The Second Petition

§1. Trivial Pursuits, Lost Causes, and Utopian Fantasies

“I want you to come with me after class to pray for someone.”

This request came at the beginning of class from Abby, one of my students. Abby was a religious studies major, a fine scholar, a Pentecostal, and a prophetess – one of those people whose lives are one long miracle. I gulped and agreed.

After class Abby led me to the room of another one of my students, who had been incapacitated for days with vertigo. Even though it was mid-afternoon, in order to enter I had to break the school’s rules on opposite-sex visiting hours. Hey, I reasoned, the Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath. It is not as if she could have come out to meet me, and praying through her window would have been a little silly.

We began to pray together. I prayed for my ailing student for a couple of minutes, thanking God for her, asking God to heal her, and so on. The usual.

Abby’s turn came next. As I finished and Abby took over, I began to feel faint. It couldn’t be a head-rush since I had been standing; I wondered if it were some kind of sugar-low. After thirty seconds it had not passed; in fact, it was still getting worse. I had stopped listening to Abby praying and was wondering how I would stay on my feet. We professors do not relish the prospect of keeling over in women’s rooms during closed hours! I finally knelt down and waited until Abby was finished. I was relieved not to have lost consciousness, and as soon as we all said amen I quickly excused myself and sat on some steps outside. Abby followed after a few seconds with a bottle of water. Five minutes later I felt ready to get back up, and she walked me back to my office.

“Do you know what happened back there?” she asked.
“I have no idea,” I replied in all honesty. “Maybe I shouldn’t have skipped both breakfast and lunch today.”

Abby’s silence was deafening.

“And what do you think happened back there?” I asked her.

“God was showing you what she was going through.”

“Interesting!” I replied professorially, turning over her hypothesis in my head. “Maybe so!”

“No, that is what was happening,” she insisted.

This was just Abby’s style. There is no gray with her, just black and white. Moreover, Abby was as obstinate as she was insistent. Professors and Ph.D.’s never intimidated her. So she and I had grown used to exchanges like this. We often butted heads in class and in conversation, playfully but seriously. I would say something, she would roll her eyes, and we would fall into our typical roles.

“What makes you so sure?” I asked her.

“It has happened to everyone who has prayed with her. You are the third one today.”

Now I was the silent one!

For someone who calls himself a Pentecostal, I have very few stories like this to tell. Only rarely have things happened to me that seem truly extraordinary, truly resistant to all natural explanation. They happen no more than once every few years. But they do happen.

They are happening much more often outside the western circles in which I am most comfortable. In the hundred years since the Azusa Street revival in 1906, charismatic Christianity has exploded around the world. In and out of Pentecostal churches new practices are sprouting up alongside revived and longstanding ones: sustained intercessory prayer, speaking
and praying in tongues, spiritual warfare, healings and exorcisms, expectations of miracles, and ecstatic spirituality are now business as usual for millions of Protestant as well as Catholic Christians the world over. These believers take experiences like mine for granted.

Bracket all the charismatic excesses and abuses for the moment – the absurd televangelists, the credulous believers, and the historical arrogance that shrugs off nineteen centuries of the Holy Spirit’s work and draws a line straight from itself back to Pentecost – and grant that some of these events are legitimate. Why are they so numerous in others’ lives, so few in mine, and missing from many others’? What do they mean?

Or grant nothing, and consider instead the unspectacular works of God that the rest of the world’s Christians celebrate: The presence of Christ in the communion bread and wine, the personal experiences of Jesus at revivals and Bible camps, the lives slowly transformed by long interactions with Scripture, the sacred stillness of Christmas Eve, the kindness of friends, and the smiles and handshakes at Sunday church services. If you are a believer, reflect on the moments that have made you one, and you will face the same questions.

One day as I related my prayer story to Camassia, she voiced a common response that had already haunted me, and haunts me still: Why, if God is working through these ways, are they so subtle and small in a world of such profound suffering and vast need? Wars rage … Christian Africa is being decimated by AIDS … Christians and others are victims of persecution and ethnic cleansing … the western Church is falling into apostasy … and God wants me to feel sixty seconds of a student’s vertigo? What kind of priorities are those? Why does God seem so concerned with the layout of deck chairs while the world sinks like the Titanic?
Not long ago I sat across from Charles H. Kraft, professor of anthropology and intercultural communication at Fuller Theological Seminary, as we prayed for a woman troubled from childhood by demons. Kraft is famous in charismatic circles for his advocacy of charismatic practices of deliverance. “There seem to be a very large number of satanic beings in the world,” Kraft says in Defeating Dark Angels.

Satanic beings are involved in every kind of disruptive human activity. … They seem to have authority over places and territories, such as building, cities, and temples. Additionally, they appear to have authority over social organizations and groups, and influence sinful behavior such as homosexuality, drug addiction, lust, incest, rape, and murder. The fallen angels we call demons or evil spirits seem to be the ‘ground level’ troops, as opposed to the ‘cosmic level’ principalities, powers, and rulers of Ephesians 6:12. These are the ones we encounter most often during spiritual warfare (Kraft 1992, 19-20).

I came along to offer moral support rather than expertise. It was the first time I have been involved so directly in spiritual warfare. As we prayed, Kraft addressed the demons directly. Some were silent, while the woman ‘channeled’ the responses Kraft elicited from others. The proceedings would be disappointing to people who expect theatrics; on neither side were voices even raised. I do not know whether the speech she conveyed that afternoon came from conscious beings, fragments of her psyche, or sheer suggestion. However, it was certainly odd to hear my friend speaking about herself in the third person.

As I listened to the exchange, I was struck by the same question I raised earlier. My friend’s troubles had arisen from seemingly trivial events in an otherwise normal, even privileged life. They could just as easily be events in the future lives of my own young children, events so unexceptional or enigmatic at the time that I as their father might not hear about them for years afterward. But they had grown to dominate my friend and strangle her hope. Now I was wondering at their power, praying that God would release her – and beginning to panic at the thought of a world of billions whose lives looked much, much worse. If a grade-school taunting
of a few classmates can evolve into such formidable evil powers, then what about wars, plagues, genocides, natural disasters, hunger, and corruption? What are Christians supposed to do in the face of those? What is the connection between Jesus’ power on behalf of a few people who need deliverance and hope for the whole world?

Is all that too spooky for you? Then consider several of my students, both male and female, who have struggled with something more conventional: sexual temptation. (“Struggle” is the evangelical term for “repeatedly surrender to and repent of it.”) All of them have come to places of victory, but not until after long seasons of frustration. These children of healthy and faithful families have still been swept along with a tide of sexual experimentation and permissiveness that has nurtured hundreds of millions here in the west in habits of vice. Tom Wolfe describes America at the turn of the millennium in Hooking Up, first among the middle-aged and then among youth:

By 2000, an estimated 50 percent of all hits, or ‘log-ons,’ were at Web sites purveying what was known as ‘adult material.’ The word ‘pornography’ had disappeared down the memory hole along with ‘proletariat.’ Instances of marriages breaking up because of Web-sex addiction were rising in number. The husband, some fifty-two-year-old MRI technician or systems analyst, would sit in front of the computer for twenty-four or more hours at a stretch. Nothing that the wife could offer him in the way of sexual delights or food could compare with the one-handing he was doing day at night as he sat before the PC and logged on to such things as a girl with bare breasts and a black leather corset standing with one foot on the small of a naked boy’s back, brandishing a whip (Wolfe 2000, 5).

