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The Decline of the Church in North America Calls for Creativity and the Celebration of the Imago Dei

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Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

THE DECLINE OF THE CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA CALLS FOR
CREATIVITY AND THE CELEBRATION OF THE *IMAGO DEI*

Written by

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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary
upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:


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THE DECLINE OF THE CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA CALLS FOR
CREATIVITY AND THE CELEBRATION OF THE *IMAGO DEI*

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

TERESA BETH GARNER
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ABSTRACT

The Decline of the Church in North America Calls for Creativity and the Celebration of the *Imago Dei*

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Doctor of Ministry

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2018

Recent studies have shown an American Church in decline. It is the belief of this author that the principles of institutionalism practiced by the twenty-first century Church could be factors in this decline. To reclaim Kingdom values the celebration of the *imago Dei* must be restored. Research shows that teenagers are leaving the Church after high school and emerging adults are leaving faith in and after college. Furthermore, this age group largely has been neglected by intergenerational adults. But there are others that are abdicating the church as well.

Senior adults, the disabled, their families, single adults and single-parent families share the same sentiments of neglect and have a hard time finding their place in an ill-equipped Church. The sexually traumatized are more likely to leave the Church as well. The Church must ask why the marginalized of society further marginalized. Also, why has the Church not learned from the days of Constantine and the Crusades that it must be a living breathing body and not a mandated structure of hierarchy and power?

The compelling love and life of the early church demonstrates humility by breaking bread together, sharing everything and waiting in prayer on the Holy Spirit. Jesus engages sinner and saint, child and adult, woman and man illustrating egalitarian principles, and celebrating the *imago Dei*. Embodying the counter-cultural Kingdom of God in the present context should be the mission of an adoptive church caring for the marginalized. This church should incorporate adolescents, and every other age and people group into its fabric and family. This church believes in compassionate community. It is a place where power, capitalism and consumerism are challenged. Humility, love, generosity and simplicity must reign. Celebrating the *imago Dei* with no exceptions will help the Church resist and dismantle institutionalization.

Content Reader: Chap Clark, PhD

Words: 295

To my husband, Kenneth Joseph Garner, there are no adequate words to thank you for your love, dedication to God, commitment and care for our family, and tireless service to the church. Thank you for believing in my dreams and stopping at nothing to see me accomplish them

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PART ONE
MINISTRY CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century American Church is currently in decline. Recognizing the isolation and atomization of today's families, adolescents, emerging adults, the marginalized and many others, who are in desperate need of inclusion, nurture, mutual mentoring and belonging is key to understanding this decline. Looking back into the history of the Church is a tool that could aid in reframing the issues that might have contributed to this phenomenon. Understanding the implications of institutionalism and its effect on the Church will be a beginning point. It is invaluable to contextualize the dangers of institutionalism of hierarchy, power, money, church and state alliance and various other characteristics that were implemented and bolstered in the time of Constantine. Such understanding can serve the Church well. The implications for the institutionalization of the present Church need to be resisted and dismantled adopting service, humility and inclusion as primary characteristics of a living entity. Being aware of Church history helps to define the past and make one aware of the present nuances of the Church that clamor for validation in a secular society.

This institutionalized state of the Church is in question along with another dilemma that begs for attention. Recent research shows sick, hurting and non-traditional "church" persons feeling as though they are anomalies and strangers within current church contexts. There must be some creative way of re-envisioning church as a transformative adoptive community for the believer and non-believer alike rather than a club where many are excluded.

Within the context of Western, White culture, the Church is facing an obvious decline in attendance. Studies show that adolescents and emerging adults are not sure about the validity and credibility of the Church, while at the same time many who have been sexually assaulted, the disabled and various other marginalized entities are leaving the Church in unprecedented numbers. There is a rise in the percentage of those who claim to have no faith and with no plan for returning or pursuing Christianity. One must ask if it is possible that this decline is a result of the institutionalization of the church. Other important questions are: Has the procurement of the principles of institutionalization become a substitution for the mandates of proclaiming the Gospel, relieving the oppressed, and releasing the captives? Has the ecclesial community forgotten the purpose for which they exist? Have the programming and structure of the Church become cumbersome, insensitive and irrelevant to those who would stay or consider joining? And, would hearkening back to the days of Jesus and his followers bring a reimagining of the Kingdom of God on earth?

The current Church can learn from Jesus and the early church. The current Church can experience a revitalization of purpose and mission by learning from those whom “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).¹ And, it is possible that the Church could pursue a holy, upside-down Kingdom, a Godly perspective on earth, filled with love for God and love for neighbor, by recognizing and celebrating the *imago Dei* in all encountered.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references in this paper are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Richard Middleton's view of the *imago Dei* develops countercultural "ethics of power rooted in a theological model of the self as empowered agent of compassion that would be serviceable for the Christian community in envisioning its calling in an increasingly violent and brutal world."² The power of the institutionalized church has no place here. When compassion is the rule, competition, hierarchy and power have no function within this living ecclesial organism. If "the human vocation is modeled on the nature and actions of the God portrayed in Genesis 1,"³ then humans must in turn portray creativity, compassion, hope and community.

According to N.T. Wright, the very nature and actions portrayed in God are climaxed in the making of human beings who "were made to reflect God."⁴ Thomas Reynolds expounds on this point in *A Vulnerable Communion*: "Bearing the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27) marks a special kind of relationship between human beings and God, each other, and the earth. Human existence is what it is by somehow reflecting God's being."⁵ Being an image bearer of God brings new community with God and neighbor. Reynolds goes on to say that it is important to focus "on the character of God's creative doings in order to access what it means to be human in this image. Such a hermeneutical step is crucial because the image we have of God has dramatic

² J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 39.

⁵ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 178.

consequences for how we interpret the image of God in human beings. Perhaps, then, the *imago Dei* can best be seen as a form of creativity, relationality, and availability.”⁶

Middleton pleads with the Church to understand what that reflection of God might mean. In his book *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, he suggests the necessity of “a hermeneutic of immersion and habitation, so that we might indwell the text and hear Jesus calling our own church practices and lives into question in the radical light of the gospel.”⁷ The thought of the aforementioned “immersion and habitation” of God amongst humans as in the beginning and then again as “the Word became flesh and lived among us,” (Jn 1:14) are reminders of the upside-down principles of the Kingdom. The costs of hierarchy and power are obvious if the Church is to become incarnational.

Dan McKanan in *Identifying the Image of God* calls on Christians to ask these radical questions: “Can we tell stories that reveal the image of God in the welfare mother, the migrant worker, and the gang member? Can we speak out of our own deepest experiences of suffering and relatedness, inviting even bitter enemies to recognize their common humanity?”⁸ Reynolds reconsiders the *imago Dei* so as to “foster the inclusion of a wide range of human possibilities.” He continues, “I suggest that to be created in the image of God means to be created for contributing to the world, open toward the call to love others. Three dimensions are implied: creativity with others, relation to others, and availability for others. The point to be stressed is that all people can be contributors,

⁶ Ibid., 178-179.

⁷ J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 277.

⁸ Dan McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God: Radical Christians and Nonviolent Power in the Antebellum United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

representing a range of both gifts and limitations.”⁹ Recognizing and celebrating the *imago Dei* with no exclusions would go a long way in helping the Church reach new depths and radical heights on this journey toward adoptive community and inclusion. But these dimensions of depth and height have nothing to do with worldly power, wealth or competition. Instead, these values are born of love, creativity, availability, compassion, service and humility.

The Church must ask several questions, such as, how might she faithfully respond in the twenty-first century? What will the Church look like in just a few short years? Will the Church respond to the cries of the young to make a Kingdom difference in the world that it inhabits? Or, will the pleas of a hurting world be ignored in favor of the acknowledgement of power, money, hierarchy, and cold, dead institutionally-accepted credentials that are laudable through the lenses of the world? Will the Western, White Church learn from the immigrant churches that are presently growing and thriving? Will Kingdom trajectory be sought after in an attempt to live out the Kingdom on earth? The ecclesial community must recognize the value of the *imago Dei* while working alongside siblings within the family of God. This is crucial to a holistic overhaul of an entity that must begin to be recognized by the characteristics of holiness, compassion, humility and love. A renewed advocacy for the *imago Dei* is in order as the Church leans in to join Christ in his work.

⁹ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 178.

CHAPTER 1

THE CURRENT CHURCH IN DECLINE

Symptoms of the Problem

There are many symptoms of decline in the Western, White culture of the current Church. Studies show the ever-steady flight of adolescents and emerging adults who have grown up in church, as well as the ever-increasing population of those who simply have no faith. There are many reasons for this decline. Understanding the information may help to clarify a common problem.

Adolescents are Leaving Church upon Graduation

The overall statistics of adolescents leaving the Church upon graduation from high school seem staggering. The thought of a possible 40 to 50 percent of the young people, who have at one time been involved in a youth group, shelving their faith after high school while they are making some of the most crucial life decisions is just not acceptable.¹ But even more unsettling and challenging to the Church should be the

¹ Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffin and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith, Youth Worker Edition: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1.

reporting of Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in their book *Soul Searching*, which houses the results of the National Study of Youth and Religion. This study, published in 2009, has been labeled the “most comprehensive and detailed study of American teenage religion and spirituality to date.”¹¹ While a majority of emerging adults continue identifying as Christians, those who had identified with a specific denomination in their adolescent years “trend toward considerable disaffiliation from religious traditions and a significant growth in the proportion of American emerging adults who identify as not religious.”¹² Although different aspects of religiosity, “such as belief in God and importance of faith decline somewhat less dramatically,” a huge decrease is seen in the attendance of worship services or other organized religious groups or meetings.¹³ But the question remains as to why the church is seeing this decline.

Understanding some of the reasons for this exodus and having more insight into the thinking of this demographic might help the Church reevaluate and respond with faithful action. The results of the College Transition Project, a six-year study of more than 500 youth group graduates, conducted by Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, and Cheryl Crawford and reported within the book *Sticky Faith*, mirror many of the results found by Christian Smith and Patricia Snell in *Souls in Transition*. One of the first concerns raised was that the faith that youth group kids seem to have is “an extremely superficial view of the gospel. They view the gospel like a jacket they can take on and off based on what

¹¹ Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6-7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 141.

¹³ *Ibid.*

they feel like doing that day.”¹⁴ This seems to be indicative of the idea encapsulated in the term “moralistic therapeutic deism.” This term was coined as a way to explain the current belief system of teenagers across the US. The following is an excerpt from Smith and Denton’s book describing the creed of moralistic therapeutic deism:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy, and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.¹⁵

This is the summation of the authors after countless hours of interviews and conversations with teenagers who call themselves Christians. This brand of Christianity that students are adhering to said nothing of Jesus Christ, repentance from sin, living as a servant of God, holiness or the like, but instead concentrates on the benefits to the person who believes in this distant Creator.¹⁶ The conclusion by the same authors is that the faith of the children is in direct correlation with the faith of the parents and even the churches they belong to. In fact, it seems that “in most cases teenage religion and spirituality in the United States are much better understood as largely reflecting the world of adult religion, especially parental religion, and are in strong continuity with it.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Powell, Griffin and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, 31.

¹⁵ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162-163.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 163-171.

¹⁷ Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 170.

It is interesting to see the correlation between adult and parental religion and practices to the same of adolescents. Whereas the above studies note a decline in the attendance of church services for adolescents, there is other research that questions the self-reporting of church attendance and the actual head counts in churches and pews across the US and UK. These studies have pointed out that there could be as much as a 50 percent differentiation in what is self-reported and what is actually taking place in church attendance as a whole. Mark Chaves and James C. Cavendish have studied surveys that in the US an average of “40% of Protestants and 50% of Catholics claim to attend church in any given week.”¹⁸ However, according to research conducted by Hadaway, Marier and Chaves, “The true weekly U.S. church attendance rate is approximately half the rate implied by the self-reports; 20% of Protestants and 28% of Catholics were actually attending services.”¹⁹

This report was used as the basis for another study by Paul J. Olson and David Beckworth, who contend that baby boomers are less religiously active than their parents and grandparents were.²⁰ This makes sense. If the lives and religious habits of the young are following the trajectory of their elders and parents, then these percentages are arguments for the true actual decline of church attendance altogether. Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry confirm the aforementioned reports by contending that less than 20 percent of Americans regularly attend church, which is half of what most pollsters report:

¹⁸ Mark Chaves and James C. Cavendish, “More Evidence on U.S. Catholic Church Attendance,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33:4 (1994): 376-81.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Paul J. Olson and David Beckworth, “Religious Change and Stability: Seasonality in Church Attendance from the 1940s to the 2000s,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50:2 (2011): 388-96.

