VOICES from the
MISSIONAL MOVEMENT

VOLUME SIX

LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR

NORTH AMERICAN BAPTIST CONFERENCE

LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR

VOICES FROM THE MISSIONAL MOVEMENT
–VOLUME 6–

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This e-book is a compilation of articles originally published between 2008 and 2015 in *The Missional Voice*, the journal of Forge Missional Training Network. The articles were written by a variety of authors with a wide variety of academic and practical experience as a way to encourage pastors, church leaders, and thinking Christians everywhere to reflect on the challenges facing the church in North America. Our hope in gathering this collection is that we will once again challenge your thinking and encourage you as you seek to follow the missional God.

FINDING OUR WAY BACK HOME

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I have a Facebook problem. It started innocently awhile back as some Facebook logarithm began to prompt me to complete profile details. I obliged. Education? Completed. Interests? Completed. Religion? Completed. Hometown? I don't know. I really don't, so I left it blank. But over the past year, Facebook continues to pester me every time I log in. The programmers at Facebook have even made it easy on me. Based on my network of friends, I'm offered three good options. All I need to do is select one and the prompts will cease, my profile will be complete. But I cannot bring myself to select any one of those options even though I've lived significant portions of my life in all three. Why? Because the place where I lived the longest doesn't even make the list. It's not really a Facebook problem, but a hometown problem. What is a hometown when one's family moved in childhood? Where am I from? How is my identity connected to concrete, physical place?

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that my nation of citizenship and my nation of residency have at times differed and that my denominational affiliation has been equally fluid. The lines in my life get blurred when it comes to questions of hometown, tradition, and community. I am shaped by some type of hybrid identity, formed through geographically diverse networks, several different local cultures, two different national stories, and several theological and denominational traditions. Where do I belong? Where is home?

I'm not that unique. Likely you or someone you know could offer a similar reflection with even greater geographical, national, denominational, and cultural differences. Sociologists have insisted for some time that we live in an age of cultural and geographic fluidity characterized by – among other things – confusion with regard to home, identity, and tradition. Global capitalism and the ubiquity of screen-based connectivity means that many of the traditional limitations on human relationships, such as geographic distance, strong generational family bonds, or ambivalent ignorance, have been transcended. We are experiencing an unprecedented new world order. We grope about in the dark for a metaphor that can illuminate our experience.

Zygmunt Bauman, in *Liquid Modernity*, offers the powerfully suggestive image of "melting" to describe the economic, cultural, and intellectual forces of our era. Bauman argues that the sources of meaning, identity, and social life, such as geographical rootedness, family bonds, clear gender roles, and religious-ethical traditions, once formed solid and immovable features of our lives. Things like nation, family, gender, religion, and geography were relatively stable features in any one society that would shape and (to some extent) determine one's way of life. One grew up Catholic and did not mix with or know many other Protestants; one would live one's whole life rooted in a single place and would largely find

a way to fit within the social scripts given in such a place and at such a time. In previous generations, a story like mine was the exception, not the rule.

But in recent decades, we have seen these solids melt almost as fast as the polar ice caps. Like climate change, these melting forces have been at work for some time even if we are just now noticing them.

Ever since the intellectual movement known now as the Enlightenment" (think Descartes of "I think therefore I am," or Immanuel Kant) courageously enthroned doubt and skepticism as a rational path toward genuine knowledge, we moderns have been in the habit of displacing one type of order in favor of another. Initially, this move was an exercise in creativity and courage, for the Enlightenment emerged after decades of devastating violence between Catholics and Protestants in Europe. This new philosophy attempted to liberate truth claims from regional rivalries but needed to "melt" or doubt existing intellectual assumptions in the process.

Over hundreds of years, we have seen this happening again and again. In each case, the philosopher or social theorist seeks some type of liberation from a pre-existing social or intellectual given for the sake of creating a new kind of order.

At first this was directed against a static ecclesiastical tradition for the sake of creating a more humane and rational approach to truth claims. But then it expanded to question the political legitimacy of ruling classes and gave rise to revolutions (American and French) and democracies. With the spread of democracy, the method and assumptions of rational "enlightenment" challenged more of the reigning assumptions of social order. For example, the memorable line that "all men are created equal" in the American Declaration of Independence eventually, and rightly, challenged the slave trade, patriarchy, and segregation. We now understand it to be a declaration of universal human rights and not only that of white, male landowners. Throughout modern history we see a stable (and, in many cases, oppressive) social order questioned or "melted" so that a new kind of order might emerge. While we can celebrate this movement as good and just on nearly all accounts, this is also the kind of "melting" that Bauman now notices at work in our experience of modernity. One form of order is questioned or doubted for the sake of a new, emerging one.

According to Bauman, these "melting powers" of modernity have intensified in recent years as this process of melting one type of order or understanding for another is now directed at "the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions."[1]

What he means by this is that we have fewer and fewer "givens" that help determine ethics, values, purpose, and meaning. We now have a situation characterized by "an individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving [. . .] falling primarily on the individual's shoulders."[2] We see this played out in debates over family structure, sexual politics, gender roles, and religious pluralism. Freed from the

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[1] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden: Polity Press, 2000), 6.
[2] Bauman, *Modernity,* 8.

limitations of geography, nation-state, family, gender roles, and religious tradition, we are now responsible to construct our own lives through the powers of individual choice. We are afloat on an iceberg in an ever-expanding sea of options.