‘Hooking up’ was a term known in the year 2000 to almost every American child over the age of nine, but to only a relatively small percentage of their parents, who, even if they heard it, thought it was being used in the old sense of ‘meeting’ someone. Among the children, hooking up was always a sexual experience, but the nature and extent of what they did could vary widely. Back in the twentieth century, American girls had used baseball terminology. ‘First base’ referred to embracing and kissing; ‘second base’ referred to groping and fondling and deep, or ‘French,’ kissing, commonly known as ‘heavy petting’; ‘third base’ referred to fellatio, usually known in polite conversation by the ambiguous term ‘oral sex’; and ‘home plate’ meant conception-mode intercourse, known familiarly as ‘going all the way.’ In the year 2000, in the year of hooking up, ‘first base’ meant deep kissing (‘tonsil hockey’), groping, and fondling; ‘second base’ meant
oral sex; ‘third base’ meant going all the way; and ‘home plate’ meant learning each other’s names (Wolfe 2000, 7).

From what I have gleaned over the years from my students, Wolfe’s account is basically accurate.

The road back to chastity from the middle-aged and adolescent American sexual norm is long and anguished. Habits that are easy to acquire are hard to break. If what I saw in Kraft’s office is at all significant, deliverance involves dimensions of spiritual combat that few churches (charismatic or not) are equipped even to appreciate, let alone practice. My delight at witnessing and participating in a few successes is tempered by the awareness that they happened against the backdrop of an avalanche of failures.

Are sexual sins too culturally conservative for you? Then move to the American left and consider the demonology of Walter Wink in *The Powers that Be*, who traveled in 1982 to Chile to experience demonic oppression in the form of Augusto Pinochet’s military dictatorship.

We spoke with a lawyer who represented the families of people who had been ‘disappeared,’ as they put it. We spent an excruciating evening in dialogue with a woman who had been tortured. And so it went, week after week. …

At the end of the trip I became physically ill. I had planned to begin writing about the Powers, but I was so sick and underweight that I could scarcely function. On top of the physical ailment, I was overwhelmed by despair as well. I had gone to Latin America hoping that our experience there would help me write something that could make a difference. Instead, the evils we encountered were so monstrous, so massively supported by our own government, in some cases so anchored in a long history of tyranny, that it seemed nothing could make a difference. I had gone there to observe the Powers; I ended up their captive (Wink 1998, 6-7).

Sin is personal, but it is just as profoundly structural. The world’s powers conspire to form what Wink calls “the Domination System.”

It is characterized by unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all. No matter what shape the dominating system of the moment might take (from the ancient Near Eastern states to the Pax Romana to feudal Europe to communist state capitalism to modern market capitalism), the basic structure has persisted now for at least five thousand years, since
the rise of the great conquest states of Mesopotamia around 3000 BCE (Wink 1998, 39-40).

If you are impatient (as I am) with the selective memory and blind spots of today’s left, then substitute Saudi Arabia for South Africa or Saddam Hussein’s Iraq for Pinochet’s Chile. Both liberals and conservatives order our political, social, economic, and sexual lives around the demands of a system that structurally ignores or relativizes the lordship of Jesus Christ. Is that not resignation, if not outright surrender?

Our refusal to be defeated leads Christians in the opposite direction: to systematic participation, reform, resistance, and revolution. Yet the constant frustration of efforts both secular and Christian seems a chorus of testimony against human effectuality in the face of the Powers. Consider, to pick on the left this time, corrupt and self-indulgent labor unions, languishing European socialism, persistent and strident fundamentalism, flabby and self-parodying political correctness, a United Nations turned into a tool of dictators great and small, marginal Catholic Worker houses, declining schools of liberal theology, aging base communities of liberation theologians, and deteriorating mainline denominations. (We could list similar failures that are just as discouraging to conservatives.) It has been five thousand years by Wink’s reckoning. The few fragile deliverances seem to pale in comparison with the defeats.

When Christians fall into thinking of ourselves and the world, it is only a matter of time before Christian life becomes a trivial pursuit, lost cause, or utopian fantasy. We often cultivate an air of outward social optimism – especially we who were raised on liberal, moderate, and conservative schools of western progress. Yet it rapidly disintegrates into pessimism and cynicism once we honestly consider the scale of the challenges that face the gospel and the great reversals of faith that have come in Christianity’s old heartlands and in our own circles. The
same questions keep coming up: Where is the power? Where is the hope? And what are we
supposed to do in this world of these powerful institutions and authorities?

Our history of engagement reinforces a longstanding dilemma in Christian culture
between two ways of relating to the world: investment and withdrawal. It goes practically
unquestioned among American Christians that these are the only realistic alternatives. This
conviction only exacerbates the problem.

§2. Divided Loyalties: American Involvement and Christian Identity

**Investment: Involvement as Christian Identity.** The first relationship is investment:
Christians express our faith through allegiance to spiritual, cultural, economic, and political
powers – either to them in their current form, or to what they might become. An academic term
for this strategy, at least as it applies to the realm of the expressly political, is
“Constantinianism.”

Classical Constantinianism describes a formal alliance between civil institutions and
Christian institutions, or even a fusion of the two. In the U.K., Queen Elizabeth II is both the
head of state and the head of the Church. This makes Buckingham Palace the pinnacle of women
in Christian leadership, and Britain an ideal example of Constantinianism. By contrast, America
has a constitutional prohibition on such a relationship, so at first we do not seem to be a
Constantinian nation. But the First Amendment merely states that “Congress shall pass no law
respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The courts have
interpreted that clause to allow a Pledge of Allegiance, a currency, oaths in court, and other
national symbols to appeal to a “God” under whom the nation lives, in whom it trusts, and to
whom it swears. The Disestablishment Clause has shaped American Constantinianism into a new and more subtle form.

Let me speak from experience. I inherited from my parents a respect for “God and country” that basically equated faithful service to God with faithful service to country. The purest form of this influence in my life was the Boy Scouts, in which my whole family was involved. In fact, the Boy Scouts serves such a useful purpose in exposing the nuances of these positions that my diagnosis will center on it. We take life most seriously when it involves our children. This is as true of our worldly commitments as it is of our spiritual commitments. The Boy Scouts is a microcosm of the way this generation teaches the next generation how to be invested in the world, in ways that go way beyond the formally political. To dismiss it as kids’ stuff is to forget how important children are both to our national identities and to our Christian identities.

I can still remember taking the Scout Oath at every meeting: “On my honor, I will do my best, to do my duty, to God and my country, to obey the Scout Law. To help other people at all times, to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.”