“Numbers from actual counts of people in Orthodox Christian churches, (Catholic, mainline and evangelical) show that in 2004 17.7% of the population attended a Christian church on any given weekend.”²¹ In summary, if the numbers of adolescents in church pews are declining, it stands to reason that in direct correlation with the faith and practices of their own parents and elders, attendance as a whole is declining. This decline in adolescent church attendance is less about rebellion and more about acclimating to parents and church participatory habits. Adolescents are actually following in the footsteps of their natural leaders.

Barnes and Lowry write, “Few teenagers today are rejecting or reacting against the adult religion into which they are being socialized.”²² If there is no expectation for relationship with a distant God, no responsibility on the part of the Christian, no real understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the life transformation that ensues from a personal and corporate relationship because of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection and no understanding, expectation or desire for prophetic interaction with a lost world, moralistic therapeutic deism looks pretty accurate. Sadly, the same students that articulate clearly every other subject do not have the words or thoughts that can be adequately expressed when it comes to the Gospel.²³ Yes, this could be the failing of the Church. But, this corporate responsibility rests on the parents and other adults including those in leadership within the Church. If this is the state of most of the students who claim Christianity as their religious preference, there seems to be nothing that would hold their attention, their

²¹ Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America,” ChurchLeaders.com, June 4, 2014 (accessed January 2, 2018).

²² Ibid., 170.

²³ Ibid., 27, 134, 137.

faith and their commitment to God in place in the midst of a wide array of options, lifestyles and pluralistic belief systems at college or beyond high school.

Emerging Adults are Leaving Faith in College

Smith and Snell have more to say on this subject of emerging adults leaving faith or exiting the Church during the college years. There are several combinations of factors that were observed in highly religious teenagers becoming less religious in the five years following high school. Three configurations included “having parents who are not among the most religious and expressing lower levels of the importance of one’s faith. We also see combinations of two of the following: greater faith, less frequent personal prayer and scripture reading, and fewer personal religious experiences.”²⁴ This could be a reflection of the current contextual and cultural experiences of the young during college and work experiences that are devoid of parental and adult investment that would normally encourage these spiritual formation practices.

These same researchers talk about the fact that when the combination of causal factors include:

The lack of the strongest parental and non-parental ties to religious faith combined with holding a religious faith that is not extremely important to one’s life and/or praying and reading scripture less frequently and/or having fewer personal religious experiences and/or harboring some doubts about religious faith puts those highly religious teenagers at “risk” of becoming low religion emerging adults five years later.²⁵

It seems the perfect storm might include the following combination of causal factors of adult abandonment, college years of doubt, fewer personal religious experiences (than

²⁴ Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 229.

²⁵ Ibid., 230.

high school youth group afforded) and harboring some doubts about religious faith. Yet this sounds like a typical emerging adult who goes away to college or begins a job.

Unless these students have been and continue to be invested in, immediately upon graduation they might find themselves in a desert of unbelief with no one to walk alongside except peers who also are finding themselves in the same set of circumstances. It takes relationships, intentionality, vision and understanding to reach out and retain students who would so easily leave the fold. Mark Cannister, in *Teenagers Matter*, talks about engaging these same students in the Church before they leave for college. His concern is that the Church is fine with students who are “operating in the status of foreclosure conform(ing) to the expectations of others,” when in fact the Church should encourage parents and teenagers both when students are moving through the discovery of their faith through questioning, doubt and active reflection.²⁶ Having these conversations while still at home with parents and surrounded by caring adults in their churches could help to eliminate some of the rapid exodus of college students. The Church must become more knowledgeable about the brain, body, soul and mind connection in order to facilitate growth and discipleship in this age group.

Keith J. Edwards of Biola University has written on “implications from neuroscience research for spiritual formation practices.”²⁷ His view of the principles of modern neuroscience examines the “self-soul” as being embodied in a “body-brain

²⁶ Mark Cannister, *Teenagers Matter* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 54-56.

²⁷ Keith Edwards, “When Word Meets Flesh: A Neuroscience Perspective on Embodied Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 34:3 (2015): 228-39.

system with known principles of functioning.”²⁸ Edwards believes that the “foundation for and the context of spiritual formation is relationships.”²⁹ He expounds that because people are the object of God’s love they can then be empowered to love others by the relational and symbolic processes of the articulation of biblical theology, words and flesh meeting to produce subjective experience.³⁰ But if students have been abandoned, they may be unable to experience true spiritual formation that is deep enough to last throughout the changes in influence and time

Chap Clark, in *Hurt 2.0*, speaks of the lack of adult social capital in the lives of teenagers. He writes:

Even among those who argue that adolescents are basically fine, virtually no one would question the need young people, and especially adolescents, have for adults who are available, who care, and who come to them without a hidden or self-centered agenda. The fact is that adolescents need adults to become adults, and when adults are not present and involved in their lives, they are forced to figure out how to survive life on their own.³¹

This actually follows the logic of Edwards. Without the embodiment of love being present, it is difficult for spiritual formation to take place. Without experience, words have no power. Renowned child psychologist and professor of child study at Tufts University David Elkind continues this line of thought as he writes of the travesty of abandonment by adults in the lives of students. He explains that two of the by-products of becoming a post-modern nation are the adult-centered, rather than child-centered nation

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers (Youth, Family, and Culture)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 26-27.

and the requirement that the young sacrifice.³² This sacrifice is not worth the trade-off. Unfortunately, the Church is a part of the lack of presence. Recent programs such as *Orange*, *Growing Young*, and *Sticky Faith* were created with the idea that the adolescent and the emerging adult both need intergenerational interaction and care. With all of these causal factors and experimental and at-risk behaviors taking place in this age group, there is another troubling factor to consider. The age of the emerging adult is the most likely time for sexual assault and completed rape. And, unfortunately, the young are not finding solace or support within the walls of the Church. In fact, the Church seems ignorant about the woes that are besetting this massive group of young adults.

The Sexually Assaulted are Leaving the Church

Children, teenagers and emerging adults eventually become full-fledged adults in some sense. However, what they have experienced as unwanted, non-consensual and even consensual sexual experiences shape the thoughts they have about themselves, each other, God and the Church. In most of these situations of sexual assault, molestation and completed rape, there is a power hierarchy and some form of forced secrecy. Heather Gingrich in her book, *Restoring the Shattered Self*, talks about how all of this affects the development of children in the areas of attachment, dissociation and child development as a whole.³³ The ability to trust and develop healthy attachments to caregivers depends

³² David Elkind, *Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 38.

³³ Heather Davediuk Gingrich, *Restoring the Shattered Self: A Christian Counselor's Guide to Complex Trauma* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2013), 29.

largely on the integration of the self with “information, memory, affect and behavior.”³⁴

When this ability to trust those in authority is jeopardized through the actions of a perpetrator, the attachment ability becomes confused and distorted and young people may act out in ways that others do not understand. The sense of safety and security has been breached.³⁵ Judith Herman, author of *Trauma and Recovery*, speaks of the aftermath of violence and sexual trauma:

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis. . . . Wounded soldiers and raped women cry for their mothers, or for God. When this cry is not answered, the sense of basic trust is shattered.³⁶

If basic relationships are in jeopardy, the basis of faith and safety is destroyed, and if Edward’s point of spiritual formation taking place through relationships is true, it seems the Church has lost the ability to make a difference in these traumatized lives. But these are not the only challenges that traumatized people will face in the Church.

Heather Davediuk Gingrich, in *Restoring the Shattered Self*, speaks of the separation from a particular church body that may occur because the individual fears being “blamed for not trusting God enough.”³⁷ When lay counselors and church leaders are not adequately trained to handle complex stress disorders and traumatic stress due to

³⁴ Ibid., 35-36.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 51, 52.

³⁷ Gingrich, *Restoring the Shattered Self*, 213.

any type of violence or sexual assault, victims are at risk of being re-victimized by the very people who want to help and retain them in their community.³⁸ Even the practice of communion, where the drinking of the blood and the eating of Christ's flesh can trigger horrific memories for those who have been ritually abused, needs to be discussed among leadership. Other practices and activities can prove to be challenging in ways that those who are healthy may not understand. Justin and Lindsay Holcomb remind the Church that many in their congregations are suffering silently: "At least one in four women and one in six men are or will be victims of sexual assault in their lifetime."³⁹ The Church can prepare their people, or inadvertently re-victimize the wounded because of ignorance and inaction. Because people do not understand trauma and abuse, it is easy for the sexually assaulted to become a part of the marginalized masses that struggle to belong.

The Disabled and Marginalized Find no Solidarity in the Church

Families dealing with disabilities and many others who are isolated by nonconformity find themselves in precarious positions of marginalization. Thomas E. Reynolds has written honestly about disability and the response of the Church in *Vulnerable Communion*. He so aptly describes his own personal experience with his son's disability and the inept hospitality of the church that the reader cringes in disbelief. Then, of course, the reader starts evaluating his or her own thoughts, interactions and beliefs about and with the disabled. As Reynolds speaks of the term itself, even the distinctions between medical and theological definitions are convicting.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb, *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 13.

Reynolds recognizes well that Christians adopt a defining model of disability that is “based on what non-disabled people think is best for persons with disabilities. . . . Hence, disability represents an inability, abnormality, or disadvantage calling for management and correction in order to restore proper functioning. And from a societal perspective this means that disability is a liability, a dysfunction legitimating professional and welfare services,” which is “limited in scope.”⁴⁰ When the Church is guilty of ignorance and short-sightedness of this magnitude, one should expect the Church to keep declining. Reynolds goes into great detail about the fact that disability needs to be defined in a more holistic way. The following is his suggestion: “Disability is a term naming that interstice where (1) restrictions due to an involuntary bodily impairment, (2) social role expectations, and (3) external physical/social obstructions come together in a way that (4) preempts an intended participation in communal life. The stress is indeed on the social, but not in a way that neglects the body.”⁴¹

Drawing on his personal experience and the experiences of others, Reynold’s message confirms that the Church is not theologically grounded in the understanding of disability, the exclusion it creates, and the resulting isolation, which again creates a colossal area of decline. Families who navigate the vulnerability of disability tend to sail this often-turbulent sea alone. These families share the loneliness that accompanies those family entities that do not measure up to or look like the traditional norm. This is what it looks like to be a part of a marginalized entity outside of and inside the Church.

⁴⁰ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 25.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

Defining the term marginal and/or marginalized might be the better place to begin. Cheryl Sanders introduces her book *Ministry at the Margins* by identifying the biblical “margins” as the “disadvantaged position of women, children and the poor in contemporary society.”⁴² *The Oxford English Dictionary* clarifies “marginalized” in the third definition of the term as “to render or treat as marginal; to remove from the centre or mainstream; to force (an individual, minority group, etc...) to the periphery of a dominant social group; (gen.) to belittle, depreciate, discount, or dismiss.” The social context of the fifth definition of this term “marginal” pertains to “an individual, or social group; isolated from or not conforming to the dominant society or culture; (perceived as being) on the edge of a society or social unit belonging to a minority group (freq. with implications of consequent disadvantage).” These definitions bring pictures to mind of those who rarely comfortably fit into a social, economic and unfortunately even ecclesial environment. Men, women, adolescents and children of differing backgrounds, ethnicities and gender find themselves at odds with the American Church.

A Many Colored Kingdom, written by Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang, and Gary A. Parrett tells the stories of those who would be marginalized because of four specific forces. Included in these concepts are class, gender, race and ethnicity.⁴³ The people these forces represent find themselves marginalized in the Church as well as in the society at large. Robin DiAngelo talks about developing White racial literacy in her book

⁴² Cheryl J. Sanders, *Ministry at the Margins: The Prophetic Mission of Women, Youth and the Poor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2009), 11.

⁴³ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang and Gary A. Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 17.

What Does It Mean to be White? And, understanding that the most segregated hour in American history is Sunday morning, the following statement is important to hear:

An all-white meeting or party is not an accident; it is the result of decades of policies and practices, including racial discrimination in hiring and white flight, which have resulted in continuing racial segregation at work and home. Race is at play in the acceptance of the all-white group – the lack of interest in or concern about the absence of people of color. There is no human objectivity. We see each other through socialized filters based on our group memberships.⁴⁴

This is the strength of the denial of the racism narrative. How difficult it would be then for people from minoritized groups to be a part of a church where the social power rests with the dominant culture. DiAngelo continues:

Giving feedback to dominant group members from the minoritized position is difficult because dominant group members are simultaneously uninformed about the oppression and highly defensive. Dominant group members responses typically include: dismissal, trivialization, denial, hurt feelings, anger, and punishments such as withdrawal, exclusion, or telling others how difficult and oversensitive the minoritized group member is.⁴⁵

It does seem that the American Church worldview needs to be challenged. In order to live in community with one another, there must be new lenses employed.