Bauman's picture of liquid modernity is met with various forms of hand-wringing. Lost at sea without any solid land in sight, we suffer from exposure to anonymous forces beyond our control. We worry about family structure, politics, problems with leadership, the loss of public spaces and community. Depending upon our political orientation, we tend to blame this vulnerability on either a rudderless and invasive national government or constant buffering by the creative destruction of global consumer capitalism. But regardless of how we understand the problem, none of us has any idea what to do about it. I have more than a Facebook problem. And this problem begs for both a theological and missiological response that stretches beyond critique and anxiety. What is it that God is up to in this "melting" era? And how can we, the church, participate? We can begin by finding the way back home. Or, rather, making our home while on the way.

Christian tradition often plays with the metaphor "home" – referring to the loss of home as a necessary part of our faith journey, while we anticipate "going home" to our final, future hope. In this vision, we are like Abraham; in following Jesus, we leave the comforts of home and become "resident-aliens" and so bear witness to the shape of things to come. But we also read texts like Jeremiah's instruction to the exiles, and recognize our life in Christ now as a kind of home-making, or perhaps a "coming home." In repentance and belief, we see ourselves as the prodigal daughter/son who is welcomed home by a gracious and forgiving heavenly Father. Amidst our melting modernity, with a society from and located nowhere, those in Christ are not the only resident-aliens. But we are, perhaps, the few who have the resources to, like Abraham, make our home wherever it is that we find ourselves. In the name of Jesus, it is time for us to shape our life around particular practices of place-making through a collective commitment of stability.

Collective Commitment of Stability

In *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*, Rod Dreher writes a memoir in which he sets his own life alongside that of his sister, Ruthie Leming. Dreher grew up in St. Francisville, Louisiana, population 1,700. A bookish kid more drawn to Paris than LSU football, Dreher found university and an emerging journalistic career as a means to escape the expectations and limitations of small town life. Very quickly, Dreher enters the fluid, mobile existence that characterizes the educated elite: moving from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C., to New York City. While Dreher remains committed to Christianity, his faith fits within his individualistic lifestyle. In many ways, Dreher flourishes. The melting structures that made it possible for him to leave St. Francisville help him to grow and find work that would have been impossible if he stayed.

Dreher's younger sister Ruthie lives the opposite life. She never leaves St. Francisville, marries her high school boyfriend, and devotes her life to teaching, family, and life-long relationships. Dreher flourishes without place. Ruthie appears stuck within place. But all this changes when Ruthie is diagnosed with an especially aggressive form of cancer.

All who know Ruthie are devastated. She is the mother of young kids and appears to be in good health. As Dreher moves back to help the family cope with Ruthie's illness, he becomes aware of what is missing in his urban, mobile lifestyle. Observing Ruthie's strength, Dreher recognizes the virtues cultivated by a life rooted in place and community. And in watching Ruthie die surrounded by friends and family, Dreher recognizes what has been lost in his liberation from home: the virtue of humility and the gift of community. We imagine the modern self as somehow invulnerable, free from responsibility, authority, and tradition, free for self-improvement. But these freedoms eventually crash against the limits of our biology. The fact of death and the promise of suffering calls the modern invulnerable self and its quest for liberation into question. The vulnerable places and times in our lives expose alternative ways of life. Dreher writes:

> Nobody ever thinks about these things when they are young.
>
> Nobody thinks about limits, and how much we need each other. But if you live long enough, you see suffering. It comes close to you. It shatters the illusion, so dear to us, of self-sufficiency, of autonomy, of control."[3]

While moving away had given Dreher life in certain ways, it robbed him of virtue in others. And so he decides to move his family back to St. Francisville, for he concludes, "if I wanted to know the inner peace and happiness in community that Ruthie had, I needed to practice a rule of stability. Accept the limitations of a place, in humility."[4]

In this encounter with suffering and loss, Dreher discovers an alternative way of life within the fluid contours of modernity by returning to his hometown. In so doing, he attempts to root himself within a particular community for the sake of acquiring the virtues that he observed in his sister and her community. He chooses to embrace certain limitations on his freedom for the sake of gaining a different kind of freedom in community. In the face of suffering and death, he sees the dead end of self-sufficiency and so searches for humility and responsibility. For Dreher, it is a discipline of place that makes this possible.

Dreher's decision to move back to St. Francisville, to abide by a "rule of stability" for the sake of community and humility, is not an accidental outcome. Dreher processes this decision through the lens of the Christian tradition, noting the reasons why monastic communities observed such a rule and the link between humility, accepting human limitations, and the life of faith. While Dreher has experienced freedom from the limitations of small-town life, he has utilized this freedom to commit himself to a new community marked by certain life-giving limitations of time and place. His journey of faith leads him back to an actual home, an existence that submits to the limits of place, community, and time.

Not everyone has such a literal home to go back to (my family moved several times). We do, however, have congregations with a particular history in a particular place. We do live in neighborhoods and a particular built environment. These are "solid" structures of

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[3] Rod Dreher, *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming* (New York: Grand Central, 2013), 266.
[4] Dreher, *Little Way*, 255.

belonging and participation. These beg for practices of stability wherein we cultivate intentionally inter-dependent lives and submit to the limitations of place. Perhaps our journey of faith might even lead to vows of stability. What if we made our home in congregations, and these congregations, in turn, make their home in neighborhoods? What if our congregations make vows of stability, where we understand our calling as a church to be lived out within a particular, limited, physical space — a neighborhood? We may not all have a St. Francisville to go back to, but we can grow roots where we are. And the congregation, with its history and its solid location in a neighborhood, can provide the structure and theological impetus to do this.