Neither Constantinianism nor the Scouting that illustrates it can be reduced to allegiance to narrowly political powers. Both involve participants in a complex of practices that embrace nearly every dimension of modern life. The Boy Scouts’ formal mission is to “provide an educational program for boys and young adults to build character, to train in the responsibilities of participating citizenship, and to develop personal fitness.” Scouting takes character, citizenship, and fitness as fundamental aspects of healthy personhood. They come together or not at all. Scouting therefore goes way beyond camping and saluting the flag. It offers more than 100 merit badges alone, in an astonishing variety of areas. Those that begin with “A” are
Agribusiness, American business, American Cultures, American Heritage, American Labor, Animal Science, Archaeology, Archery, Architecture, Art, Astronomy, Athletics, Atomic Energy, Auto Mechanics, and Aviation. The Scouts are an investment vehicle for a whole life in the midst of the powers – cultural, economic, political, and spiritual.

There is room in the Boy Scouts of America for most every religious faith: Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic, various flavors of Protestant, Unitarian, Mormon. The Scouts understand all these confessions to converge neatly with character, fitness, and duty to the United States. When you think about that, it is a staggering claim. But it is accepted everyday in this country. (In fact, the Scouts’ “God and my country” echoes the motto of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps, “For God and Country,” another juxtaposition that is accepted uncritically by most Americans, and most American Christian communities.) Furthermore, it is accepted in every nation-state in which the Scouts operate, even those that go to war against each other.

As a Christian Scout you can earn a special award, called “God and Country,” in association with your church. (The God and Country program actually operates at every age level in Scouting: “God and Me” for Tiger Cubs and Cub Scouts from grades 1-3, “God and Family” for Cubs and Webelos in grades 4-5, “God and Church” for Boy Scouts in grades 6-8, “God and Life” for older Boy Scouts and Varsity Scouts, and the “God and Country” program for adult mentoring of children.)

Muslim Scouts have a parallel set of programs: The “Bismallah” or “In the Name of God” program, and the “Allaho Akber” program. Buddhist programs train Scouts in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Mormon Cubs can earn the “Faith in God” award, and Boy Scouts the “On My Honor” award. (Mormonism has become the most influential
religious group in the BSA. Mormon Wards sponsor more Scout Troops than any other organization except for public schools.)

It is easy to mistake the Scouts’ religious pluralism as an expression of American-style diversity and separation between Church and state. However, the overtly theistic Scout Oath makes it impossible for atheists to participate in Scouting. The Scouts are happy to juxtapose loyalty to America and loyalty to God defined in terms of Protestant or Catholic Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, or Mormonism (which is poly- or henotheistic), or even Hinduism or Buddhism (at least some forms of which deny God), or even a God left undefined, who after all is the closest match with the mysterious One invoked on America’s money and in its Declaration of Independence. But Scouting cannot tolerate a loyalty to America that is independent of loyalty to any of the Known and Unknown Gods. For the Scouts, Christian identity, like other forms of acceptable religious identity, necessarily manifests itself in patriotism and a host of other forms of secular investment, and vice versa. They are not different loyalties, but one loyalty expressed in compatible ways. As the Scout Handbook has said since 1911, “The Boy Scouts of America maintains that no member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing an obligation to God.... The recognition of God as the ruling and leading power in the universe and the grateful acknowledgment of His favors and blessings are necessary to the best type of citizenship and are wholesome precepts in the education of the growing members.” Religious observance is a necessary expression of social responsibility. Scout religion is civil religion.

This relationship is exactly duplicated in the youth and adult branches of the Masonic Service Organization. The Order of DeMolay (for boys), International Order of the Rainbow for Girls, and International Order of Job’s Daughters all demand both patriotism and religion (of the
member’s choice). If the Church of England is the Conservative Party at prayer, the Scouts are the Masons toasting marshmallows around a campfire.

Masonic American Constantinianism is not only the dominant vision of civic involvement in Christian circles, but also the dominant paradigm for the American public. “The goodness of a person and of the society he or she lives in often comes down to very simple things and words found in the Scout Law,” says President George W. Bush. “Every society depends on trust and loyalty, on courtesy and kindness, on bravery and reverence. These are the values of Scouting, and these are the values of Americans” (http://www.scouting.org/factsheets/02-559.html).

My father would have emphatically endorsed the president’s statement. Bush’s vision of neat convergence between Christian commitment and diversified investment in the powers is also the dominant vision in my own family. I am an Eagle Scout, brother of an Eagle Scout, son of an Eagle Scout, nephew of an Eagle Scout, and grandson of an Eagle Scout.

It came as something of a shock to discover that my proud family tradition of teenage Monday nights and weekend camping trips was a catechism in Masonic American Constantinianism!

It is not only those who accept Scouting’s particular vision of God and country who reveal the shape of Masonic American Constantinianism. Three camps that dispute its vision – Unitarians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and atheists – demonstrate the same point.

**Divestment as Investment.** Unitarians share the Scouts’ Constantinian paradigm that commends investment in the world as the appropriate expression of religious faith. They are enthusiastically participatory in American public life: In (usually liberal to radical) politics, in local, national, and global activism, in culture, and in public service. Investment and involvement
have been features of Unitarian culture since its American ascendency in the eighteenth century. Especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Unitarians were prominent in American politics (Thomas Jefferson, for instance, is an honorary and perhaps unofficial Unitarian), American education (Harvard University), and American culture (the Transcendentalists). Unitarians and Scouts seem made for each other. And for decades the two cooperated harmoniously.

However, the late sixties brought a twist to the notion of patriotism that became vastly influential, and since then the Culture Wars have split the country ideologically between “conservative” and “liberal.” One mode of patriotism became associated with the culture and family structures of the generations born before 1945; with aspects of the Democratic Party of Roosevelt and Truman and the Republican Party of Goldwater, then Nixon, then Reagan; with support for the Vietnam and Cold Wars; with opposition to affirmative action; with economic deregulation, free trade, and low taxation, and high growth; and so on. Another mode of patriotism became associated with sixties youth culture and non-nuclear family structures; with the Democratic Party of McGovern, then Mondale; with national pacifism and disarmament; with support for affirmative action and the extension of antidiscrimination measures to other than ethnic groups; with government intervention in the economy and trade; with environmentalism and new social practices and organizations; and so on. (Some institutions, such as big business, labor, Roman Catholics, and some ethnic groups, were left trying to straddle the divide.)

It is important to recognize that both of these political cultures were essentially patriotic, even when they thought of themselves (and each other) subversive. It is easy to see the “conservative” side in the Culture Wars as patriotic. It is less obvious, but no less true, that the “liberal” camp is essentially patriotic, even in its so-called “anti-patriotism.” Both sides have
often seen public activism as the measure of social and individual identity – including religious identity. The “Christian right” has been more visible in the former camp than the “religious left” in the latter, but in both camps were plenty of people who understood their lives of faith in terms of the struggle over true patriotism.

Consider the first traumatic days after September 11, 2001. During the September 13 episode of *The 700 Club*, Jerry Falwell offered a receptive Pat Robertson his interpretation of the attacks of two days earlier: “I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way – all of them who have tried to secularize America – I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’” This claim, which called down wrath from the center and left and (public) disavowal from the right, and forced retractions from both televangelists over the next several days, is both patriotic and subversive – an affirmation of American public life only as a call for its thorough reformation.