Soong-Chan Rah speaks about the forces of race and ethnicity and their intersection with the Church by noting how the Church has been taken captive by Western, White culture. He asserts that in the twentieth century Christianity had been seen as a “predominantly European and North American faith.”⁴⁶ Rah has been involved in the planting and pastoring of churches and is actually a product of North American

⁴⁴ Robin DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to be White* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2016), 267.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁴⁶ Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Releasing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Books, 2009), 13.

evangelicalism, and yet knows firsthand the “reality of feeling marginalized” while also being “seen as an outsider.”⁴⁷ Rah has a deafening response. Although the face of American evangelicalism is now multiracial, the leadership itself continues to be White and “the theological formation and dialogue remains captive to white Christianity.”⁴⁸

Rah’s argument is that “American evangelicalism has more accurately reflected the values, culture and ethos of Western, white American culture than the values of Scripture.”⁴⁹ As the world has been changing and developing into a multi-racial and multi-ethnic place, Christianity seems to be in captivity to the very values of individualism, consumerism and materialism rather than reflecting Jesus’ perspective and ideals.⁵⁰ According to Rah, the Church lines up with the ideals of American society too nicely. No one seems to be reevaluating the mission and vision of the Church beyond being a good citizen, spending a lot of money and meeting the personal needs of individuals. When the American dream becomes confused with biblical standards there are bound to be scores of people who feel and are marginalized.

The poor, the disabled, the mentally challenged, the orphan, the powerless and the addicted are just a few of those who are touched by this phenomenon. There must be a place in the ecclesial community for someone who has been marginalized by American society. Middleton asks, “What would our response be if Jesus held up as examples of people on equal footing with ourselves, not gentiles, but instead members of whatever

⁴⁷ Ibid., 15-16.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 48-49.

group most offends our ethical and religious sensibilities? If we were honest, who would we say are the furthest from the kingdom of God? Who, as we see it, are our enemies or the enemies of God?”⁵¹ If the American evangelical church would dare to step up, move forward and integrate with these people declaring each the *imago Dei*, equality and equity would ensue, mirroring the Gospel of Christ. Or, as Reynolds writes,

Every human being has the image of God in common, even as it is expressed in variety and difference. Personhood lies in being affirmed by God as a dependent creature loved into being with others. . . . The Kingdom of God is exactly what we need, as it addresses both our present brokenness and our deepest yearnings for restoration and renewal . . . failed marriages, drug addiction, sexual promiscuity, domestic violence, racism, poverty, disease, war, genocide, greed, and despair. For though it may be disorienting for us, the Bible is quite clear that salvation involves the restoration of human life (in its bodily and social aspects) to what it was meant to be.⁵²

If those of different races and ethnicities feel uncomfortable in the pews because of privilege, money and White culture, then it must be asked how do the poor, the orphan and those who are seeking feel? How are they treated? Will they feel marginalized yet again when they step into the Church?

There are Many who Find no Belonging in the Church

There are many other groups that need to be mentioned within this idea of church decline. Families that do not look like the traditional families of the modern era, LGBTQ communities and other invisible people rarely feel seen, welcomed or wanted within the Church. The Church is not prepared and educated theologically and practically enough in

⁵¹ Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 278.

⁵² Reynolds, *A Vulnerable Communion*, 186, 272.

these realms to reach out, care for, and walk with people who look different than those that are in the present declining Church of the twenty-first century.

Ray S. Anderson and Dennis B. Guernsey were way ahead of their time when they examined the social theology of the family. In their book, *On Being Family*, they talk about the difference between moral and conventional authority and order as opposed to scriptural authority. They write, “A moral authority then attaches itself to those who seek to uphold the conventional order of the family. It is but a short step from the charge that those who attempt to change the traditional, conventional order are violating a moral law to the charge that they are violating the law of God. All of this takes a more serious turn when Christians link conventional moral authority with scriptural authority.”⁵³

This conversation then is pertinent in light of family structure, family order and roles within the family that many conservative evangelicals hold to and espouse as being morally superior. The late Diana R. Garland, recent dean of Baylor University School of Social Work, tackles the ideas of the structural and the functional definition of family for the more postmodern world: “The sociological study of the family has taken two different approaches to defining families – one begins with a structural definition based on the ways persons are related to one another biologically and/or legally; the other begins with a functional definition based on the ways persons relate to one another, or function in one another’s lives, in ways expected of family members.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Ray S. Anderson and Dennis B. Guernsey, *On Being Family: A Social Theology of the Family* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 24.

⁵⁴ Diana R. Garland, *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2012), 53.

Secular society has realized the need for these definitions, while the Church seems to attach moral superiority to one over the other. In fact Garland speaks of Paul and how he understood the choice to remain single as she writes, “Both singleness and marriage can be Christian callings. Both can testify to the truth of the gospel working itself out in the lives of individuals. According to Paul, we are to live in the conditions in which we find ourselves as witnesses to something that transcends marital status (1 Cor 7:24).”⁵⁵ Yet, churches do not seem prepared for the influx of new and unique family entities to walk through the doors and participate in the ecclesial community when they are more concerned about the moral and traditional structures than the commands of Jesus to love, to go into all of the world and to practice hospitality to strangers. The language and programming of the Church can seem hostile and belittling to those who do not look like the traditional modern family entity of old.

Theresa McKenna speaks of the gargantuan and oft times hidden mission field of single-parent families in the twenty-first century. Using the biblical language of widows and orphans McKenna speaks of what this looks like in the modern era. She addresses several “strangers” to and in the Church including single fathers, single mothers, many whom have never been divorced, as well as absentee fathers, and the poverty that can result from the difficulties of the economy when trying to raise a family on a limited income.⁵⁶ When McKenna’s words are coupled with the insights of Elkind into the differences between the modern and postmodern family structures, there is an invitation to the Church to participate in the Gospel of Jesus to these unique family entities. But,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁵⁶ Theresa McKenna, *The Hidden Mission Field: Caring for the Widow and Orphan in the 21st Century* (Mukilteo, WA: Winepress Publishing, 1999), 23-29.

again, single-parent families, single adults and other family groupings that defy the current moral definitions of tradition find themselves excluded because of language and practice barriers that were erected in a different age.⁵⁷ They feel like strangers. And “stranger” is an apt word for the LGBTQ community when it comes to the American evangelical church.

The Church has a hard time understanding and speaking of human sexuality in a coherent, theologically-grounded way. The Church must examine how to be inclusive, hospitable, and inviting to a sexually charged society that holds to differing standards and values. Deb Hirsch in her recent book, *Redeeming Sex*, talks about the difficulty of the Church to address the issues of human sexuality in general let alone the ever-present people who are involved in homosexuality, transgendered sexuality, bisexuality and the queer community.⁵⁸ Although Hirsch is not an academic scholar, her years of experience as a gay woman who is now married to a man, an ordained pastor, speaker and counselor give her a perspective on the Church that is invaluable. She talks about sexuality by saying, “Every human being on the planet is sexually broken. Everybody’s orientation is disoriented. All of us are on a journey toward wholeness; not one of us is excluded.”⁵⁹ Scot McKnight, in his book *A Fellowship of Differents*, addresses these and other marginalized people who are not finding a place of grace within the walls of the Church. He reminds the Church of the realities that the early church within the Roman Empire faced daily: “Converts to Christ came from this circle of people: Romans who had lived a

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Debra Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality (Forge Partnership Books)* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 15-17.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 120.

life of sexual experimentation, exploration, and exploitation – or who were involved in and perhaps were seeking liberation from enslaved prostitution.”⁶⁰ The current Church faces the same, and yet whether same-sex attraction or heterosexual encounter is the issue, it would seem the Church is less than welcoming. Sexual indulgence is as much a part of contemporary culture as it was in the days of the Roman Empire.

These subjects of shared human sexuality are rarely talked about, and when they are discussed it seems forced and abbreviated. The Church does not know how to act toward people who do not believe as they believe. The struggle is real when navigating relationships with teenagers, young adults and family entities that do not mirror more traditional manifestations, such as the marginalized, the disabled and their families and many others who are or have been disenfranchised from the evangelical church for some reason or another. And it is in this reality that Anderson and Guernsey insert their understanding of parity: “A determinative of covenant love, not of contractual and performance-oriented social relations, grounded in the commonality, or *koinonia*, that characterizes the life of the family.”⁶¹

It is obvious that Anderson and Guernsey also see a disconnect happening in the Church when it comes to this concept. They continue, “The Church as the new family of God, however, does offer a new form of parity – or at least it ought to. Not every member of the body has the same function and not always the same honor, says Paul. But there is still absolute parity: ‘If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is

⁶⁰ Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God’s Design for Life Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 123.

⁶¹ Anderson and Guernsey, *On Being Family*, 148.

honored, all rejoice together' (1 Cor 12:26)."⁶² This could be the missing action and attitude in the Church. The Church might be seeking too much after the institutionalized qualities and characteristics of the world that would legitimize its existence. It might seem to be more important for the Church to be recognized as a viable institution that allies itself with state values and validity of power, control and hierarchy instead of caring deeply for those who have no power, no control, no voice and seemingly no value in the eyes of the powerful. Yet, the Church should be finding its worth only in the fact that it is the bride of Christ: "The church's unique gift is its inclusive and transcending order of family life, which gives each member full parity in the *koinonia*."⁶³ It is my belief that the Church is losing ground in its mission and understanding of the Gospel mandates because of the politicization of religion, the clamoring after alliance of church and state and the desire for power, control and value in the eyes of the world systems. The Church in the Western hemisphere has become institutionalized to a point of decline. It is time to recognize, resist and dismantle these institutional values that continue to render the Church impotent to carry out the mission and vision of Jesus.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 149.

CHAPTER 2

RECOGNIZING THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE CHURCH

Defining the Characteristics of Institutionalization

It is imperative to understand the definitions, characteristics and qualities of institutions and institutional themes that are common to secular and sacred spaces in order to recognize the same in current churches. Gregory F. Hayden cites the research he and his colleagues conducted as reported in the *Journal of Economic Issues*, stating “Institutions prepare homo sapiens to be social actors, not individuals. Institutions perform the integration of social beliefs, technology, ecological entities, and cultural values into regular relationships and patterns,”¹ and they process according to systems principles.² Hayden wrote about institutions in a piece that was developed in order to analyze exactly “the main activity inside institutions that is utilized to complete the service responsibilities – which includes production – in the formulation and enforcement of rules, regulations, and requirements which are formulated to be consistent with the

¹ Hayden, F. Gregory, “Complex Systems Characteristics and Theoretical Development for Analysis Inside Institutions.” *Journal of Economic Issues* 50:2 (2016): 398-405, Business Source Elite, EBSCOhost (accessed October 16, 2016).

² Ibid.

normative belief, technological, and ecological criteria of institutions.”³ This definition makes sense when looking at the institution of the Church. The rules and requirements, belief systems and cultural values form relationships and patterns that help to describe what takes place in an institution. This takes place to reinforce the integrity of the organization. Geoffrey Hodgson, in *The Journal of Economic Issues*, explains institutions in another way, in his article “What Are Institutions?” He writes, “Generally, institutions enable ordered thought, expectation, and action by imposing form and consistency on human activities. They depend upon the thoughts and activities of individuals but are not reducible to them.”⁴ Lynne Zucker, from the Department of Sociology at the University of California, is more explicit when explaining the term institutional: “(A) a rule-like, social fact quality of an organized pattern of action (exterior), and (b) an embedding in formal structures, such as formal aspects of organizations that are not tied to particular actors or situations (nonpersonal, objective).”⁵

Zucker, as a sociologist, believes organizations and institutions to be more objective and non-personal in nature; whereas Hodgson is convinced that institutions can be nuanced and somewhat characterized by individual involvement and thought, which can indeed be experienced by and influential to the rest of the organization. He states:

By structuring, constraining, and enabling individual behaviors, institutions have the power to mold the capacities and behavior of agents in fundamental ways: they have a capacity to change aspirations instead of merely enabling or constraining them. Habit is the key mechanism in this transformation. Institutions

³ Ibid., 398.

⁴ Geoffrey Hodgson, “What Are Institutions?,” *Journal of Economic Issues* 1 (March 2006): 2.