Implications of Stability

What this looks like will vary by person and congregation, but at least three different immediate implications are clear. First, congregations need to recognize the fact that their placed history is good news in a melting and fluid world. Dreher had St. Francisville to go back to. Many of us do not. But we do have congregations – as communities rooted in time and place with a particular history – as a physical and located community within which we might find a home.

Second, we need to recognize the place of commitment in finding a home ourselves. Dreher was not compelled to come home, he chose to do so and made an intentional vow of stability to do so, acknowledging that conditions may change and it may not be a vow for life. In this fluid era, mere church attendance or even participation is not enough to build home-like roots. We need commitment that spans people and place. At a basic level, this might mean moving into the neighborhood where the congregation is located or not pursuing a bigger home in another neighborhood just because that is what middle class families are supposed to do.

Third, we must recognize that place or making our home with a congregation in a neighborhood is a critical part of our spiritual formation. As Dreher helps us to see, certain Christian virtues, such as humility and mutual dependence, cannot be learned in the fluid conditions of modern life. Even if we are in careers that cause us to move or travel, we must figure out how to be at home in particular places – committed to them and the church in that place – for the time we are there. Our spirituality depends in part upon our particular presence in place.

We find these dynamics at play in the biblical narrative as well. The biblical narrative plays around with the categories of liberation and mutual submission, of human freedom and limitation. When God calls Abraham to leave home and homeland, He invites Abraham into a journey of faith discontinuous with what has come before. It marks a new chapter in the biblical story. In one sense, Abraham is freed from the pressures and traditions of family and clan and land as he searches for the place that God promises. But in another sense, Abraham's leaving also places him in a posture of dependence upon and submission to God. He becomes free from clan and family so that he can be made free for the promise of God. There may not be any way to turn back the modern liberations. And perhaps we ought not anyway. We have already left Ur because we have heard at least some whisperings from God regarding the good of human flourishing and the intrinsic value of all persons. And

while we experience this leaving as liquid modernity, and while it mostly feels like being lost, there are some glimmers of a promised path, of a way forward. Perhaps the Spirit of God, in helping us identify the "Facebook problem," now invites us to choose and orient our lives by place. The problem, however, is that very few of us have a "home" to go back to. We are more like Abraham than we thought. But we do already live somewhere. And perhaps the *missio Dei* invites the North American church to attend to these particular "somewheres" and the longings that inhabit them.

THE GENEROUS GOD AND ABUNDANT COMMUNITIES

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In the gospels, a rich young man comes to Jesus. He has great wealth and has lived – by all outward appearances, anyway – the "good life" as it is imagined according to the Law. But an insatiable need drives him to Jesus: "Teacher, I have kept all these commands, but what thing do I lack?" Despite the man's wealth, religiosity, and good community standing, he knows at a deep level that something is missing. We all know Jesus's answer.

It makes us uncomfortable. Wading through the material surplus of our North American consumption, we devise a variety of methods to spiritualize or slip past the blunt force of Jesus's words: "Go and sell all you have." But we know that something of the gospel is expressed in this exchange. We know that we can acquire all that our heart desires without ever fulfilling our most basic need to be complete and whole persons. In the abundance of North America, we often experience an increasing anxiety about the throngs of things, resources, and products we acquire. In the midst of the cornucopia, we become acutely aware of our lack: I have done all this . . . but what still am I missing?

We find Jesus's instruction so familiar that we turn it into a cliché. Go. Sell all you have and give to the poor. But these words resist our attempts to sanitize their force. In a few words, Jesus confronts our acquisitiveness and whispers to us of a different kind of world, one characterized by abundant generosity and rooted in faith. It is the only way to live when the kingdom comes near, and it has always been the way of God's people in light of the gift of God's presence and provision. It is also the only way to build communities of faith and hope.

Something like Jesus's charge to the rich young man echoes throughout North America today. We hear it in the trenchant critique of consumerism coming from various religious, political, and philosophical sources. In our pursuit of things and the promise of endless credit, we threaten to lose what is most valuable. As one character in the documentary *What Would Jesus Buy?* says, "You don't have to buy a gift to give a gift!" We also hear it in the chorus of neo-monastic communities throughout North America who have taken vows of poverty and simplicity for the sake of the gospel. Their lives of lack challenge us with the abundance of their love and community, their proclamation of the gospel. We also see it in the various movements calling us back to our neighborhoods for the sake of building healthy, trusting, and life-giving communities.

In *The Abundant Community*, John McKnight and Peter Block cast a compelling vision for this movement. McKnight and Block stand at the front of this multi-pronged movement. Their approach emphasizes the discovery and nurturing of neighborhood assets for the sake of building healthy communities. They encourage our local communities to opt out of

the cycles of compulsive acquisition, to stop looking for expert technocratic solutions so that we might build trust with one another and discover our local resources. By insisting on asset-based community development, McKnight and Block echo the basic idea in Jesus's instruction to the rich young man. In the man's abundance of wealth, he can only experience anxiety. Jesus tells the man to embrace his fear – to lose all he has – so that he might be whole. For the man to follow Jesus's command, he must move into a wholly new framework, from one rooted in the anxiety of scarcity (What am I missing? What still do I lack?) to trust in abundance. The movement toward neighborhood development encourages a similar jump: from neighborhood life rooted in the anxiety of scarcity (What are we still missing?) to community development that grows from a place of trust and goodwill (We already have more than we think).