Fourteen days after the attacks, Barbara Kingsolver responded in the *San Francisco Chronicle* from the other side of the Culture Wars, alleging that patriotism threatens free speech with death. It is infuriated by thoughtful hesitation, constructive criticism of our leaders and pleas for peace. It despises people of foreign birth who’ve spent years learning our culture and contributing their talents to our economy. It has specifically blamed homosexuals, feminists and the American Civil Liberties Union. In other words, the American flag stands for intimidation, censorship, violence, bigotry, sexism, homophobia, and shoving the Constitution through a paper shredder?

No one accused Kingsolver of being a patriot (though many accused her of taking leave of her rationality). But reading further yields a different picture:

… my patriotic duty is to recapture my flag from the men now waving it in the name of jingoism and censorship. ... I would like to stand up for my flag and wave it over a few things I believe in, including but not limited to the protection of dissenting points of view. After 225 years, I vote to retire the rocket’s red glare and the bullet wound as obsolete symbols of Old Glory. We desperately need a new iconography of patriotism. I
propose we rip stripes of cloth from the uniforms of public servants who rescued the injured and panic-stricken, remaining at their post until it fell down on them. The red glare of candles held in vigils everywhere as peace-loving people pray for the bereaved, and plead for compassion and restraint. The blood donated to the Red Cross. The stars of film and theater and music who are using their influence to raise money for recovery. The small hands of schoolchildren collecting pennies, toothpaste, teddy bears, anything they think might help the kids who’ve lost their moms and dads.

This is anti-patriotism as a form of patriotism, an affirmation of America only as a call for its transformation. Barbara Kingsolver and Jerry Falwell are feathers in the left and right wings of the same eagle.

The split between Unitarians and Scouts occurred because the two organizations took different sides in the Culture Wars. Unitarian Universalists are radically inclusivist, allowing people to join their “church” whether they believe in one God, many, or none at all. (Indeed, in inserting every religious tradition they find attractive into their scheme, they are as downright imperialistic as the Masons.) Furthermore, they have taken a strong position against discrimination in all forms, including discrimination on the basis of sexual practice. Meanwhile, Scouting has slowly moved from its place in the American mainline to occupy the conservative side of the Culture Wars, without cutting its ties to the organizations in the American mainline that have moved to the liberal side.

This has meant that Unitarian commitments to God and country now conflict with Scouting’s commitments to God and country. Unitarians have a strained relationship with Scouting today not because they are unpatriotic, but because their position on homosexuality conflicts with the Scouts’. One group discriminates against homosexuals, the other rejects discrimination against homosexuals. The God of exclusion battles the God of inclusion in the American public square. (UUA churches still give out “Religion in Life” awards to Unitarian Scouts, but now over the BSA’s own objections.)
By the way, the Scouts have won the Supreme Court battle over this one, but they are bound to lose the war, because their strategy of defining God in terms of American public life plays entirely on the Unitarians’ terms. The fact that homosexuality, not the absurdity of Mormons and Hindus and Buddhists and Unitarians all swearing duty to “God,” sparks the greatest cultural battle in Scouting history shows that the Culture Wars are not a battle between Christian faith and secular humanism, but a shirmish between two flavors of Constantinianism. Much anti-patriotism, at least most of what makes it into the papers and onto the evening news, is really just shadow patriotism. The left’s divestment from the Scouts is a consequence and form of its investment in the culture.

This is how the relationship of patriotism and Christian identity is usually debated in America. Should ‘we’ (whose referent quietly meanders between ‘Christians’ and ‘Americans’) invest or divest in the name of patriotism? Should we be American Revolutionaries or French Revolutionaries?

“Neither,” answer Jehovah’s Witnesses. And that brings us to the opposite of Christian investment in the world: withdrawal.

**Withdrawal: Involvement or Christian Identity.** One popular alternative to both wings of Masonic American Constantinianism considers Christian and civil loyalty to be mutually exclusive. God and Caesar are inevitable competitors rather than potential partners. Devotion to one is apostasy from the other. The logical consequence for those maintaining their integrity as believers is separation.

Jehovah’s Witnesses see symbols of American civil religion much as early Christians saw the Roman civil religion that required sacrifice to images of the emperor as evidence of political loyalty. Thus Witnesses practice withdrawal from civic involvements they consider incompatible
with following Jehovah. This is not because America in particular is a government with sinful features, but because all worldly governments are instituted by Satan. Nationalistic practices such as salutes to the flag and loyalty oaths make participation in Scouting and many other impure forms of life strictly forbidden. Rather than taking part in American or French revolutions, Jehovah’s Witnesses wait for apocalyptic deliverance.

Where Mormons are Constantinians and Unitarians are shadow Constantinians, Witnesses are “counter-Constantinians.” Against the sunny patriotism of Mormons and the Moral Majority and the shadow patriotism of Unitarians, Jehovah’s Witnesses are the true anti-patriots. They offer no contribution whatsoever to American governmental authority. (The wider society has found the Witnesses helpful in exposing contradictions between the imagined religious freedoms of all Americans, and the actual constraints placed upon Americans by institutions such as flag salutes, public oaths, compulsory public and military service, and so on; but Witnesses have not set out to protect these freedoms.)

Yet as the Unitarians and Scouts look like opposites but turn out to be estranged brothers, so the Jehovah’s Witnesses that reject both turn out to have more in common with them than we might think. In withdrawing from the public sphere, Witnesses leave its claims unchallenged. Whether or not these three invest in the modern nation-state, all of them accept its hegemony in American public life. All respect the rules that democratic society places on them, and all agree to contribute or not to contribute according to those rules.

*Splitting the Difference: Involvement and Christian Identity.* A third group that disputes the Scouts’ vision is atheists and agnostics. Both atheists and agnostics are prohibited from leadership as adults and from membership as children. Many are supportive American citizens who would like to participate in everything about Scouts besides the civil religion, but
the Scout Oath ties their hands. They argue that the “God” of the Boy Scouts is irrelevant to the organization’s mission and inconsistent with its character as a quasi-public institution. The Scouts’ insistence on belief, they argue, is “un-American.” While the Scouts contend that religion is a personal matter with public consequences, agnostics argue that religion is a personal matter with private consequences, and thus unimportant to both citizenship and Scouting.

The agnostics who would decouple Scouting’s religion from Scouting’s patriotism show a third way to relate confessional identity and civil identity. We should talk not of patriotism as Christian identity, or of patriotism against Christian identity, but simply of patriotism alongside Christian identity. I call this position “para-Constantinianism.” Patriotism and religious identity are two different things. Each operates alongside the other in its own sphere. I may be a Scout who happens to be agnostic; you may be a Scout who happens to be a believer. Analogous claims that “I am an American who happens to be a Christian” and “I am a Christian who happens to be American” express mutual indifference between political practice and religious practice. This allows Christians to invest and withdraw simultaneously. Politics and religion pass each other in the night – or at least they should, for modernity construes the border between them as the border between public and private, between fact and value, between objectivity and subjectivity, between obligation and conscience. Who would dare to cross those lines?

The Scouts turn out to be fellow travelers with Masons, Mormons, Unitarians, and the Moral Majority as proponents of American-style Constantinianism. Jehovah’s Witnesses are counter-Constantinians. For the agnostics’ fellow para-Constantinians, look to the history of evangelicalism.