⁵ Lynne G. Zucker, “Institutional Theories of Organization,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 13 (1987): 443-64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083256> (accessed October 17, 2016).

are social structures that can involve reconstitutive downward causation, acting to some degree upon individual habits of thought and action.⁶

It is my belief that indeed individual actors can and do implement personal bias and action into an institutional setting. Although Zucker and Hodgson seem to be in agreement concerning the structural endeavors of institutions, Zucker leans more toward the thought that the structure is a formalized attempt at conformity while Hodgson seems to believe there is room for individuals to speak into the organization simply because it is a social structure.

The imposition of forms, activities, thoughts and hierarchy by Constantine onto the Church in that day helps to explain the direction of institutionalism that it followed and continues to follow in this current culture. In fact, it will be noted that changes made in the Church during this time period fundamentally shaped and impacted the present and future Church for hundreds of years to come. The changes may not be reducible to one person in the institution, but the fact remains that the influence of a man not yet claiming salvation nor baptized had and has quite an impact even today.

Recognizing Institutionalization in Church History - Constantine

First, the history of Christianity in the time of Constantine reveals compelling evidence that Constantine was making his decisions concerning the Church for political reasons. His family history is one of strong leadership, conquering enemies and building his kingdom. But while he continued to fortify his empire, facing formidable foes, he “experienced what he thought were revelations from the God of the Christians; he adopted this Deity as his divine patron and defeated his rival behind the sacred talismanic

⁶ Hodgson, “What are Institutions,” 6.

symbols of the Christian religion.”⁷ Charles Matson ODahl in his book, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, is quite careful to read, synthesize and report from the original works of Eusebius in *Vita Constantini*, and Lactatius’ *De Mortibus Persecutorum*. Around 311 and 312 C.E. the “defeat of Maxentius in the west and Licinius over Maximin in the east resulted in the ending of the ‘Great Persecution’ of Christianity, and the beginning of a partnership between the Christian Church and the Roman state.”⁸ Constantine became the hero in ending the persecution of the Church by elevating it to a status it had never enjoyed. But the Church took another turn here that is indicative of institutionalism. The Church became an ally of a worldly kingdom. In fact, Constantine began building basilicas in “important locations around the city.”⁹ Yes, there is general consensus that there was a life change in Constantine’s devotion to God. This “became even more evident when he declined to participate in the sacrificial rituals at the pagan temples.”¹⁰ And, it must be noted that Constantine was trying to build a kingdom that was peaceable. But the question is, “How?”

Constantine did not want to “alienate the pagans of the city, who had greeted him as joyously as had the Christians at his *adventus* and whose support he wished to retain; next, he patronized the Christian Church as generously as possible by building magnificent edifices for public worship, and by giving Christianity an impressive public

⁷ Charles Matson ODahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 98.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 146.

¹⁰ Ibid.

presence.”¹¹ It seems that Constantine’s desire for prestige, power and clout among the masses was the guiding factor in his endeavors, and the symbol of the cross was a very helpful tool in leading the procession toward building an earthly kingdom. Richard Rohr reminds the Church of the danger of power being the only voice in interpreting and conveying Scripture. In a recent contemplation of the Church bending toward the role of “priest” while leaning away from the responsibilities of “prophet” Rohr’s thoughts from *The Center for Action and Contemplation* bring clarity to the problem at hand.

After Christianity became the established religion of the Western Empire in the fourth century, the priestly mentality pretty much took over in both East and West, and prophets almost disappeared. When the Church held so much power, prophets were too threatening to the status quo. The clergy were at the top of the hierarchy in the full company of their patrons - kings and princes - and even began to dress like them. Emperors convened and presided over the first seven Councils of the Church. What does this tell us?

For the next 1700 or so years, most of the preaching and interpretation of Scripture was from the perspective of power, from primarily European, educated, quite comfortable, and presumably celibate males. Where are the voices of women, minorities, LGBTQ, the poor, and differently abled? How would they read the Gospel? Without these voices included, sometimes even central, I see little future for Christianity.¹²

It must be recognized by the Church of the twenty-first century that the need to impress the secular realm with power, influence and monetary gain, and the desires for state and church alliance finds its impetus here with Constantine. This should be scary not impressive. The Church must example where the Gospel of Christ Jesus fits into this puzzle of power, money and earthly kingdom building. Yes, Constantine was key to restoring what was the rightful property of the Church, upgrading the status of clergy,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Way of the Prophet* (Center for Action and Contemplation: 1994), audio, no longer available; *Prophets Then, Prophets Now* (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2006), CD, MP3 download; and *Scripture as Liberation* (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2002), MP3 download.

promoting the worship of the Christian God and exempting taxes; and for a couple of those things one can surely be thankful. But, it must be asked, what was the cost to the prophetic mission of the Church? Henri Nouwen reflects, “One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power – political power, military power, economic power, or moral and spiritual power – even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are.”¹³

Recognizing Institutionalization in the Church Today

John Howard Yoder in his book *The Politics of Jesus* talks about the Pauline vision of the Church: “The very existence of the church is its primary task. It is in itself a proclamation of the lordship of Christ to the powers from whose dominion the church has begun to be liberated. The church concentrates upon not being seduced by them.”¹⁴ The prophetic voice of the Church can rarely be heard when the voice is enmeshed in political ambition, want of affluence and the need for acknowledgement. Lisa Keister and Darby Southgate speak candidly of people or groups that have power in their book entitled *Inequality*. They write, “People recognize that power has many advantages, and they desire it for reasons beyond the economic benefits that it entails.”¹⁵ In explaining these benefits of power, they turn their attention to an institution called the bureaucracy. And,

¹³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership with Study Guide for Groups and Individuals* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 76.

¹⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 150.

¹⁵ Lisa A. Keister and Darby E. Southgate, *Inequality: A Contemporary Approach to Race, Class, and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 49.

in so doing, they label the Church as being such an entity.¹⁶ The following definition hearkens back to that of institutions with a bit of a twist. A “bureaucracy” is “a unique type of organization that separates work into specialized units acting together to perform tasks quickly and efficiently.”¹⁷ These authors go on to highlight other characteristics that are indicative of many churches. They write:

“Bureaucracies are specialized” with assigned jobs and roles that continue “regardless of the person filling the position. A bureaucracy has a hierarchy of offices, a well-defined, hierarchical system of subordination and superordination. A bureaucracy has written rules, regulations, and files that create the organizational memory (that) enable the collective” to perform the organization the way they have in the past. “Bureaucracies are characterized by technical competence” where each position is written in an organization’s records. “Bureaucracies are impersonal and they require the full working capacity of employees.” “Bureaucracies rely heavily on written communication and rules.”¹⁸

The Church today benefits from this institutional and bureaucratic status in order to maintain control of administrative functions, economic resources and appointments to power and influence. And yet this does not seem to be reminiscent of the work of Christ while on earth nor the Church that began spreading the story of God after Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension. Nouwen writes, “It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. Jesus asks, ‘Do you love me?’ We ask, ‘Can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your Kingdom?’ (Matthew 20:21).”¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 49-50.

¹⁹ Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 77.

Justo L. Gonzalez in *The Story of Christianity* agrees that, “Until Constantine’s time, Christian worship had been relatively simple,” where private homes and eventually small rooms and structures were dedicated as common places of communal worship.²⁰ “After Constantine’s conversion, Christian worship began to be influenced by imperial protocol.”²¹ Utilizing incense, impressive processions, luxurious garments and choirs produced services where the common people had less active roles in worship.²² The ordinary people were in a sense separated from the ministers of the Gospel by clothing and hierarchical positions complete with a raised floor for the clergy within the sanctuary.²³ And though the era of Constantine was a new beginning for the church, the impact of power and empires joining together with the Church caused much of a backlash within the very Church that was being elevated to a new status.

There were many who saw “the fact that the emperors declared themselves Christian, and that for this reason people were flocking to the church, was not a blessing, but rather a great apostasy.”²⁴ And, if they wished to keep peace with the Church, they “withdrew to the desert, there to lead a life of meditation and asceticism. The fourth century thus witnessed a massive exodus of devoted Christians to the deserts of Egypt

²⁰ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Volume I: The Early Church to the Reformation* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 125.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 127.

²⁴ Ibid., 124.

and Syria.”²⁵ There is more to the message of the Church that seems to be hiding beneath the façade of organization, power, status and politics.

Recognizing the Implications of Institutionalization in the Current Church

It is possible that the need for money, power, hierarchy and the desire for attention and favor from the government has caused the current church to lose sight of the very mission that Jesus was putting before the disciples and the early church. It just might be that the message of the Gospel, which brings the Kingdom of God into everyday life, bringing hope into the reality of each situation, has been negated in order to concentrate on earthly legitimacy causing the Kingdom prospect to be lost. Yet this incarnational living that was exemplified in the life of Christ, this Immanuel God-with-us life brings with it a fear of vulnerability and humility. Again, Nouwen reflects, “The temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love.”²⁶ The Church cannot recognize and resist such earthly temptations that contort the Gospel message while simultaneously grasping for money, status, power and alliance with the state or government in some form or another. The days of Constantine continue to play out in this contemporary day. In order to be the prophetic voice in a world that is rife with distortions, Wright’s words ring ever more true and helpful in the ears of the Church:

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 79.

What Jesus was to Israel, the church must now be for the world. Everything we discover about what Jesus did and said within the Judaism of his day must be thought through in terms of what it would look like for the church to do and be this for the world. If we are to shape our world, and perhaps even to implement the redemption of our world, this is how it is to be done.²⁷

It is imperative to study and understand Jesus, the workings of the early Church and the universal principles that should be leading the Church today. The methods have to change, but the message cannot be rendered impotent on the altar of dueling kingdoms of this earth and the Kingdom of the Lord. Revisiting the past has helped to unearth what should not be done. But now the Church must reevaluate present practices in light of the life and teachings of Jesus and the early church as found in the Gospels and letters of the New Testament.

²⁷ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 53.

PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 3

THE EARLY CHURCH LIVED COUNTER-CULTURAL VALUES

There are many things the current church can learn from the dealings of Jesus and the early church. This postmodern church can garner from Jesus' interaction with the empire while he was bringing and living out the very kingdom of God. It was not the early church, nor Jesus himself lining up to join forces with Rome in order to bring affluence and influence to the church. N.T. Wright reminds contemporary readers of the interaction of Jesus with the Old Testament as it related to first-century Jews:

Before we can get to the application to our own day, we have to allow fully for the uniqueness of Jesus' situation and position. First, he believed that the creator God had purposed from the beginning to address and deal with the problems within his creation through Israel. Israel was not just to be an "example" of a nation under God; Israel was to be the means through which the world would be saved. Second, Jesus believed, as did many though not all of his contemporaries, that this vocation would be accomplished through Israel's history reaching a great moment of climax, in which Israel herself would be saved from her enemies and through which the creator God, the covenant God, would at last bring his love and justice, his mercy and truth, to bear upon the whole world, bringing renewal and healing to all creation.¹

¹ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 35.

With these terms being the premise for his book, Wright reminds his reader that this renewal and healing was to reach the whole world and not just Israel.²

Although the Jews of that day were hoping for release from the captivity of pagan rule, Jesus was forcing “them to come to terms with God’s reality breaking in to their midst, doing what they had always longed for but doing it in ways that were so startling as to be hardly recognizable.”³ Throughout the examination and commentary on Jesus parables, Wright goes as far to say that when the people were told to trust Jesus, “he was telling his hearers to give up their agendas and to trust him for his way of being Israel, his way of bringing the kingdom, he was urging them, to abandon their crazy dreams of nationalist revolution.”⁴ This was not what Israel had longed for. They wanted political rule and power to accompany their freedom.

But Jesus was intent on bringing the Kingdom of God into the present. He was not waiting for political revolution. So, as Jesus goes about welcoming all with “radical acceptance and forgiveness” and “on his own authority, without requiring any official interaction with Jerusalem” (the very center of Israel’s power),⁵ he was showing Israel how to be the Kingdom instead of waiting for it to happen.⁶ This does not take place through political power, nor not through hierarchical status, but through the universal principles that tell the new Kingdom to “go also the second mile” (Mt 5:41), “if anyone

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 38.

⁴ Ibid., 44.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 45-46.

strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other” (Mt 5:38-39), to be “the light of the world” (Mt 5:14), to be “the salt of the earth,” (Mt 5:13) and finally the ultimate, “those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:25).

Scripture reveals that Kingdom communities are responsible for passing on this faith and offering healing to the broken. Counter-cultural actions and attitudes can only be implemented by the power of the Spirit. Reevaluation of status quo church practices will only take place by comparing the current church to the early church and understanding Kingdom values as being opposite of those in the world. The first of these values is found in a basic understanding of Deuteronomy 6, which helps contemporary Western civilization comprehend what Jews and early Christians would have based their actions on.