Certainly, this movement toward asset-based community development is good news for missional congregations who also seek the peace of the city. We should enthusiastically participate in such movements at the grassroots level. However, we need to do so with theological acumen appropriate to the task. As churches, we participate in asset-based community development because we see this work as an instance of the in-breaking kingdom and not just because it meets an immediate need in our society.

So how do we theologically understand the move from scarcity to abundance in our neighborhood life? In *Journey to the Common Good*, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann provides readings of the Exodus, the prophet Jeremiah, and the book of Isaiah through the lenses of scarcity and abundance. He argues that the Old Testament narratives consistently draw Israel out into the wilderness and away from the seductive anxieties of acquisitive economic practice. Brueggemann observes that it is out in the wilderness, "where there are no viable life support systems," that Israel learns, again and again, the abundant gift of God's generosity.[5] We might say that in the face of Israel's anxiety about acquiring more, producing more, making more, God commands Israel to sell all they have by going into a place of scarcity and lack. It is here, in the harsh wilderness, in the place where Israel has nothing, that Israel experiences the gift of provision. The abundant grace of a generous God redefines these places of scarcity.

The wilderness and the exile are now viable for life because of God's provision.

This basic pairing of wilderness/grace and acquisition/anxiety provides an important theological framework for our partnership with neighborhood development organizations. Both Brueggemann and Block and McKnight recognize that groups who are anxious about resources running out (scarcity) are not able to pursue practices of generosity. They are unable to work for the common good. Both books seek to confront a common problem: we are drowning in the excesses of consumeristic capitalism and are therefore beholden to its anxieties and acquisitive practices. By reminding us of the biblical vision of grace in the wilderness, Brueggemann helps us to see how it is that churches provide a vital and uniquely transformative role in the journey to the common good. The God of Jesus Christ is the one who calls us out of our "*entitled consumerism* in which [. . .] we imagine that

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[5] Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 15.

something more will make us [. . .] happier" and into a place of abandon, trust, and reliance upon the generosity of God.[6] Surely, churches living from such an understanding of grace and abundance can participate in bringing life, trust, and health to their neighborhoods.

Brueggemann helps us to see that we are the rich young man.

The biblical narrative calls us toward an alternative way of imagining the world. If we can tell these stories, we may begin to imagine an alternative to acquisition for the sake of learning dependence upon God's grace. Stories of God's abundant provision in the wilderness and of life gained when it is given away provide us with the theological resources we need to turn toward the neighborhood in faith and hope.

Our theology plays a vital role in the task of neighborhood reconstruction and in the healing of social bonds in our society, for visions of such abundance require the steadfast faith and the prophetic imagination of God's people. May our theological storytelling and discernment be up to the task!

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[6] Brueggemann, *Journey*, 29–30.

PLACED CREATION: A READING OF GENESIS 1–2

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Place has its own history, its own story, and our ability to perceive and to talk about "place" is conditioned by culture. As a result of some historical distortions, we have some work to do in recovering a biblical theology – and then a Christian practice – of place.

Genesis 1 and 2 offer complementary accounts of God's work in creation. The sixth day, Genesis 1:26–27, has dominated our vision. On this day God makes human beings, and we discover we are made in God's image, created for a purpose.

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion" (Genesis 1:26 NRSV).

We are told to "subdue" and to rule. In the second account (Genesis 2:7–9, 15), we discover the manner of our making, more about our purpose, and what we share with other creatures. Humankind, the Genesis account of creation asserts, is a species among species, fully embedded in the natural world, created not just from the same matter, but coming out of the creation itself, "dust from dust." We are created both *imago Dei*, in the image of God, and *imago mundi*, in the image of the earth. We share a kinship with the rest of God's creation. We are beings in relation: first to God and then to God's creatures.

This sense of participation in the larger life of creation is nearly lost to us. Our dualisms of God and world, sacred and secular, nature and super-nature, pushed God out of the world. The church separated itself from the rest of reality by locating religious activities and symbols in one sphere and defining the rest of the world as separate and secular. What's left is a perceived natural world devoid of the sacred.

But Eastern views are more relational, so that the participation of God in the world, and of the world in God, is mediated by the Spirit. As in Colossians 1:17, Christ upholds (present tense) all things by the word of His power. This accent on God's immanence mirrors the Hebrew vision we find in the Psalms, "You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. . . . the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing" (Psalm 65:9, 13 NIV).

Much of our self-understanding in relation to creation hinges on a word and a phrase. The word is *dominion* (KJV; NASB "rule"), and the phrase is *imago Dei*. The word for dominion is

a strong word. Ellen Davis translates *radah* as "skilled mastery." She notes that the word suggests something like a craft or an art in our mastery.[7]

Yet human beings are not, in the Genesis account, just a species among species because we alone among all of the creatures are made *imago Dei*, in the image of God. At times this idea has been distorted and secularized to support domination more than dominion. The current environmental problems we face – what Paul describes as the groaning of creation in Romans 8 – demonstrate the dangers of domination.