Evangelicals spent fifty years in the American cultural wilderness. They retreated from wider American society after the Scopes trial and, with a few exceptions like Billy Graham, re-
emerged only in the seventies. In the meantime evangelicals developed a host of organizations that paralleled mainstream American institutions: Specifically evangelical denominations, schools and colleges (such as Westmont), bookstore chains, media outlets – and versions of Scouting. They retreated from their nineteenth-century Reformed and Wesleyan styles of American Constantinianism, in which the state had helped them wage their campaigns against evils like slavery and alcohol abuse, into a twentieth-century para-Constantinianism which viewed the American establishment with relative indifference.

One intellectual justification of para-Constantinianism comes from a source that might at first be surprising: Abraham Kuyper, Calvinist theologian and prime minister of the Netherlands. Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism (X, X) draw out his vision of “sphere sovereignty,” in which community rules and ways of life fall within or without Church authority based on whether they embody the Calvinist categories of common (providential) grace or special (saving) grace.

[QUOTE KUYPER?]

Unlike Jehovah’s Witnesses, evangelical organizations have not been especially hostile to civic involvement, patriotism, and even nationalism. Especially since Jimmy Carter’s election in 1976, evangelicals have participated in elected office. Evangelicals tend to be enthusiastic participants in the U.S. military. However, these involvements are seen as secondary to the real mission of evangelicalism, which is overt promulgation of the good news itself. Jimmy Carter is a parable of this hierarchy of loyalties. After he retired from the presidency, he returned to teaching Sunday School, and worked tirelessly on behalf of Habitat for Humanity – giving the impression that he saw this as a promotion. (Carter stands in absolute contrast with Bill Clinton, who quite obviously does not know what to do himself now that he is no longer president.)
The popularity of Kuyper’s vision beyond the Calvinist tradition whose categories make his claims intelligible attests to the real source and character of sphere sovereignty. It rests on the Western European Constantinianism in which Kuyper – like Erasmus, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Cranmer, Simons, Wesley, and the other engineers of western Christianity from the sixteenth century almost until today – drew out his vision. Its life and death are confined to that world. One hundred years after Kuyper’s lectures were delivered, they read like a museum artifact. His odes to Calvinism seem as ludicrous as the exaggerations of a lover’s poem. The Church, state, arts, and sciences of his Christian Europe did not survive World War I. Today the Netherlands are indistinguishable from Kuyper’s. There is an awful lot of common grace, but apparently not much of the special sort: church attendance has gone from X% to X% in the country. Life in the Low Countries today is not much different from life in the Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican societies whose theologies Kuyper critiqued and contrasted so starkly with his. While the various faculties of Frei Universitat in Amsterdam, which he founded, do what they like, the theology department is confined to the top story of its building – “up in heaven,” the rest of the campus scoffs – and its faculty is being taken over by Pentecostals, who are the fastest growing sector in Dutch Christianity. They too tend to be para-Constantinians.

Scouting has traditionally been reluctant to allow awards from evangelical groups, not because it sees them as threatening, but because it does not see these groups as “traditional.” (This attitude gets especially ugly when the unrecognized traditions are historic African-American denominations, such as the AME Zion Church, which have abundant reasons to dispute Scouting’s “traditional” vision of patriotism and Christian identity.) The suspicion has often been mutual: Evangelicals who were already unhappy with liberal Protestantism were happy to create their own evangelical versions of Scouting such as Pioneer Clubs, Royal
Ambassadors, and the Christian Service Brigade. These ersatz Scouts have evangelical statements of faith that resemble Westmont’s, seeking to ensure that the institutional identity and mission of these organizations stays distinctively evangelical. The web sites of all three of these youth organizations make no appeals to patriotic loyalty as intrinsic to their own missions. They are focused on things besides “duty to country.”

An exception that proves the rule is the “Royal Rangers” program of the Assemblies of God. Like the others, it takes over much of Scouting while leaving out the Scouts’ religious pluralism. Yet the Royal Rangers allow para-Constantinianism to split themselves down the middle. The Royal Rangers say three “pledges of allegiance”: To the American flag, the so-called “Christian flag” (“I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag and to the Savior for Whose Kingdom it stands; one brotherhood, uniting all true Christians in service and in love”), and the Holy Bible (“I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God’s Holy Word. I will make it a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path, and will hide its words in my heart that I may not sin against God”). These loyalties are distinguished as neatly as I imagine Royal Rangers’ lives are compartmentalized between the sacred and the secular. The Royal Rangers website pictures two rangers, one holding the American flag and the other holding the Christian flag. (The American flag is higher.)

You may sense an imperfect fit between the evangelicalism I am describing and evangelicalism today. That is because the last hundred years saw evangelicalism’s mood swing wildly from Constantinianism and back. First evangelicals moved from postmillennial optimism to premillennial pessimism, and from social activism to fundamentalist – sometimes even Jehovah’s Witness-style – abandonment from American public life. Then, as its institutions formed and matured, it moved to a parallel, Pentecostal-style duplication of American public life.
As it began to see the centers in power within its reach, it then took on a participatory, Mormon-like argument with American public life, and introduced an interior bifurcation between life’s sacred and secular aspects. Nowadays evangelicals are becoming ever more integrated and assimilated into American public life. We are the new Episcopalians, the new mainline, and it shows.

**Christian Conundrum.** Lest this come across as a smug dismissal of everyone else from the heights of my ivory tower, I want to be clear that I am sympathetic to every one of these visions. My Scout sash and uniform still sit in my closet. I love my deceased mainline father, who was a Scoutmaster; my traditionalist Episcopalian mother, who as a latter-day culture warrior now supports the Scouts more vociferously than ever; my postmodern Episcopalian sister, who admires Kingsolver; and my ultramodern Unitarian brother, who teaches world religions in his Sunday School. Furthermore, I feel nostalgia for the old days when I was a naïve Boy Scout, then a Hal Lindsey-era premillennial conspiracy theorist, then a Pat Robertson admirer and Christian activist, then an apolitical evangelist and mission-supporter. Either I or someone in my nuclear family has occupied every one of these visions of the relationship between American patriotism and Christian identity.

Nevertheless, something leaves me dissatisfied with all of them. Something drives me back to the drawing board, back upon the Christian tradition to revisit the question. Furthermore, my dissatisfaction seems mirrored by the restlessness of my fellow evangelicals as we have careened from one extreme to another in our quest for Christian faithfulness in our powerful, threatening, promising world. We find nowhere to rest because all of these relationships leave the powers’ dominance in the sphere of patriotism unquestioned. Both investment and withdrawal work around the Domination System. They focus on swimming with or against the
cultural tide. Investment turns Christians into “the Church conformist” and worldly significance into cultural assimilation. Withdrawal turns Christians into “the Church impotent” and worldly irrelevance into cultural invisibility. Our various forms of investment and withdrawal merely underwrite Christian dilution, burnout, and defeatism. But what else is there? No wonder we are frustrated!

Perhaps that something is the Holy Spirit.

§3. “Your Kingdom Come”

Dilution, burnout, and defeatism are literally a world away from the language of the Lord’s Prayer. Old systematic theologies speak not of impotence or conformity but instead of “The Church militant” and “the Church triumphant.” This is not just fancy language for living believers and dead believers. It alludes to an entirely different way of looking at the world – from the perspective of the Kingdom or reign of God.