The *Shema* is Addressed to the Whole of the Community

Judaism required that the *Shema* be recited twice daily.⁷ The recitation of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is recognized as “a radicalization of the first commandment: ‘You shall have no other gods before me’ (Deut 5:7, Exod 20:3).”⁸ The *Shema* was a reminder that Israel was expected to love Yahweh in “total commitment expressed in the phrase heart, soul, and strength, a devotion that is single-minded and complete.”⁹ As an extension of the Ten Commandments these words represented how they were to live as people who had been released from captivity while living among those who were not

⁷ A.D.H. Mayes, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed., Ronald E. Clements (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 176-78.

⁸ Stephen G. Green, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition (New Beacon Bible Commentary)* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2015), 99.

⁹ Ibid.

committed to the same God. Kingdom communities were and are responsible for teaching and living out this type of “single-minded and complete devotion” in front of and with their families and communities. The command was a kind of warning, in a sense, that if they did not teach diligently, keep the words of God on their hearts, and bind these words to themselves, their children and their communities by tattoos or the wearing of phylacteries, there was danger “that time and acclimatization to the culture of the land might bring forgetfulness of the God to whom Israel owes her prosperity, or might bring self-pride or even apostasy.”¹⁰

Joiner represents the commonly held idea that the church movement became domesticated under the “imperial edict by Constantine to create a state religion and a clergy eager to comply - combined to centralize and institutionalize the Christian movement. The church congregationalized. This move profoundly altered its way of being in the world.”¹¹ From that time until this “the assumption was that community and individual transformation would result from having great congregations with well-trained clergy and lots of programs.¹² Instead “the church became an ‘it’” contradicting “biblical teaching that sees the church as the ongoing incarnation of Jesus in the world, an organic life form vitally connected to him, even married to him.”¹³ The *Shema* was and is in place to remind and aid an ancient and contemporary people that in order for individual and

¹⁰ Mayes. *The New Century Bible Commentary*, 177-178.

¹¹ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-congregational Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

community transformation to take place there must be constant interaction with Scripture, with people and with family.

In a more contemporary setting, Ron Hunter, founder of D6, which bases ministry on the roots of Deuteronomy 6, the *Shema*, says that these kingdom values must be “caught and taught” to children through the efforts, coaching and living out of these principles by parents and church leaders.¹⁴ This is referred to as “generational discipleship.”¹⁵ It has to be a shared value for Kingdom communities to abide by in order for counter-cultural values to become adopted. This is a communal responsibility and it is not privy to individualized, atomized Western thought. It seems the context and culture of Western society is so far removed from this type of single focus of serving and loving God together as a people.

Donald Kraybill explains in *The Upside-down Kingdom* that the value system of the Kingdom of God, which was the central theme in the ministry and teaching of Jesus, was the inverse of the value system of the “kingdoms of this world. . . . Patterns of social organization which are routinely taken for granted in modern culture are questioned by kingdom values. Kingdom ways of living do not mesh smoothly with the dominant society.”¹⁶ Harkening back to Wright, the Church must be the healer of the broken, bringing the Kingdom of God into present reality by loving, serving and obeying God with their families, their children, their communities. This is an intergenerational, mutual mentoring responsibility for all involved in the community of God. As the *Shema* is

¹⁴ Chap Clark et al, *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views (Youth, Family, and Culture)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 150-162.

¹⁵ Ibid., 162.

¹⁶ Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-down Kingdom* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 23, 24.

calling out to all of Israel, so does the cry go out today to surround an abandoned and vulnerable generation(s) with people who care.

Clark, in *Hurt 2.0* says,

Difficult life circumstances can also nudge children and adolescents toward the vulnerable category. Regardless of the events leading to the circumstances, this marginalized group consists of the disabled, the socially illiterate, those who self-describe as GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender), and those who fall into a distinct separatist subculture, for whatever reason, like highly religious students.¹⁷

Then there are those who are considered privileged and find themselves plagued by their inability to see themselves as valuable and unique, placing them on the “fringes of the mainstream” as well.¹⁸ Again, it is through Jesus (Israel), and the community of God that healing and restoration take place as complete trust, singleness of love and obedience is lived out within the lives of the marginalized, whether adolescents, children, emerging adults, single parents or any of those down-trodden by the world.

Richard Stearns, in *The Hole in Our Gospel*, believes the Church has tamed this Gospel by reducing it “to a mere transaction involving the right beliefs rather than seeing in it the power to change the world.”¹⁹ He continues, “The whole gospel – the very social revolution Jesus intended as His kingdom unfolded ‘in earth as it is in heaven’ - has been entrusted to us, those who claim to follow Christ. Jesus seeks a new world order in which this whole gospel, hallmarked by compassion, justice, and proclamation of the good

¹⁷ Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 168.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Richard Stearns, *The Hole in our Gospel: What Does God Expect of Us? The Answer that Changed My Life and Might Just Change the World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 243.

news, becomes a reality, first in our hearts and minds, and then in the wider world through our influence.”²⁰

The Isaiah 61/Luke 4:18-19 Challenge of Healing for the Broken

Luke 4:17-19 says, “The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

In a short summary of the Luke 4:14-28 passage, Walter L. Liefeld explains, “Luke presents the quotation (of Isaiah 58:6 and Isaiah 61) and Jesus’ ensuing comments as a programmatic statement of Jesus’ ministry. As prophet and Messiah, he will minister to the social outcasts and needy, including Gentiles, in the power of the Spirit.”²¹ This passage does not talk about alliance of church and state, power of money or hierarchy, nor does it ask for the society at large to acknowledge the power of the Church. Instead it is noted that the Kingdom of God is to be brought into reality now where reconciliation, restoration and freedom for the oppressed begin and become qualities in present life because of the power of the Spirit. But, this divergence from the kingdoms of this world is an awakening that comes only as a result of the transformation of the mind.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Walter L. Liefeld, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 867.

The Romans 12:1-2/John 17 Challenge of Transformation

In keeping with the aforementioned commentary on Luke 4, Paul's ethic in Romans 12:1-2 mirrors "the apocalyptic conviction that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the righteousness of God has invaded this present evil age, which lingers still, to inaugurate already the new age, elsewhere known as 'the fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22-23)."²² Scholars in the Wesleyan tradition, Greathouse and Lyons would confirm that in being reconciled to God by faith a new life in the Spirit is opened up. They write:

The life of the Spirit is communal-life in the body of Christ. In chs 12 and 13 the apostle makes a general application of love (*agape*) as the distinguishing mark of the Christian life. Paul points to the ways in which Christians should put love in practice in their mutual relations within the Christian community and in the ways they relate to unbelievers outside the church. According to Paul, God is at work through the Spirit to create communities that prefigure and embody the reconciliation and healing of the world.²³

Again, the healing of the world is the theme: "Paul urges Christians to offer their bodies [*somata*, plural] as a living sacrifice [*thysian*, singular] . . . to God. By refusing to conform to the ways of the old Adamic age and instead "walking in newness of life," Christians' minds may be continually transformed according to the pattern of the risen Christ (7:4, 6; 8:1-17)."²⁴ The mind must be transformed, by the Spirit, through faith in Christ in order to even see clearly the delineation between kingdoms of this world and God's Kingdom. This is necessary to see each person as valuable, as *imago Dei*.

Ruth Haley Barton talks about this transformation as a natural and supernatural phenomenon in the life of Christ-followers who "grow and change" but only because

²² George Lyons and William Greathouse, *New Beacon Bible Commentary, Romans 1-8: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2008), 124.

²³ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

God accomplishes this “in our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit.”²⁵ But, she also makes it clear that it is only in the context of community that this Scripture is even understood. She continues: “Spiritual transformation takes place incrementally over time with others in the context of disciplines and practices that open us to God. In general, while we are still on this earth, our transformation will happen by degrees (2 Corinthians 3:18), and we need each other in order to grow (I Corinthians 12).”²⁶

Barton then explains, “It is the lack of spiritual transformation within individuals and systems that causes communities to falter and sometimes implode or explode. And it is the lack of community – a privatized approach to transformation that fails to see other people as necessary instruments of God’s grace – that limits the work of transformation in our lives.”²⁷ This is what it means to see one another as the *imago Dei*.

Transformation happens in the lives of the marginalized within the life of the Church community when all understand the role of neighbor and sibling adopted by God.

Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile emphasize missional theology by inviting “us to recognize the integral role of the neighbor, the stranger, and the wider world in the congregation’s life and imagination.”²⁸ The neighbor—whether a single mother, a homosexual or a teenager—might be adopted into a community of love. The stranger, the one who does not look like the Church, might be imagined as a part of a family. A

²⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, *Life Together in Christ: Experiencing Transformation in Community* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Books, 2014), 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁸ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 154.

theological reframing and reevaluation of “missional direction, refocusing budgets, facilities, staff time, activities, worship, and other elements of congregational life outward, upon the world invites us (the Church) to redefine what we value and how we assess it.”²⁹ To reiterate this, the assessment of whom and what we value comes through careful evaluation of current programs and understanding what is really happening with the marginalized. The budget might help a church understand who or what is truly valued above the marginalized.

Reggie McNeal looks back to the first three centuries of church history when he evaluates the efficacy and mission of the Church today: “Christianity was mainly a street movement, a marketplace phenomenon that spread through slave populations and social guilds of free laborers. Gatherings of adherents took place primarily in homes and some suitable public places, convening primarily for fellowship, teaching and worship. Christianity was primarily a practice, a way of life.”³⁰ Evaluating the mission of the contemporary Church by understanding the mission of Jesus should indeed impact the way the Church programs, practices and influences the community.

A new worldview must be opened up and employed in order to recognize what is really happening in the Church today. A possible result of consumerism, capitalism and nationalism seems to be intertwined with Kingdom values so much so that the upside down Kingdom of God is rife with the values of the kingdoms of this world. As noted in the previous chapter, it seems that the desire for legitimacy in the eyes of the culture takes precedence more and more.

²⁹ Ibid., 154-155.

³⁰ McNeal, *Missional Communities*, 2.

The Matthew 18 Invitation to Child-like Faith

Matthew 18:1-9 deals with yet another counter-cultural value that seems to be waning in the contemporary church. The disciples are concerned about who would be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. It is Jesus that confronts their earthly understanding of greatness by warning them that they must “become like little children or not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3). D.A. Carson writes, “The child is held up as an ideal, not of innocence, purity, or faith, but of humility and unconcern for social status. Jesus advocates humility of mind, not childishness of thought. With such humility, comes childlike trust.”³¹

The call for “humility” and “unconcern for social status” reminds the contemporary reader that the Matthean church “was open to sectarian influences of an organizational kind” as well. The verb used in this context means “change direction and conduct,” which would alter the way they view greatness.³² This is a divestment of power and hierarchy, which would be a complete change in how greatness was and is assessed. This is a command to welcome the “little ones,” those who would follow Jesus as true disciples, as if welcoming Jesus himself. Jesus’ disciples must deal as radically with pride as they were earlier commanded to deal with lust (5:29-30).³³ This is a picture of what is valuable through the lens of God’s upside-down Kingdom. It is with humility and care for one another that justice and *shalom* become part of the landscape of reality in the present.

³¹ Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 386-397.

³² Hill, *The New Century Bible Commentary*, 273.

³³ Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 399.

Wright says, “In the kingdom of the Son of Man, the power that counts is the power of love. It is the rule of Emmanuel, God-with-us.”³⁴ This rule of love pours itself into justice, mercy and compassion not unlike Amos 5:24, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Richard James Coggins notes that justice and righteousness were to be reliable and permanent characteristics rolling like an ever-flowing river and not just flowing as with seasonal rains.³⁵ This Amos passage shows the plight of the Israelites as they worship rites, religion and even trample on the rights of the poor while entreating the “God of Israel.”³⁶

Even in John 3:14-16 the power of love is felt and seen as being prominent. Wright expounds upon this passage: “Jesus is lifted up as the true revelation of God, lifted up in the supreme work of love, of gentle and heartfelt compassion, the place and posture which now symbolize the yearning love of the creator for his lost and self-destructive world.”³⁷ For Amos to call into “question the whole religious life of the Israelites” would have been seen as “monstrous to his contemporaries.”³⁸ And, yet, it is understood that Jesus and the early Church would have stood on these principles of compassion, justice and mercy for the marginalized.

³⁴ N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections On Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 31.

³⁵ Richard James Coggins, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Joel and Amos* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2000), 132.