A recovery of a sense of our relatedness to creation helps us move away from the detachment that leads to abuse. The trinitarian renaissance that is underway has reinforced the turn to relationality, while also helping us to escape some of the interpretive dualism of the Enlightenment, which led to secularization. Part of this secularization was to conceive of the *imago* as an inward reality, expressed outwardly not through embodiment but through rationality.[8] Salvation, in turn, became an inward and private experience. But if we let *imago* rest in the text and not tradition and culture, embodiment and relationality are the horizon. God's fiat is itself relational ("let US make man") and its outcome is plural and implicitly relational ("in the image of God he created THEM").[9]

The Eastern tradition begins with the relationality of the three divine persons. In John Zizioulas, relational personhood is constitutive of being: a component of essence. There is no personal identity without relationality. What does this mean for the *imago Dei*? It means that personhood is a relational quality. Put another way, to speak of persons we must speak of relations and not merely being.

This specifically Christian ontology of the person stands in contrast to the individualistic and dualistic anthropology of the Greek philosophers. In a fully Trinitarian understanding of personhood, we find that it is our embodied relationality which constitutes our being. We are, in fact, nothing if not for the relationships in which we exist: relationships to a people and a place. "The church is not a collection of individuals who choose to associate primarily to have their spiritual needs met," but rather "a community of mutual participation in God's own life and the life of the world."[10]

Some interpreters argue for a functional reading of the *imago* over a substantive reading. In this approach, the text is not so much a description of the being (ontology) of humanity as it is our purpose and function in the creation. Thus *imago Dei* indicates that God created humanity to represent Him in ruling the world.[11] Through comparative ancient literature, John Walton demonstrates that the Genesis creation account does not describe material origins but rather a functional ontology. In this account something exists only when it has a

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[7] Ellen Davis and Wendell Berry, "Land, Life, and the Poetry of Creatures," On Being with Krista Tippett, June 3, 2010, https://onbeing.org/programs/ellen-davis-wendell-berry-the-poetry-of-creatures.
[8] F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
[9] Similarly, Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 55–60.
[10] Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zschelle, *The Missional Church in Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 107. They reference John 17:21–23.
[11] Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 25–26.

role and a purpose in an ordered system. In the first six days, God sets up a cosmos to function for human beings. The seventh day then becomes the climax of the story.

In traditional readings of Genesis, the seventh day is often treated as a theological appendix tacked on after the important details are out of the way. But a reader in the ancient East would read the Genesis account and immediately see what modern readers miss: Deity rests in a temple, and only in a temple. The temple was the control room from which the god exercised control of the cosmos.

Deity rests in a temple. "When Genesis indicates that God rested on the seventh day, it tells us that [. . .] the cosmos is being portrayed as a temple."[12] Ancient temples were made functional in a seven day ceremony. On the seventh day the deity was brought in and the temple then existed: could function as it was designed to do. Walton writes this:

> Genesis 1 is composed along the lines of a temple dedication ceremony. [. . .] The functions center on the royal and priestly roles of people, but the imagery is defined by the presence of God who has taken up his rest in the center of the cosmic temple. Through him, order is maintained, and nonfunctional disorder is held at bay – through him all things cohere.[13]

Walton's work brings out the broader telos of the biblical narrative: our destiny is both kingly and concrete – to rule an earthly kingdom with Christ. More than this, however, we serve as priests in God's earthly temple, which is at the center of God's work in the cosmos (see in particular Isaiah 66:1–2).

The cosmos is seen as a temple, with God resting at the center. How does this connect to place and place-making? Following the Hebrew priority on function, we are priests at work in God's temple. Place-making is more than the creation of a temporary culture: it begins here and now in the common and ordinary places of this world and extends into the kingdom of God. Moreover, if God sits at the center of His creation, then all the earth is sacred space. Walton notes, "The most central truth to the creation account is that this world is a place for God's presence."[14]

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[12] John H. Walton, "Creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3 and the Ancient Near East: Order out of Disorder after *Chaoskampf*," *Calvin Theological Journal* 43 (2008): 61.
[13] Walton, "Genesis," 61
[14] John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 84–85.

REFLECTIONS ON CHURCH-LEAVERS

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Some time ago, Skye Jethani posted a thought-provoking piece at Out of Ur on the de-churched.[15] Who are they? What is this all about anyway? How come so many believers are suddenly not attending meetings on a Sunday morning? Are they just a bunch of self-centered, disloyal, unsubmissive, I'd-rather-watch-football, un-disciples of Jesus? Having been a "de-churched" believer myself for five years, I have my own take on the answer. But I've also had many helpful conversations over the years and picked up small tidbits here and there.