When we wearily return from the world of powers and principalities to pray “let your reign come” with the Messiah, we discover that we have had it precisely backwards. The real question is not whether or not we are invested in the world, but whether or not the world is invested in God’s reign. Investment in God’s future for the world is the key to transcending the categories of the world and ourselves that pose insoluble dilemmas of investment or withdrawal. Christian power is not cultural power, cultural powerlessness, or countercultural power. It is eschatological power.

Eschatological power, end-times power, is not the power to which the old age has become accustomed. Sometimes eschatological power even looks weak, as it did on the cross (1 Cor. 1:21-25) and in the fear and trembling of the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 2:3). Other times it looks
strong – as it did in Jesus’ itinerant ministry (Matt. 11:12, 12:28) and in the resurrection that Paul 
preaches (1 Cor. 15:50). Sometimes it appears negligible, other times compelling (Luke 13:18-
19). These resemblances, however, are incidental. Because eschatological power comes from 
beyond the world of principalities and powers, it is not defined in terms of anything but the God 
whose purpose is accomplished through it. It is neither worldly nor otherworldly, but eternal. 
The world cannot construct it or destroy it, for it is imperishable (1 Cor. 15:50). It is a given. By 
the will of God it arrives or leaves, spreads or withdraws, suffers or conquers, includes us or 
excludes us. The Kingdom stands on its own.

The grace of the Lord’s Prayer is that it accepts that we do not determine God’s Kingdom; but by the mystery of God’s openness to his own creation, we can and do truly interact with it. We are not passive before the Kingdom any more than Christ is. We invite it, enter it, dwell in it, celebrate it, proclaim it – and also deny it, reject it, and leave it.

The Lord’s Prayer makes the fundamental question not how Christians should be involved in the world, but how Christians should be involved in the Kingdom. Practicing it cultivates a perspective in which the Kingdom is central, not marginal. Eschatology is a presupposition for those who pray in its Spirit, not an afterthought. “Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on,” the Lord tells shortly after leading us in his prayer. “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Matt. 6:25, 33).

_Eternity misunderstood._ Christian life is eschatological life (Acts 2:17, 1 Cor. 10:11) – eternal life (1 John 5:13). However, just as misunderstandings about the identity of Jesus Christ obscure the character of the Father, so misunderstandings about eternity obscure the nature of the
end-times. Each one makes this petition of the Lord’s Prayer a call for the absurd and confuses those who pray it.

The most popular eschatological mistake in the west is that of worldly \textit{progress}. The future is a world empire, a New Israel, a worker’s paradise, a Thousand Year Reich, a global market, a global village, a United Nations, a technological wonderland, an ecological Eden, or a universal Muslim theocracy. Here, ironically, we encounter the very thing we have been trying to escape: a world that demands investment on its own terms. All these utopias are intensified (and often estranged) descendants of the Christian Constantinianism we already examined at length. All amount to eschatological visions. As Constantinianism envisions Christian political power as a postmillennial realization of Christ’s earthly reign (Clapp 1996, 23-24), so each pictures itself as the end of history as we know it, as the world’s arrival at eternity – and through its own efforts.

\begin{verbatim}
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored,
He has loosed the fateful lightening of His terrible swift sword
His truth is marching on.

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps
His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnish’d rows of steel,
“As ye deal with my contemners, So with you my grace shall deal”;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel
Since God is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat
\end{verbatim}
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on (Howe, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”).

If eternity lies in the world’s own reach, why bother to pray for the Kingdom to come? God helps those who help themselves! In a world of progress, prayer becomes inspiration, encouragement, and introspection – a prelude to an action already decided. A culture that takes matters into its own hands prays to a God of its own making, and sooner or later only to itself.

Another common misconception is that eternity is timelessness. Here Platonism, which opposes the material world of corruption and change to the immutable “God” who is its source, is making its ancient influence felt. One such child of Christian Platonism is C.S. Lewis’ classic, The Great Divorce, in which a glorified George Macdonald tells the narrator:

“Son,” he said, “ye cannot in your present state understand eternity: when Anodos looked through the door of the Timeless, he brought no message back” (Lewis 1946, 67).

“All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world: but it is smaller than one atom of this world, the Real World. Look at yon butterfly. If it swallowed all Hell, Hell would not be big enough to do it any harm or to have any taste” (Lewis 1946, 122-123).

“If ye are trying to leap on into eternity, if ye are trying to see the final state of all things as it will be (for so ye must speak) when there are no more possibilities left but only the Real, then ye ask what cannot be answered to mortal ears. Time is the very lens through which ye see – small and clear, as men see through the wrong end of a telescope – something that would otherwise be too big for ye to see at all. … Ye cannot know eternal reality by a definition. Time itself, and all acts and events that fill Time, are the definition, and it must be lived” (Lewis 1946, 124-125).

Suddenly all was changed. I saw a great assembly of gigantic forms all motionless, all in deepest silence, standing forever about a little silver table and looking upon it. And on the table there were little figures like chessmen who went to and fro doing this and that. And I knew that each chessman was the idolum or puppet representative of some one of the great presences that stood by. And the acts and motions of each chessman were a moving portrait, a mimicry or pantomime, which delineated the inmost nature of his giant master. And these chessmen are men and women as they appear to themselves and to one another
in this world. And the silver table is Time. And those who stand and watch are the
immortal souls of those same men and women (Lewis 1946, 126).

Lewis pleaded in his introduction that his readers not take his “imaginative supposal” as “even a
guess or a speculation at what may actually await us” (Lewis 1946, 8), but such images –
whether from his pen or Augustine’s – have been too vivid to resist. “When the Last Day comes
and goes, and time will be no more, I’ll be praising you. … A thousand years from now, before
your throne of grace and power, I’ll be praising you,” my church sometimes sings. The lines are
literally nonsensical. We can sing without time? Time will end in exactly one thousand years?
Will the worshiping Church be frozen in amber and the song silenced like a recording locked
away in a safe? If the Kingdom were timeless, the world would have nothing to do but fade
away, fossilize, or run along keeping its distance. The coming of the Kingdom would make no
sense.

A third misconception is that eternity is another dimension in which one can skate
through time up and down and sideways like a time traveler. Edwin A. Abbott’s Flatland: A
Romance of Many Dimensions obliquely paints such a portrait. This nineteenth century
geometrical fantasy from an English clergyman is the monologue of a Square who lives in a two-
dimensional realm. One day a Sphere mysteriously visits him and leads him, as Beatrice leads
Dante, up into Spaceland then down into Lineland and Pointland. When he decides to
“evangelize the whole of Flatland” to “the Gospel of Three Dimensions” (Abbott 1992, 77) – an
illegal activity – he is imprisoned and writes these memoirs. He closes them on a note of
desperation proper to a Victorian clergyman:

The millennial Revelation has been made to me for nothing. Prometheus up in Spaceland
was bound for bringing down fire to mortals, but I – poor Flatland Prometheus – lie here
in prison for bringing nothing to my countrymen. Yet I exist in the hope that these
memoirs, in some manner, I know not how, may find their way to the minds of humanity
in Some Dimension, and may stir up a race of rebels who shall refuse to be confined to
limited Dimensionality. … It is part of the martyrdom which I endure for the cause of the Truth that there are seasons of mental weakness, when Cubes and Spheres flit away into the background of scarce-possible existences; when the Land of Three Dimensions seems almost as visionary as the Land of One or None; nay, when even this hard wall that bars me from my freedom, these very tablets on which I am writing, and all the substantial realities of Flatland itself, appear no better than the offspring of a diseased imagination, or the baseless fabric of a dream (82).