³⁶ Robert Martin-Achard and S. Paul Re'emi, *International Theological Commentary: God's People in Crisis: Amos and Lamentations*, eds., George A. F. Knight and Fredrick Carlson Holmgren (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1984), 45.

³⁷ Wright, *Following Jesus*, 36.

³⁸ Martin-Achard and Re'emi, *International Theological Commentary*, 45.

The final scriptural reference of Luke 10 holds three more stories that lead back to the *Shema*. But, this time Jesus adds another phrase, which will be accentuated throughout this passage. First, Jesus sends out the seventy into the harvest field with instructions as to how to minister to the world. Then, while they are rejoicing in their return, the lawyer “correctly identified the priority of the commands to love God and love one’s neighbor. The story of the good Samaritan then develops the meaning of the command to love one’s neighbor, and the story of Mary and Martha highlights the overriding importance of devotion to the Lord’s Word as an expression of one’s love for God.”³⁹ But, it is interesting to see that the “unlikely heroes” of these stories are a Samaritan and a woman, both people who would have been considered marginalized at the time.⁴⁰

The New Interpreter’s Bible comments, “By depicting a Samaritan as the hero of the story, therefore, Jesus, demolished all boundary expectations. Social position – race, religion, or region – count for nothing. Anyone who has compassion and stops to help is his neighbor. The duty of neighborliness is an expression of love of God and love of others, and those who show mercy show that they belong among the heirs of the kingdom.”⁴¹ Finally, the story of Martha and Mary creates yet another surprise. Though Martha is receiving Christ into their home and preparing the meal as was social custom, Mary is sitting at Jesus feet listening to her Lord. But, this is the place of a disciple: “By

³⁹ *The New Interpreter's Bible: Luke John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 9:230-32.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary is acting like a male, violating a clear social boundary."⁴² Jesus is tearing apart all convention and allowing anyone to be a disciple, everyone to have value and is declaring that all are worthy image bearers of God. No one is left out. In fact, the marginalized are welcomed in as heroes. Luke 10:27-28 highlights this: "He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'"

Wright says, "Go into the world to follow this Emmanuel, to work and pray so that the healing celebration may woo this weary old world back to the God who made it and who loves it still."⁴³ Before Constantine's desire for a state religion the Church was the congregation of the sent ones. Jurgen Moltmann in *The Open Church* invites the church back to this messianic life-style: "Where Jesus is, there is life. There is abundant life, vigorous life, loved life, and eternal life. The one-sided orientation toward accomplishment and success makes us unjust and inhuman in our dealings with others. We exclude the sick, the handicapped, the unaccomplished, and the unsuccessful from public life. Also, politically we have to pay dearly for the gods of work and success."⁴⁴

Jesus was constantly touching the lives of people. John 1:14 speaks of the incarnation: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Exodus recounts "He not only came into the world but suffered thirst, weariness, and death, lived among us,

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Wright, *Following Jesus*, 31.

⁴⁴ Jurgen Moltmann, *Open Church: Invitation to a Messianic Lifestyle* (London: SCM-Canterbury Press Ltd, 1978), 15-21.

tented among us,” just as the “glory of the Lord took up residence in the tent of meeting” (Ex 40:34). The book *Compassion* explains what Jesus did and what the Church is to do: “Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish.”⁴⁵ Jesus invites the first century Jews to let go of all interests and agendas and take hold of “God’s surprising grace” which he is offering now to the whole world, even to their enemies.⁴⁶ The American church would do well to take hold of this grace and extend this grace to the world.

It seems obvious that Jesus is in the midst of the pain of humanity and is asking the Church to be in the very same place bringing healing, recovery and freedom through the power of the cross. Jesus prayer in John 17 “grows out of the fact that he is going away. He is entrusting the disciples to the father, and he is very much aware that the disciples are at risk. The world, which hates them as it hated him, will threaten and abuse them. They don’t belong to it, but they are to be sent into it, and they need protecting.”⁴⁷ These are now the responsibilities of the Body of Christ. The congregation must be present with children, adolescents, emerging adults, the transgendered, the gay, the healthy, the sick, the single-parent, the abandoned child, the family entities that do not seem traditional and so many more. It is time for the Church to be the Church. The Church, the faithful ones must provide an adoptive community of hope, love and *shalom*. By loving God with everything that is within and loving neighbor as self, the Body of

⁴⁵ Nouwen, *Compassion*, 3-4.

⁴⁶ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), under “Luke 4:14-30,” Electronic Format.

⁴⁷ N.T. Wright, *John For Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), under “John 17:9-19,” Electronic Format.

Christ must see where God is at work and join him there. The faithful action of the Church must resonate from the very faithfulness of the incarnate Christ.

PART THREE

THE FAITHFUL ACTION OF THE ADOPTIVE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY

CHAPTER 4

JOINING CHRIST IN HIS WORK

The faithful action of the postmodern, twenty-first century ecclesial community must take place within a compassionate community of believers. After examining the decline of the Church, it seems that an atomized, fractured, hurried and lonely culture is in need of a family. This lonely culture consists of the vulnerable, inclusive of the adolescent, the emerging adult, the aged, the LGBTQ community, the family entities that are not seen as “traditional,” those who have been touched with trauma and loss, the single-adult community, those who are navigating life with special abilities or children with such, and so many more. The Church must first begin recognizing that it has fallen prey to individualization, consumerism and capitalism, which causes competition rather than community, causing believers to share the same worldview as current culture. Walter Brueggemann calls this theological way of thinking “the myth of scarcity,” which leads to a life of wanting more and more, where God is not seen as provider, but as one more commodity that is available to help meet expectations and desired goals.¹ And in

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity,” *Christian Century* (March 1999).

the midst of this competition the vulnerable are trampled instead of engaged and mutually mentored as the very image of God, the *imago Dei*.

This ability to engage the vulnerable as the creation of God is explained by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together*. He actually exhorts the believer to control his/her tongue utilizing Ephesians 4:29. He believes it is in practicing right discipline of the tongue that

Each individual will make a matchless discovery. He will be able to cease from constantly scrutinizing the other person, judging him, condemning him, putting him in his particular place where he can gain ascendancy over him and thus doing violence to him as a person. Now he can allow the brother to exist as a completely free person, as God made him to be. His view expands and, to his amazement, for the first time he sees, shining above his brethren, the richness of God's creative glory. God did not make this person as I would have made him. He did not give him to me as a brother for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above him the Creator. Now the other person, in the freedom with which he was created, becomes the occasion of joy, whereas before he was only a nuisance and an affliction. God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me, that is, in my own image; rather in his very freedom from me God made this person in His image.²

Dean Borgman, one of the pioneers of thinking theologically in youth ministry wrote about what this next phase of ecclesial ministry should look like: "It will require a bold and broad theology, true to its biblical foundation and teachings of the church, careful to include the best insights from the social sciences," but first seeking wisdom from God.³ Therefore, in seeking wisdom from God, the next phase is to join Christ in his work of advocacy for humans who have lost their identity. Joerg Rieger and Kowk Pui-lan, "The church of the multitude needs to recapture both the religious and political

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian in Community* (Wheaton, IL: HarperOne, 2009), 93.

³ Dean Borgman, *Foundations for Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 7.

meanings of the term “*ecclesia*.”⁴ The people of God assemble not just for Sunday morning worship services, but also to discuss common affairs of the community and to take faithful action for justice. Many of the prophetic traditions of the Hebrew Bible hold that working for justice is worship. Rieger and Pui-lan continue, “The Church is the community or matrix in which the multitude is being formed and nurtured.”⁵ But, in order to truly understand the issues at hand, it seems there must be lament to admit or confess what truly has been lost.

Soong-Chan Rah, in *Prophetic Lament*, talks about the “tendency to view the holistic work of the church as the action of the privileged toward the marginalized,” which “often derails the work of true community healing. Ministry in the urban context, acts of justice and racial reconciliation require a deeper engagement with the other – an engagement that acknowledges suffering rather than glossing over it.”⁶ Investigation into how reconciliation, *shalom*, and restoration might take place for any population of vulnerable people, in the realm of community, might begin with Rah’s understanding of *shalom* and lament. He writes, “Shalom therefore, does not eschew or diminish the role of the other or the reality of a suffering world. Instead, it embraces the suffering other as an instrumental aspect of well-being. Shalom requires lament.”⁷ The word lament is thus defined and detailed by Rah:

⁴ Joerg Rieger and Kowk Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2012), 117

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Books, 2015), 20-21.

⁷ Ibid., 21.

Laments are prayers of petition arising out of need. But lament is not simply the presentation of a list of complaints, nor merely the expression of sadness over difficult circumstances. Lament in the Bible is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble. The hope of lament is that God would respond to human suffering that is wholeheartedly communicated through lament.⁸

Furthermore, before the Church can adequately lament or respond, there must be some understanding of exactly what has been lost. A huge component of this loss would be how individuals in and out of the Church view one another.

To Join Jesus in his Work of Advocacy for the *Imago Dei*

The *imago Dei*, a term that has a deep background, is only explicitly referenced in the Old Testament three times in Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1 and 9:6 and two places in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 11:7 and James 3:9. Middleton in his book, *The Liberating Image*, explains the *imago Dei* like this: “Humanity is created like this God, with the special role of representing or imaging God’s rule in the world.”⁹ He then explains the near Eastern background of the term: “Kings (and sometimes priests) were designated the image or likeness of a particular god, a designation that served to describe their function – representing the deity in question, and of mediating the divine blessing to the earthly realm.”¹⁰ The definition and understanding of the *imago Dei* that will be adopted as the functional summary useful for the purposes of the reader will be as follows: God, generous creator, inviting humans (trusting them) “to participate in the creative (and

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 26.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

historical) process”¹¹ of transforming the world into an ordered, harmonious cosmos; the human calling as *imago Dei* is itself developmental and transformative and may be helpfully understood as equivalent to the labor or work of forming culture or developing civilization.¹² It is a commission to extend God’s royal administration of the world as authorized representatives on earth.¹³ It is a hermeneutic of love demonstrating “power with rather than power over” another human being.¹⁴ Utilizing this framework, it is time for the Church to use theological and sociological imaginations to creatively interact with the current culture.

Children, adolescents and emerging adults are indeed in need of attention, care and celebration as part of the community. Assumptions of how they think, who they are and how they operate need to be thrown out. Informed understanding of their development cognitively, biologically, socially and spiritually aid in how they are ministered to and engaged. Many children and adolescents lose their identity at the hands of well-meaning people. There are fewer and fewer markers and rituals that help them tell their stories and understand their narratives in light of their own development. Reimagining engagement with these young people through their painful and joyful daily realities through the eyes and mind of Jesus is necessary and incarnational work.¹⁵ For it

¹¹ Ibid., 289.

¹² Ibid., 89.

¹³ Ibid., 289.

¹⁴ Ibid., 297.

¹⁵ Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 88.

is through the leadership of theological reflection that important spiritual formation and discovery of God's gentle presence takes place.¹⁶

Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley perpetuate this type of engagement by utilizing stories, markers and rituals that acknowledge pain, loss, joy and victory in *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*. They stress the "human need for narrative and ritual so that the world can be rendered a habitable and hospitable place. Narrative and ritual are essential media through which human beings create environments conducive to their psychological, social, and spiritual survival and development."¹⁷ They encourage the Church to create new rituals as an "acknowledged liturgical response to a powerful story of crisis, transition, or loss."¹⁸ How empowering it could be to create a ceremony of transition for those who are moving out from home and heading to college or a place of their own. It is imperative to remind emerging adults of the intersection of the divine narrative and their personal narrative. The Church must reimagine the engagement of these as well as the vulnerable, who may live in crisis with no one taking notice and acknowledging their pain. This is part of what it means to serve and love one's neighbor. This is part of what it means to be adoptive.

Anderson and Foley continue:

Ordinary people yearn for a union between their story and God's story. We suggested that such a union can be achieved in two ways. One is characterized by the Christian virtue of hope: we hope that – if not in this world, at least in the next - we will become part of God's story of glory and eternal peace. The other is more characterized by the Christian virtue of faith: we want to believe that God is very

¹⁶ Ibid., 88.

¹⁷ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories Dangerous Rituals* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 128.

¹⁸ Ibid.

near and that God is even present in the story we are currently struggling to narrate.¹⁹

Imagining this hermeneutic of love and creativity actively involved in forming culture and developing civilization paints a picture of Christ and the Church.