In *The Present Future*, leadership and spirituality author Reggie McNeal aimed near the heart of the issue. He writes, "A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith."[16]

What in the world? Talk about cognitive dissonance. Why would someone leave church to "preserve" their faith? In the same book, McNeal opined:

> I say we now have a church in North America that is more secular than the culture. Just when the church adopted a business model, the culture went looking for God. Just when the church embraced strategic planning (linear and Newtonian), the universe shifted to preparedness (loopy and quantum). Just when the church began building recreation centers, the culture began a search for sacred space. Church people still think that secularism holds sway and that people outside the church have trouble connecting to God. The problem is that when people come to church, expecting to find God, they often encounter a religious club holding a meeting where God is conspicuously absent. It may feel like a self-help seminar or even a political rally. But if pre-Christians came expecting to find God—sorry! They may experience more spiritual energy at a U2 concert or listening to a Creed CD.[17]

If this is true, then, "Houston, we have a problem!" Could it be that one of the dynamics we are seeing in this new exodus has to do with a broken human institution and many broken leaders? Could it be that our typical assumption that God is active within the fortress but absent in the culture around us was just plain mistaken? Could it also be true that the modern frame of professional/do-it-all leadership has worked against us? These are some

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[15] Out of Ur is a now-defunct blog hosted by the editors of *Leadership* journal.
[16] Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 4.
[17] McNeal, *Present Future*, 59.

of the dynamics operative in the huge and growing exodus. But it doesn't fully explain what we are seeing, and it certainly doesn't offer a clear sense of the implications. We have to scratch a bit harder to clarify this picture.

De-churched

Jethani makes a nice beginning for us in his article. He starts out by making a critique of which Tozer would have strongly approved. He uses a video clip from Matt Chandler, who attributes the exodus of young people to the proclamation (explicitly or implicitly) of a false gospel of "moralistic deism." This is essentially the "health and wealth" gospel, but founded on moralism. If you obey God's rules, He will bless you with what you desire. But as Jethani points out (and as N. T. Wright has also argued in *After You Believe*), this becomes a problem when the blessing doesn't come – or doesn't come in the form we want. Moreover, the theology here is deeply skewed. It makes God into a mechanism and faith into a technique. I do A so God will do B: no sovereign, majestic Creator necessary in this formula.

Jethani agrees with Matt Chandler, but only partly. There is at least one more group of de-churched Christians. They haven't walked away from faith in Christ but have lost confidence in the institutional structures and programmatic trappings of the church. For them the institutional church is distracting, a drain on time, resources, and energy better spent on mission. Instead of supporting incarnational attempts, it extracts people from their missional contexts into endless meetings and political wranglings. It provides religious goods and services (see the first complaint above) without teaching us how to really worship. It bids us come – but not come and die, to paraphrase Bonhoeffer.

Jethani breaks this group of de-churched down into two groups. I'll use his terms but then characterize then my own way. Jethani sees the relationally de-churched ("The church is a machine; it doesn't know what to do with people") and the missionally de-churched ("The church bids me come when I think I'm actually supposed to be 'going' out on mission.") He breaks this second group down one more time into the "transformationally de-churched."

When we get involved with people in recovery, we discover a raw edge to faith that makes it very difficult to sit through the heavily programmed, neat and tidy, everything-by-the-timer, sanitized approach to meetings that is typical of large Western churches. As McNeal somewhere else quips, Jesus did not say, "I came that they might have church, and that more abundantly."

Reflective Exiles

But Jethani leaves out one group in his exploration and misses one of the nuances. At least one more category is needed, and Alan Jamieson supplies it in his research and interviews among de-churched believers in New Zealand. This additional category relates to the quotes from McNeal which I offered above. It has some elements in common with the relationally de-churched and the transformationally de-churched in that there is just something about the institutional and programmatic approach to meetings that has stopped working for these people. But the problems go deeper than that. Jamieson

identifies this group as only a sociologist would (shades of the work of James Fowler) as Reflective Exiles. Here is his description:

> For this group of leavers [. . .] leaving is typically a process which occurs over a long period of time, perhaps 18 months or more. This process of moving away from the church begins gradually with feelings of unease, a sense of irrelevancy between church and what happens in other important areas of their lives, and a reducing sense of fit and belonging to the church community and its 'faith package.'

> The gateway through which this group leave the church I have called Meta-grumbles. [They are questioning] the deep rooted foundations of the faith itself. [. . .] The faith of the Reflective Exiles can be characterised as counter-dependent. [. . .] When I asked this group of leavers what nurtures their faith now the most common response was "It certainly isn't . . ." followed by some description of aspects of [established church].

> Secondly, the Reflective Exiles are engaged in a deconstruction of their previous faith. That is, they are engaged in a process of taking to pieces the faith they had received, accepted and acted within for so many years. To do so is personally a very destabilising process for them, as their faith has been an important part of their world view, the foundation of important life decisions and an integral part of their sense of selfhood. They are involved in an ongoing reflective process which involves a reevaluation of each component of their faith.[18]

What is striking about this description is that it frames the church-leavers as people on a journey. Historically and in the tradition of Christian spirituality, we might use the term "desert journey" or "pilgrimage" to describe the movement that has placed this group outside traditional structures. This begs the question of whether this journey might be a response to an inner call, a response to the Spirit?

Jamieson describes a second group that are similar to Reflective Exiles, calling this group Transitional Explorers. He writes that, "The transitional faith interviewees displayed an emerging sense of ownership of their faith. This is shown in a confidence of faith, a clear decision to move from a deconstruction of the received faith to an appropriation of some elements of the old faith whilst giving energy to building a new self-owned faith."[19]

It doesn't take a psychologist or therapist or a Scott Peck aficionado to recognize that both the Reflective Exiles and the Transitional Explorers are on a faith journey, an individuating process that was somehow restricted by their involvement in a faith community. Like adolescents, they had to somehow "leave home" in order to make their faith and their lives their own. Some of these will complete this work in a new setting (transitions require

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[18] Alan Jamieson, "A Churchless Faith," *Reality Magazine*, issue 33, http://www.reality.org.nz/articles/33/33-jamieson.html.
[19] Jamieson, "Churchless Faith."

liminal space) and then reengage at a different level. This describes my own process in the last ten years quite accurately. From here, Jamieson describes a final category that is also part of this journey, Integrated Way-finders. But it's probably more useful for me to move on and make another connection.