*Flatland* gets an enthusiastic reception among some modern evangelicals, who see in its mathematical analogy a handy solution to the problems of divine transcendence, foreknowledge, and incarnation. However, Israel does not conceive of heaven as a higher dimension in which our narrative universe is enclosed like a scroll. The Kingdom comes not as an angel’s millennial visitation to reawaken us to worlds beyond, nor even through a material cross-section called Jesus of a hyper-being called God. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the whole Word made whole flesh, and his kingdom shall have no end. Second Peter 3:8’s “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” is a text of patience, not transcendence. Heaven as hyperspace is a fascinating intellectual project, but it is not the Christian story.

It is even possible to get the basic eschatological framework right but the details tragically wrong. Jews and Muslims are still waiting for the end-times to begin. Jesus’ refusal to arrive as predicted since at least the thirteenth century has not deterred eschatological prophets from drawing real and fictional scenarios of the Last Day that have compelled millions (including me). Adventists are descendants of Millerites who originally miscalculated the date of Christ’s second coming as October 22, 1843. Jehovah’s Witnesses have proclaimed human existence to have ended imperceptibly in 1975. [ILLUSTRATION? HAL LINDSEY?]

Eternity-as-progress turns the coming of the Kingdom into the world’s *coming out* at the climax of the present age. Eternity-as-timelessness twists the Kingdom’s coming into immortal souls’ *going* into transcendence. Eternity-as-hypertime reduces it to ongoing sacramental or
evangelical traffic with parallel realms. Eternity-as-preconceived-future imagines a scenario of coming that fails to come. Each of these mirages is powerful. Each holds people in its thrall, at least for a while, until some other picture replaces it, or until boredom or revulsion drives some away from eschatology altogether and back to the old world and its dilemmas. “A picture held us captive,” Ludwig Wittgenstein says of the modern idea that propositions depict the world beyond. His diagnosis applies just as well to each of these notions of eternity. “And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (Wittgenstein 1958, I.115, 48).

What defuses these popular abstractions of eternity and frees us from our slavery to them is the Kingdom that has actually come near. Jesus’ advent is the definitive content of the Kingdom of God. It alone shows us the way out of the eternal maze.

The Kingdom as the good news. “The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). This sentence is one of only a few references to the kingdom of God in Paul’s letters. Paul uses it as if to recapitulate the whole flow of his letter to the Romans: the righteousness of Christ for the benefit of sinners (Rom. 1-4) yields peace with God and each other (Rom. 5-14), which overflows in lives of joy (Rom. 15-16).

Today “kingdom of God” (basileia tou theou) is a dead metaphor that people use without hearing its overtones. Consider a couple of translations: God’s regime has taken power. The dominion of the God of Israel has approached. The YHWH Administration has made Jesus Davidson dictator-for-life, and Chief of Staff Peter Jonason is waiting for you in the lobby.

Paul prefers a different label for all this: “the good news of God” (Rom. 1:1) “concerning his Son” (Rom. 1:3, 1:9). This message is not just “information” as we understand the term
nowadays, but “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16). “The kingdom of God does not consist in talk,” Paul tells some of his chattering competitors, “but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20). Its power is the Spirit’s own eschatological power (1 Thess. 1:5, 10).

Biblical scholars often stress distinctions between Paul and each gospel, but the overlap is more profound than the particularities. Mark’s gospel puts the same linkage on Jesus’ own lips at the outset of his career: “The moment has finally come, and the YHWH Administration has approached; change your ways and trust that the news is good” (Mark 1:1, 9-15). All three other gospels follow him in their own ways (Matt. 4:12-17, 23; Luke 4:14-15, 43; John 4-5). When we turn, for instance, to the Gospel of Matthew, we find that Paul’s life is a living parable of God’s regime taking power.

What an odd sort of power! This dominion belongs to the spiritually poor and to those abused for doing good (Matt. 5:3, 10). It is nonviolent and suffers persecution (5:38-48, 10:16-33), yet bears a sword and advances violently (10:34-39, 11:12). It is unlike anything Jesus’ audiences have ever heard or seen (7:28, 9:33), yet resembles all kinds of familiar things: salt, yeast, fishing nets, and buried treasure. It performs unprecedented acts, then defends them with common sense. It seems totally new but already at home in the world; rejected but triumphant; insignificant but momentous.

This distinguishes God’s dominion from the eschatological mirages we normally see. Jesus is not the adolescence of the world, the event horizon from time to timelessness, or the portal between time and eternity. Jesus is the frontier between the old and the new (cf. 13:51-52).

By grace, Jesus’ disciples are too. In Matthew 10 Jesus sends out his apostles to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, predicting works of power (Matt. 10:8a), hospitality (10:8b-12a), and rejection (10:12b-15) on the way. As rewards for his disciples’ faithfulness he promises gifts
of prophecy (10:18-20) and righteousness (10:32). This sobering apostolic scenario plays out in the next two chapters (Matt. 11:1). John in prison, the crowds that had gone out to him, the Jewish cities to which Jesus preaches, and the Pharisees have all fallen out of step with the times, like wallflowers at a dance (11:2-19) or political parties voted out of power. Their skewed eschatologies have misled them and even turned their piety into a pretense for evil (12:1-4). Jesus’ disciples contrast absolutely with these. As officials trained for the YHWH Administration, they understand the difference between new and old, and know when is the right time for each (13:51-52).

Like all changes in government, this one must inevitably become a contest of powers. In the course of these two chapters Jesus moves from a crowded open space (perhaps a marketplace) to a field, then to a synagogue, and finally to a house at the seaside. The scope of his operation narrows accordingly. In every place his power is met with curiosity, wonder, loyalty, and opposition – against a vast backdrop of indifference (11:20-24). Does this sound familiar? The YHWH Administration should be a sensation, not a sideshow. The revolution should be scaling up, not down. What is going on?

All is according to plan, Jesus says. Then in a series of parables of the kingdom he shows how that astonishing claim can be.

Any farmer knows that waste, harsh weather, and weeds are unavoidable contingencies in agriculture (13:18-22). They need not threaten a good harvest (13:23). Inaction in the face of adversity should not be taken as neglect or naivete; it may even be the best approach (13:24-30, 36-43). The perfect is the enemy of the good: no utopian farmer who demanded that every seed yield grain, spent his hours pulling up every weed, and demanded instant results would stay in
business. The engineering aphorism – better, faster, cheaper: pick any two – is here outdone. Better, faster, cheaper: pick one. The YHWH Administration is slow, expensive, and wonderful.