Yet, in America, it seems that the Church is adhering to a mass produced cultural capitalism and consumerism message that continues to ensnare rather than bring the salvation message. In *Arrested Adulthood*, James Cote' speaks of the fact that there has been widespread and rapid change in Western society; it has been a customary practice to learn from the children and in some cases "imitating their children, joining in on the hedonism that has become more widely acceptable," and accepting the philosophy of "a simple maximization of personal freedom and a minimization of personal responsibility."²⁰ The future therefore becomes one of "immediate gratification" and there is little work done on identity.²¹ This issue of identity, in many instances is left to the "institutionalization of distinct life stages, which occurred as the life span of the twentieth century adult increased," thus the "blurred lines between youth and adulthood."²² The danger here for the Church, is that unless this worldview of conformity producing and consumeristic individual preference is recognized, the Church will never reevaluate and reorient to the counter-cultural ways and thoughts of Jesus and the early Church where the *imago Dei* was celebrated in each and every person. When

¹⁹ Ibid., 153.

²⁰ James Cote', *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 16-17.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 28-29.

psychological growth is stunted by mass conformity to social norms, the non-conforming will be forgotten, and the unique qualities of each human will be disdained rather than embraced.

Considering the fact that many people in the world have been touched by vulnerability, trauma, poverty, systemic evils that continue to impoverish and power that enslaves, whether as children, teenagers or as adults, it is important to recognize what effective trauma-informed ministry care looks like. For, if this type of care were used in just normal settings in the Church, there would be more compassion, less competition and less judgment. The atmosphere must exude safety. In order for the Church to join Christ in his incarnational work, it is imperative for the *ecclesia* to empty themselves of power, status and competitive edge in order to join the hurting and the traumatized right where they are. Thus, the picture changes from that of an elite posturing as the savior to the neighbor walking alongside to offer support and suffer with them. It is a key element for a trustworthy and safe space. Philippians 2:1-11, *The Hymn of Christ*, gives the example of Jesus who does not seek after equality with God, but becomes human, taking on the form of a servant—not a master, thus bringing a new perspective on servanthood.²³

Servanthood changes the atmosphere of a church. Another book by Nouwen, *Can You Drink This Cup?*, speaks of sorrows being universal as well as deeply personal.²⁴ It is the people who decide to forego their own comfort zones, indulge in the depths of others' pain and lament over another's loss as if it were their own that have decided they will indeed, drink the cup of Christ. This will be recognized by those who are in need of

²³ Nouwen, *Compassion*, 21-31.

²⁴ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Can You Drink This Cup?* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2006), 38.

restoration, who are longing for shalom. And, they, in turn, may find one more reason to trust, allowing themselves hope that they will be heard, and that their burdens will be shared. If healing and renewal are to reach the whole world, this must be the basis for interaction. As Jesus shows the believers how to be the Kingdom, it is important to note that sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is necessary for the atmosphere to be managed with care, consistency, prayer and consideration. When this happens the Church becomes a place of hospitality, honesty, transparency and prayer. The Church must remember how Jesus utilizes ordinary moments with ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary realizations.

Another ordinary avenue to join the work of advocacy for human beings who are created in the very image of God is to regularly break bread together. This not only creates a feeling of safety and hospitality, but a new intimacy is shared among friends when this takes place. There is the story of Simon Peter. After Jesus shares breakfast with him, he speaks deeply to Peter about shepherding his sheep in John 21. There must be grave importance in understanding what takes place when people eat together. Intimate conversations and the breaking of barriers seem to be normal fare during or after a meal. There is no hierarchy at the table. All participating are on level ground. All are reclining or seated together, celebrating time away from a harried, hurried world, learning to be present with one another. Wright, in his commentary about Luke's Emmaus story notes that the first meal with Adam and Eve, opened their eyes to sin, destruction and sorrow.²⁵ This story was one that even Cleopas knew all too well. But this meal in Emmaus, where

²⁵ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 2413-2567 Amazon Kindle edition, 5294.

Jesus broke bread and gave it to those gathered, made this “the first meal of the new creation.” Eyes were opened and hearts were enlightened, “death itself has been defeated.”²⁶ God’s new creation, brimming with life, joy and new possibility, has burst in upon the world of decay and sorrow.²⁷ Barton describes Emmaus in this way:

The choice to stay together was powerful for the three travelers in Luke 24 because it gave them the opportunity to do something very ordinary together—to share a meal—and that meal became the context in which the most significant and revelatory moments of the whole journey took place. In Jewish culture sharing a meal had special significance because meals were time of solidarity and fellowship—which is why Jesus often got in trouble for who he ate with.²⁸

The ordinary became the extraordinary.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer also talks about the fellowship of the table in regards to the Luke 24 Emmaus passage: “The Scriptures speak of three kinds of table fellowship that Jesus keeps with his own: daily fellowship at table, the table fellowship of the Lord’s Supper, and the final table fellowship in the kingdom of God. But in all three the one thing that counts is that ‘their eyes were opened, and they knew him.’”²⁹ He continues, “The daily table fellowship binds the Christians to their Lord and one another. At table they know their Lord as the one who breaks bread for them; they eyes of their faith are opened.”³⁰

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Barton, *Life Together in Christ*, 135.

²⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 66.

³⁰ Ibid., 68.

It is clear that the eyes of Zacchaeus were opened as well when Jesus invited himself to eat with he and his family. Allan Aubrey Boesak devotes many pages to this story in his book *Radical Reconciliation*. He writes,

Zacchaeus was shunned by his people. They would not eat with him, because sharing a meal with someone was identifying with them, affirming them as part of oneself, as part of the community. Jesus overrules the prejudices created by law and custom, takes away the stigma that has clung to Zacchaeus and his family. In breaking bread with him Jesus affirms his humanity, his inclusion. Jesus teaches the people that radical reconciliation means the solidarity of unconditional love; it means inclusion, affirmation, consecration.³¹

This could be where the believers and nonbelievers alike feel as if they are family. In a community that endeavors to bring healing, safety, restoration and peace to the lives of those who have been traumatized or abandoned, to the forgotten who have been invaded with thoughts of brokenness, unworthiness and pain, there could be an atmosphere of mutuality, a sharing of place where the healing can begin. This is a place of adoption.

The Church as Family

If the church is to become an adoptive community and therefore family, it is important to see through a new lens. Clark has spent a lifetime re-envisioning the Church as a New Testament family of siblings, adopted by God.³² In his book *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, he speaks of the community of faith by utilizing the metaphor of family and the

³¹ Allan Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 73.

³² Chap Clark, ed., *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations Into the Family of Faith* (Youth, Family, and Culture) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 1-2.

“ministry of adoption.”³³ The following four premises are the foundation of his hope for the Church:

- #1: Adoption recognizes that in every church or organization there are insiders and outsiders.
- #2: I am adopted into God’s family as a child with other children.
- #3: Jesus has his eye especially on the vulnerable.
- #4: Adoption is not limited to the gathered but includes the outsider as well.³⁴

He continues:

Adoptive ministry means that while all are siblings – all are children of the same Father, whether they are eighty or fifteen years old – those who are mature must take the lead on ensuring that those who are vulnerable for any reason are protected. Thus, adoptive ministry is not simply a grounding theological framework for youth ministry, though it obviously applies to both youth and children’s ministry. Adopting the vulnerable means that those who are mature must see it as their responsibility to ensure that those who are not are cared for, included, and empowered, and can grow into well-established life and faith.³⁵

This sounds like the *Shema*. This is a way of engaging the vulnerable, valuing those society devalues and bringing community where there is abandonment, hope where there is none and thriving where there was only survival. This view of youth, family and church ministry recognizes that the hierarchy and power of institutionalization that has crept into and taken the Church hostage must be replaced with a mutual mentoring, intergenerational community of compassionate family members. This seems a biblical antidote to the ever-widening gaps between the Church and the young, and the Church and the marginalized.

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Chap Clark, ed., *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations Into the Family of Faith* (Youth, Family, and Culture) (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 3.

Life Together No Exclusions

Another book, *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views*, again edited by Clark, addresses the more pressing need of youth ministry in the Church. In order for the Church to engage, disciple to maturity, and then retain young people something must change. Clark writes,

The goal of youth ministry must shift away from segmenting young people off from everyone else to offering them a mutual, empowering, engaging, and supportive new family. . . . When we offer young people real, mutually participatory familial relationships that go beyond the single mentor, in line with the family and body metaphors especially found in the New Testament, the Church becomes a more natural and wide-ranging environment best described as a mentoring community.³⁶

In an effort to be practical in the midst of a theoretical conversation there is one thing that will make this adoptive church a more probable possibility. When the Church learns to include and celebrate every person as being created in the very image of God, there will be no exceptions to those whom the Church adopts. Recognizing the *imago Dei* within every person encountered aids in this process. When this takes place, the sanctification by truth that Jesus prays for actually happens organically.

Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.” Richard Wayne Wills, Sr. writes about Martin Luther King Jr. and his theological implications of the image of God:

First, all individuals, as children of God, were equally valued inasmuch as they were birthed with an inherent dignity. Second, human beings had an intrinsic worth that in and of itself became the requisite for the bestowal of just and fair treatment. Third, humanity thus created and possessed the capacity to cooperate with God by living out the mandates of their moral conscience, such that the desire to choose to do that which is socially good can actually be translated into

³⁶ Chap Clark et al, *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 85, 90.

the deed itself. Fourth, and finally, image of God provided the existential common ground for genuine community [building, making beloved community, in its broadest sense, a distinct historical possibility.³⁷

Congregations valuing everyone equally, believing that all were children of God and treating everyone with dignity would seemingly be the first step in the “genuine community-building, making beloved community a distinct possibility” that Martin Luther King Jr. was talking about. If anyone had sorrow over the way he and his race were (and are) treated, even in the name of God, it was this man. And, yet, he was able to maintain civility, kindness and a non-violent response in a very violent culture working toward unity. This type of beloved community was something that King longed for in his day. Believing that all persons are born with an inherent dignity inches the Church closer to the Kingdom trajectory of equal ground at the foot of the cross that is spoken of in Galatians 3:23-29. So many are hung up on differing ethnic backgrounds, racial divides, the changes of the traditional family makeup and roles and the desire for hierarchy and power that the meaning of unity in the Body of Christ as well as the recognition that all are created in the very image of God is lost.

Stanley Grenz, in *Theology for the Community of God*, contends that “those who are united to Christ share thereby in the image of God,” and the “transformation into the image of God is a process which we experience beginning with conversation and lasting until the great eschatological renewal which will bring us into full conformity with the image of God.”³⁸ He also argues that,

³⁷ Richard W. Wills, *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Image of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 113.

³⁸ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 178.

Ultimately the image of God should focus on community. As the doctrine of the Trinity asserts, throughout all eternity God is community, namely, the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who comprise the triune God. The creation of humankind in the divine image, therefore, can mean nothing less than that humans express the relationship dynamic of the God whose representation we are called to be. Consequently, each person can be related to the image of God only within the context of life in community with others.³⁹

So, according to Grenz, although in the beginning, the male and female were created in the image of God, because of sin, the image was marred, and it is only recovered fully when all things are made new. But, in order for this image of God to be recognized – there must be community, this cannot happen in solitude. He writes, “At the heart of the concept of the divine image is God’s ultimate intention that humankind show forth God’s own character.”⁴⁰

King might argue, however, that each person is birthed with the inherent dignity of the *imago Dei* just because they were conceived. There is one thing that must not be forgotten throughout this conversation of the *imago Dei*. Moltmann, in his treatise to the Church in *Creating a Just Future*, reminds her that there is only one way to do any of this which is worth doing: “It is the action of God through Christ which brings about justification and creates peace among us unjust and peaceless people.”⁴¹ The Church must never forget that recognizing and celebrating the reconciliation to the *imago Dei* in each human being happens only through the work of God Christ Jesus.

³⁹ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 178.

⁴¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *Creating a Just Future* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 5.

It is the work of the Church to be the instrument of God's justice in the world today as well as the pledge of "the coming new creation of the world in this justice."⁴² God's justice does not settle for waiting for the new creation. It is God's justice that brings the stark reminder that there are people that will walk away from faith and people that will never come to faith because they are not viewed as worthy. Until the Church recognizes the beauty of confession over the brokenness of the systems and structures that have bound it to political power, hierarchy and short-sightedness, there will be no renewal in the life of the Church. The Church needs to come alive again.

To Celebrate One Another as Siblings – Hierarchy is Dead

Again, Clark writes, "Adoptive ministry means that while we are siblings—all are children of the same Father, whether they are eighty or fifteen years old—those who are mature must take the lead on ensuring that those who are vulnerable for any reason are protected."⁴³ Learning what it takes to treat one another as siblings rather than viewing others through the desire to wield power and control is a difficult task. The Western, developed world struggles to see the value of taking care of others as much as taking care of oneself. S. Steve Kang talks about developing a holistic, loving, God-glorifying community where "the teacher and the students are traveling together on a pilgrimage toward the ever intensifying vision of God's kingdom. Together, they encourage one another to enter the formation process so they can experience eternal communion with

⁴² Ibid., 7.