Peregrination

One of the surprising results of the research for Jamieson was discovering that for the majority of leavers (65 percent of those interviewed) this was not a solo journey but one which involved them in groups of people in similar faith transitions. Equally intriguing, leaving church can be a step in healing and growth for some. Andrew Pritchard runs the de-churched through the grid of James Fowler's "stages of spiritual growth."

The classic work on "spiritual stages," (other than perhaps the Enneagram) is Fowler's work. He describes the third stage of faith development as Synthetic-Conventional faith. The transition from this stage to the next, Individuative-Reflective faith, is described like this: "For a genuine move to stage 4 to occur there must be an interruption of reliance on external sources of authority. The 'tyranny of the they' – or the potential for it – must be undermined. In addition to the kind of critical reflection on one's previous system [. . .] of values [. . .] there must be [. . .] a relocation of authority within the self."[20]

According to Fowler, the strength of stage 4 has to do with its capacity for critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology). The transition requires "an interruption of reliance on external sources of authority." That is a fascinating take on the need to move from trusting human authority to trusting in God. I believe that this movement into a self-authorizing faith describes the heart of a shift to a universal priesthood. It is only when we are rooted in this place of radical Sonship that we can effectively contribute to the life of a Jesus community. There are many voices out there who will try, often for complex and personal reasons, to tell us who we are. But only one Voice has true authority in this.

In terms of church-leavers, Andrew Pritchard's article is helpful. It reframes at least some of the process of leaving church with the hope that God is active here too. God fathers us not only in traditional structures but on the road, on the journey, wherever it takes us. For some that journey will lead outside the established church on a "road less travelled."

Stages of Faith

In *The Critical Journey*, Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich describe six stages in the life of faith:[21]

> Stage One: Recognition. "We believe."

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[20] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 179.
[21] Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem: Sheffield Publishing, 1995).

Stage Two: Discipleship. "We are learning about God."

Stage Three: Production. "We are doing things for God."

Stage Four: The Wall. "Things aren't working anymore."

Stage Five: The Journey Outward. "Living from a new center"

Stage Six: The Life of God. "It's all about love"

Conclusion and Disclaimers

Language changes with time, and some biblical terms are particularly problematic these days. How does one leave church without leaving faith? If by church we mean the spiritual body of Jesus followers, then leaving church would be leaving faith. If by church we mean the organized and circumscribed activity of a local faith community, what some would call "the institution," then leaving church is only leaving a specific group. In our own process we remained closely tied to others who were no longer part of a traditional meeting. I have often quipped that my wife and I left the church to find the church.

As I close this short reflection, and with a nod toward the journey we all have to make – a journey that is mostly in community, but sometimes intensely personal and individual – I am thinking of the wisdom of Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*.

"Let him who cannot be alone beware of being in community. [. . .] Let him who cannot be in community beware of being alone."[22]

Let me address some final words to two distinct groups of people: those who lead in faith communities and those who are leaving them (though these groups do overlap).

To church-leavers: God may call you out of your faith community. Or, you may find yourself unwillingly on the outside. It will be a tough journey. Keep your eyes on Jesus. I know – the challenge for some is that this journey begins without conversation partners. But if you are reading this, then already you are gaining a broader perspective.

To those who lead: It can be so hard to gain perspective. When people leave our communities we may feel personally slighted, personally rejected. Yet this is rarely true. Resist the temptation to label those who leave as disloyal or backsliders. Try to maintain a view of the larger picture and ask what God may be doing. You will probably never have the full picture, but it is not about you. Lean into God.

As God's people in exile, we face many daunting challenges in our time. Times of reformation are always confusing, risky, and dangerous. Much that we thought could not be shaken is now being shaken. The rate of people leaving churches in North America is on the increase. The diaspora is hard on everyone – people, leaders, communities, and the

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[22] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 77.

ministries and programs we have learned to value so highly. May the Spirit give us peace and faith as we lead in these days.

THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD: *CHRIST AND CULTURE* FIFTY YEARS ON

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Despite the many valid criticisms leveled against them, some books retain a hold on the minds of their readers and become part of the lexicon of the church. Whether H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* is considered in its overall effect to have been a force for good or not, it is certainly one of those enduringly influential books. More than fifty years after its first publication, it continues to provide a typology that is referenced and debated in sermons and lectures, articles and books.

Christ and Culture is certainly not without its problems. It has had legions of critics, and even the author himself speculated about its usefulness. While acknowledging that the five positions the book advances are never really found in their pure form in practice, but always overlapping one another, Niebuhr never really deals with this. Nor does he give much of a picture of what these positions might look like when embodied in the praxis of a local church, though it is important to acknowledge that Niebuhr was not writing ecclesiology but exploring social ethics, so some of the uses his work has been put to may also be called into question.

Nevertheless, Niebuhr's analysis of the potential approaches to the relationship between church and culture has proven so stimulating to generations of readers that it has secured the book's place at the heart of this discussion for more than half a century.