⁴³ Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, 3.

the Triune God as they have communion with fellow saints of God's historical and multicultural kingdom."⁴⁴

It is imperative that the American Church wakes up to recognize that the desire for power, hierarchy and control plagues and overwhelms the mission of the Church. As Rieger and Pui-lan write,

Just as Jesus rejected the temptation to acquire the position of top-down power over the world offered to him by the devil (Matt. 4:8-11), the early Christian rejected the temptations of top-down power. The early Christians had a strong sense that Jesus Christ, whom they considered both human and divine, was no supreme being operating from the top down – omnipotent, immutable, and impassible. Their memories of Jesus Christ, and the difference that he made in people's lives in the midst of a world of empire, gradually helped them rethink divinity and who God is.⁴⁵

Learning New Church from the Immigrant Churches in America

Rah calls churches that are blinded by power, individualism, consumerism, materialism and racism the Western, White cultural captivity of the Church. He speaks of an American Church that is more cultural in its norms than biblical.⁴⁶ McNeal considers the tough questions that the current churches need to ask that would expose what is really happening in his book *The Present Future*. He concurs with Rah that, "The church culture in North America is a cultural phenomenon in America that is more about a particular religious culture than about Jesus or his mission."⁴⁷ Rah proposes and believes that the immigrant Church has much to offer the contemporary Western Church. The

⁴⁴ Conde-Frazier, Kang and Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom*, 166.

⁴⁵ Rieger and Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion*, 90.

⁴⁶ Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 20-21.

⁴⁷ McNeal, *The Present Future*, 52.

immigrants, themselves, are looked down upon by the dominant White culture. Yet, they are the people who provide examples of holistic evangelism. Five characteristics are examined in the Korean American Church that have brought growth and health through “prayer and the work of God,” and they seem to be somewhat universal in nature to other immigrant church experiences as well.⁴⁸ These are worship in the heart language of the immigrant, maintenance of homeland culture, the importance of fellowship community life and social networking, provision of social services and the restoration of social status.⁴⁹

Instead of the dominant culture insisting on another language and form of worship that must be adhered to, there is the preservation of a faith that is known, Scripture reading in their own languages and relationships that help to rebuild, restore and provide vital services that aid not only in survival but in spiritual growth and renewal. Rah continues: “The church becomes a place where the immigrant’s desire for an extended family environment lost in immigration is fulfilled.”⁵⁰ They find themselves adopted into a family of believers in the midst of a hostile environment. The immigrant Church engages “life on all levels—serving a community in need and providing the services that demonstrate the Kingdom of God to those who may be experiencing a sense of displacement in the Kingdom of this world.”⁵¹ This is what adoption looks like. And, this is what the American Church could be.

⁴⁸ Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 167.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 173.

⁵¹ Ibid., 177.

Rieger and Pui-lan help the Church reimagine who the God of the multitudes truly is through the work and life of Jesus while on earth: “In the stories of the Gospels, Jesus spent considerably more time on the road than in the synagogue or the temple; he spent time walking through fields gleaning food or engaging in public debates in villages and cities, and he was on his way to the capital when he mocked the Roman governor by entering the city on the back of a donkey instead of a horse (Matt. 21:1-11). Where is Jesus walking now?”⁵² Even a more global understanding of Christianity that challenges the American Church is seen in Latin American congregations. These “communities challenge the complacency of the church. (They) present a new church paradigm because they build the church from below and not from the top down. The church does not exist for itself; the church consists of the poor, who want to take action to change their communities. The church is seen as sacrament in history, for it announces and anticipates the universal salvation of all people.”⁵³

A Compassionate Community – Not a Competitive One

The congregation must be able to recognize the Kingdom of God in the present, joining God in his work by intentionally engaging the single parent, the homosexual couple with a child, the family with a disabled child, the single adult, the married couple with children, along with the abandoned teenager in intergenerational fellowship, community and service. Celebrating each person the way he or she has been created, recognizing the value and dignity of each, and allowing God space to work through the

⁵² Rieger and Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion*, 85.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 116.

power of his Spirit are intentional choices to join God in a faithful response to what he is already doing. Adoptive ministry is only possible when vulnerability in community is a priority. And a family is well aware of the brokenness of each individual it embraces. Being able to suffer and celebrate together is a reflection of the divine incarnation.

Nouwen writes, “The great mystery revealed to us in this is that Jesus, who is the sinless son of God, chose in total freedom to suffer fully our pains and thus to let us discover the true nature of our own passions. In him, we see and experience the persons we truly are. Jesus who is divine lives our broken humanity not as a curse (Gn 3:14-19), but as a blessing . . . a God who has experienced our brokenness.”⁵⁴ And, the Church, created in the very image of God must learn from God made flesh, Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One, how to celebrate and suffer with every single soul encountered in order to fulfill the mission of reconciliation, freedom and healing.

⁵⁴ Nouwen, *Compassion*, 15.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The current American Church is showing decline in the attendance of adolescents, emerging adults, those who are marginalized and families that are dealing with the special abilities of children and other family members. Many seem to be finding no solidarity in the Church. However, studies have revealed that this attendance decline also is shown in the habits of normally faithful adults and families. Combining the results of these studies with the questions of institutionalization of the Church and the possible repercussions thereof brings new insight and relevant information that must be evaluated and contemplated. Through the definitions and examples of institutionalism and bureaucracy that include money, power, control, the alliance of church and state and hierarchy, correlations have been made to the current contemporary Church. These earthly kingdom issues are mirrored in the attitudes, minds and leadership of the Church.

Not only is it important to understand how these ideas have impacted the Church in its history and in its present form; but, it is imperative to hold the current Church up to the light and understanding of Jesus and the early church. Harkening back to the days of Jesus and the early church has a way of making the Church take notice of where it has been, where it is and where it might be if there is reevaluation and adherence to the upside-down Kingdom perspective of Jesus.

The Church must understand why it is operating the way it is and then ask questions. It is possible to resist and even dismantle the institutionalization of the Church in order to re-envision the mission and vision that Jesus so clearly mandated through his

words and actions. But there must be an impetus for reviewing and evaluating the history first.

The church took a huge turn theologically and philosophically in the days of Constantine. Just recognizing the fact that Constantine was operating in a largely pagan world with no idea of the counter-cultural Kingdom values that Jesus espoused, but instead sought to conquer and expand in most of his exploits, gives a new perspective on motive. Except for those who left for the desert and monasteries, people fell right in line embracing power, alliance of church and state, the declaration that all must be Christian under the rule of someone who was looking to build a great kingdom. And, yet, from that point on, most of Christendom changed.

Instead of being concerned for the orphan, the beggar, the destitute, the widow and various other marginalized entities, the Church began to amass wealth, and march in crusades, taking the cross into battle as a symbol of victory. The Sermon on the Mount was all but forgotten in those crucial skirmishes where people were slaughtered in the name of Jesus Christ. Today it must be asked did the Church ever look back and wonder at the bloodshed that followed? Did it ever question why Jesus did not confront Rome? Did the Church wonder why Jesus went after the Pharisees and the Saducees, but did not go into battle against the powers of this world?

The twenty-first century Church does not have the luxury of just following church tradition and past protocol without actively seeking for the life and words of Jesus and the life and actions of the first-century church to bring clarity to the current demise. Speaking about the early church in the midst of the Roman world that was so obsessed with status, Scot McKnight says the following:

Hierarchy, status, reputation, and connections were the empire. The church, though, was not the empire! So when the Christians gathered to worship, to fellowship, and to meet and eat, the ruthless, divisive, and status-shaped backbone of the empire snapped. There would be no slave and no free in the church. There would be no Roman, no Greek, no Egyptian, and no barbarian.¹

No one was invisible in the early church. They had to make it work every day. But, there was a clear demarcation as to where, who and what the empire was and how the Church acted and lived. The current Church must take the time to reevaluate where it has come from and why it is operating the way it does. It is time to resist the pull of the empire in the Western world. Nouwen, in *Compassion*, calls the Church to consider the radical call to displacement that Jesus answered. He feels that this call must be answered by the current church as well: “Voluntary displacement leads to compassionate living precisely because it moves us from positions of distinctions to positions of sameness, from being in special places to being everywhere.”² As noted in *The Hymn of Christ* (Ph 2:6-11) there is a self-emptying of Christ that must be seen as crucial to the Christian life. Galatians 2: 20 says, “And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” It is a life of walking away from the temptation of importance and relevance, understanding that the Church does not need the titles of legitimacy or validity from the empire. Instead it is of utmost value to live out the challenges and qualities of *The Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew 5 following the trajectory of Christ, who became one of us, emptying himself of all status.

¹ McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents*, 89.

² Nouwen, *Compassion*, 64.

Conclusions

In response to the research and studies that show the Western, White church in decline, it is my opinion that these trends of decline are in direct response to the loss of prophetic voice of the Church. The Church has conjoined with the empire, and the battles that are being fought are not the battles of Christ and the upside-down Kingdom of God but of the earthly kingdom nature instead. Those who are invisible to the world are invisible in the Church. Those who are marginalized in the world are marginalized in the Church. Those who are victimized in the world are re-victimized in the Church. The Church has politicized and consumerized the message of Jesus' love. And, it is time to reevaluate.

There is a definition of spiritual formation found in the book *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, by James C. Wilhoit, that gives the Church an idea of where to begin. He writes, "Christian spiritual formation refers to the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit."³ In Wilhoit's description of this definition he admits that it is his desire to make a distinction between a spiritual formation that is impacted by everyday "cultural forces, activities, and experiences that shape" one's view with earthly kingdom values and those values that are a part of an exploration of the more intentional and deliberate process of becoming more like Jesus through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.⁴ This delineation helps the Church to reevaluate the direction that it is taking. It must be asked, is the Church heading in a direction that is led by

³ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 23.

⁴ Ibid.

empire or led by the Spirit? Another question might be, “Is the church impacted more by mass consumeristic, capitalistic culture, news and activity than the leading of the Holy Spirit and the life of Jesus?” Allan Aubrey Boesak writes about an intentional move by his church to adopt an article that reflects the decisive direction and movement towards God and his Kingdom. The premise was, “The church ‘should stand where God stands.’ It is a kind of leitmotif for the liturgical and public worship of the church and in its simplicity calls for equally direct and simple obedience; against injustice and with the wronged. The confession itself is a powerfully prophetic document that reflects the church’s belief in three key gospel truths: unity, justice, and reconciliation.”⁵ Boesak contends, “It follows that the church, ‘in following Christ’ should therefore stand where God stands and witness against all the powerful and privileged who seek their own interests, seek control over others, and in the process always harm others, that is, those they have made powerless. Where power is at play, the powerless suffer.”⁶ Howard Thurman in *Jesus and the Disinherited* writes, “The first step toward love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value. This cannot be discovered in a vacuum or in a series of artificial or hypothetical relationships. It has to be in a real situation, natural, free.”⁷

Where there is a hunger for power, there is a need to control. Where there is a need for hierarchical systems, there is a desire for status. Where there is collusion with the empire, there is a loss of prophetic witness. Where the marginalized of the empire

⁵ Allan Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 101.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

⁷ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 98.

have no value in the Church, there is a blindness that has overtaken leadership, deeming the invisible people as worthless to the Church. Where the desire of status in the eyes of the empire is at play, there is no ability to celebrate the *imago Dei* of each and every person in society. In fact, where there is power, money, status and alliance of church and state, no one cares to hear and live out the commands of Jesus to free the captives, help the blind see again, bring hope to the hopeless, feed the hungry and quench the thirst of the thirsty. Those commands become menial tasks. And those with status are not willing to become servants. It is servant leadership in the vein of Jesus and the road to the cross that will draw the young, the old, the hurting, the lost, the powerless and all of the vulnerable to the Church, but ultimately to Jesus the Christ. For Jesus is from the upside-down Kingdom where everyone matters, everyone is valuable, everyone has purpose and everyone has a story. The identity of the Church will be restored when it has decided to “stand with God.” In doing so, the young will be invigorated with passion to fulfill the commands of God. There will be more than a nominal confession of Christianity that takes on the nuance of moral therapeutic deism. There will be a vitality that draws people together in the community of God. This will be a Jesus-centered Church, a sent Church, the incarnational presence of Jesus among the people. Institutionalism will be challenged and dismantled, and the Church as a living, breathing organism will be re-envisioned and celebrated.

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