For the sake of those who have never read the book, Niebuhr's typology may be very briefly and rather inadequately summed up as follows:

Christ against Culture

Niebuhr states, "The first answer to the question of Christ and culture [. . .] is the one that uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture's claims to loyalty."[23]

The Christ of Culture

Those who hold this view, according to Niebuhr, "feel no great tension between church and world, the social laws and the gospel, the workings of divine grace and human effort, the ethics of salvation and the ethics of social conservation or progress. [. . .] So they harmonize

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[23] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 45.

Christ and culture, not without excision, of course, from New Testament and social custom, of stubbornly discordant features."[24]

Christ above Culture

This view asserts that one "cannot separate the works of human culture from the grace of God, for all those works are possible only by grace."[25] The good in culture needs to be completed in Christ; it requires revelation. For example, through the cultural appreciation of creation we may perceive a Creator, but we require revelation to discern that this Creator is the triune God.

Christ and Culture in Paradox

Rejecting this synthesis, this stance instead stresses the Christian's experience of paradox. The Christian is one who lives in two kingdoms simultaneously. It is right to attempt to honour what is good in culture – the importance of the family, the rule of law, good government – all of which are rightly seen as a gift from God, but this needs to be held in tension with a higher commitment to kingdom values. A model scripture text here would be the call to be "in the world but not of it." (It is not insignificant that all of these types can claim scriptural authority without much difficulty.)

Christ the Transformer of Culture

Here Niebuhr argues that Christians must not simply live in the midst of this paradox, they must work to transform culture. Describing this view, John Stackhouse of Regent College says, "Society is to be entirely converted to Christianity. Business, the arts, the professions, family life, education, government – nothing is outside the purview of Christ's dominion, and all must be reclaimed in his name."[26] In a sense, culture is raw material to be reshaped into the kingdom.

It is not difficult to see that this last is Niebuhr's own view, not least because he offers a critique of each of the other views, but not of this position.

Over the years since its original publication, arguments have been made in support of each of these types. For a good, brief summary and critique, with a strong defense of the unpopular third view, Angus Menuge's essay "Niebuhr's Christ and Culture Reexamined" is well worth a read.[27]

Considerably weightier is Don Carson's *Christ and Culture Revisited*, which brings a breadth of biblical reflection to bear on the issues raised by Niebuhr. To this Carson adds a fascinating series of reflections on contemporary political and national culture. As a

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[24] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 83.
[25] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 119.
[26] John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "In the World, but…", *Christianity Today*, April 22, 2002, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/april22/8.80.html.
[27] The article in its entirety can be found at https://www.issuesetcarchive.org/articles/bissar26.htm.

critique of Niebuhr, this is a valuable read, but it does not provide easy answers for the practical pastor.

Other books have sought to revise Niebuhr's typology in light of some of the criticisms leveled against it. Preeminent among these is Craig Carter's *Rethinking Christ and Culture*. Subtitled "A Post-Christendom Perspective," Carter's main criticism of Niebuhr is that each of the types he advances is rooted in Christendom-thinking. This makes all of these types susceptible to the accommodation of the world in the church, since a Christendom worldview presupposes such an accommodation at its core. In a consistently stimulating book, Carter goes on to offer an alternative, post-Christendom typology.

Robert Webber lays out another alternative typology in *The Secular Saint*, in which he intentionally reduces Niebuhr's five categories to three broad alternatives. This is the most accessible of any of the books I will mention and lends itself to small group discussion, including discussion questions and suggestions for further study. In addition to biblical reflection, Webber helpfully includes reflection on church history, giving a sense of how these types work themselves out in practice.

Other authors have concerned themselves with similar topics while writing essentially independently of Niebuhr's categories. At the root of the missional church conversation lies Lesslie Newbigin's wrestling with the relationship of the gospel to a changed and changing Western culture. Questions of gospel and culture raised by Newbigin, in books such as *Foolishness to the Greeks*, were seminal to the formation of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America and continued to be explored in the collaborative books the Network produced, including *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, *Missional Church*, and *Confident Witness—Changing World*. All of these books demonstrate how a transformational stance can radically reinvigorate and reconfigure post-Christendom churches.

Finally, and with something to say to all of these authors, Jaques Ellul offers a radical vision of Christ as transformer of culture in *The Presence of the Kingdom*. As in his other works, Ellul sees the need not simply for transformation but for Christians to be active in seeking to subvert the world for the sake of Christ. By taking up the categories of kingdom and world rather than church and culture, Ellul alerts us to another weakness of *Christ and Culture* typologies.

Jonathan Wilson (of Carey Theological College) argues that culture is not in fact a biblical category at all and that the didactic value of any non-biblical typology ought to be seriously questioned. He argues that a more nuanced engagement with culture is made possible when culture is correlated to kingdom and world. The biblical category of world is essentially a negative one, and yet its relationship with the biblical category of kingdom is not by any means simply a matter of rejection, though transformational typologies may underplay the significance of resistance, embodied, for example, in the call to be overcomers in the book of Revelation or the call to persevere in the book of Hebrews.

Perhaps, then, it is best to end with a plea to examine this issue first and foremost through the words of the New Testament, and in particular on the lips of Jesus, where "kingdom and world" are the subjects of so many of His parables.