As for practically going underground with the good news, what else is new? Jesus’ message has been hidden since the foundation of the world (13:35), and it remains hidden even now. However, where once it was entirely out of reach, now it is hidden differently: in soil where it grows into an eschatological tree (13:31-32), in flour that it leavens (13:33), in a field where it can be reburied and purchased (13:44), in an inventory where it must be sought out and purchased at great expense (13:45-46), and in an underwater net that works out of sight (13:47-50). Hiding is explicit in two of these images and obscurity is implicit in the others. In our age the YHWH Administration’s PR strategy seems bizarre. It is neither investment nor withdrawal. It seemed strange in Jesus’ day too. What monarch reigns incognito? Yet the kingdom is not purposefully marginal or aloof from its context, as counter- and para-Constantinians might think. All these similes depend on interaction – with the soil, the lump, the field, the shop, the sea – to make sense. This is a deliberate strategy of engagement.

As for the kingdom’s tiny scale, Jesus refuses the classic Constantinian confusion of size for power. A miniscule seed in a field, a pinch of yeast, a treasure chest in a field, one pearl, a net in a sea – none of these impresses except by its smallness. Yet each is powerful – in some cases, more powerful than the large thing it inhabits. That explains the reception that immediately follows these teachings in Jesus’ hometown synagogue. “Where did this one get his wisdom and wonders?” (13:54). He is only one man, and from an undistinguished family! Jesus’ neighbors miss his connection with the Father and the Spirit. Their God is too big!

Moreover, in this Administration small things signify big things. As a mere signature unleashes vast executive power, so symbolic actions lead to momentous actions elsewhere. “I
will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth has been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth has been loosed in heaven” (16:19).

Small things also reveal big things. What ruler would tolerate hypocrisy among his officials? So forgiving fellow citizens shows trust in the Father’s grace (18:21-35). Welcoming the humble and caring for them shows trust in the Father’s own welcome and does his will that none should perish (18:1-20, 19:13-15). Letting go of one’s own wealth invests in the regime’s far greater resources (19:16-29). The YHWH Administration demands lives of utter consistency.

Finally – and here the kingdom’s eschatological character comes into full view – small things are a prelude to big things. “To those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance,” Jesus says. “But from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (13:12). This is not just remedial prophecy (cf. Isa. 6:9-13), it is remedial wisdom (Proverbs 1:29-33)! No decent ruler trusts strangers with state secrets, let alone fools and enemies (Matt. 10:10-11). First he finds out who can be trusted. Jesus offers signs of deliverance to the crowds, and sorts his audiences according to their response. Antagonists get refutation and intentional confusion (12:24-45), while followers receive inside information (13:18-23) and the promise of heavenly authority (16:16-20).

Jesus uses the same words later in the parable of the talents (25:29) to describe the final cut between the fruitful and the unfruitful: “To those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” What chief executive rewards poor performers with cabinet positions? Ruling is serious business! No, only those who have proven themselves gain executive authority. The loser gets the sack, while the master in the parable sets the servants who double his capital “over much” (25:21, 23).
Over much what? In Luke’s version, these faithful servants become the mayors of many cities (Luke 19:17, 19). Is this just an incidental detail in the parable, or does evangelical fidelity in the present age actually yield political power in the next?

It seems so. The faithful and wise servant who is ready for his master’s arrival is set over all the master’s possessions (Matt. 24:47). The ready maidens celebrate the feast (25:10). The sheep inherit the kingdom (25:34). All of these describe activity following the day of judgment (Matt. 24-25). Judgment Day is conventionally interpreted as the last significant event in human history, but these stories suggest the opposite. In every case the work increases after the final cut. The talents are as much a test as anything, for the master has much over which the servants are not presently set. Perhaps the eschatological YHWH Administration thinks small because the really big events follow the eschaton.

We cannot read these parables as endorsements of Premillennial Dispensationalism. There is no Millennium in Matthew, and the judgment in these scenes is final, at least for the ones being judged. (Likewise, being taken or left in Matt. 24:36-44 is not a “rapture” that lifts up the righteous but a flood that washes away the wicked. Left behind is good!) We can, however, take seriously the prospect that the current tasks of discipleship are a mere prelude to future tasks.

Think about it. Why would discipleship stress the cultivation of virtues, habits, and practices that had nothing to do with life in the new creation? Where is the glory in demanding costly discipleship as mere admission into a paradise of Platonic idleness, let alone Muslim sensuality? What use is literal eternal rest to a humanity created for work (Gen. 1-2)? The sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the sabbath (Mark 2:27). The faithful stewards in these stories enter into the master’s joy, not his rest (Matt. 25:21, 23). The saints “shall reign
for ever and ever” in the new Jerusalem (Rev. 22:5). “Reigning” cannot be another word for retiring.

My profession has developed the widely misunderstood institution of tenure. The first years of one’s teaching career are a kind of probation. The object of tenure is not to make junior faculty work like dogs, burn them out, then reward them with academic social security while they kick back. When that happens, it is an abuse of tenure and a display of the teacher’s bad faith. Yet that is just what we often imagine life in the new creation will be! No, tenure is properly a time of proving oneself that leads to being vested with full power. Tenure endows a proven professor with full academic freedom. It opens doors to administrative power. In sum, it entrusts, in the confident expectation that the trust will not be betrayed. “To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant,” Jesus says, “but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father” (20:23). Jesus and his disciples are not being exploited or hazed, but readied.

This also makes sense of the Christian symbolism that saturates disciples’ lives. If faith, hope, and love really survive the knowledge, prophecy, and tongues that now respectively mediate them (1 Cor. 13), then they will still take tangible forms. Both charismatic and sacramental signs are significant only if they are symbols of things that last. If baptism and healing anticipate resurrection and Eucharist and marriage anticipates the wedding banquet, then ordination should anticipate something too. As vast as the Church’s power already is – power to forgive sins, to bind and loose, to witness before the world’s great ones, to speak for God himself – it cannot compare to the power to come.

Perhaps this is why the YHWH Administration seems so concerned with a woman’s healing or a man’s chastity while nations lurch from one war to the next. What commander would send soldiers right into battle without training? What ruler would appoint a judge who had
not passed a bar exam? So a nation at war and plagued with injustice needs the patience to train its public servants if things are ever to improve. A regime’s refusal to panic and subordinate the important to the urgent makes its boot camps and law schools signs of victories and justice to come. In God’s kingdom, the Church is such a sign. “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birthpangs. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake” (Matt. 24:8-9). “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” (24:14). To Jesus the two are bound together. Christian patience and steadfastness in the face of persecution is a reassurance that the YHWH Administration is determined and able to see the whole creation through her long, traumatic labor.

Jesus’ crucifixion stands at the center of all this. Jesus has taught his followers his announcement that the YHWH Administration has approached and waits for our response. He has taught them his prayer accepting it and inviting it to enter in. At the cross his announcement, his prayer, his power, his opposition, and his obscurity all come to their logical conclusion.

Jesus follows his third prediction of his crucifixion with one of his clearest interpretations of the kingdom’s engagement with the world:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25-28).

This event too is a small thing from the world’s perspective – just another execution – but it signifies, reveals, and leads to events at the heart of God and the center of history. Every intention collides at Calvary: the Jewish authorities’ refusal to receive the Son of the Father
(21:33-41), the Father’s exaltation of the Son above them (21:42-45), Pilate’s expedience
(27:24), the disciples’ greed and fear (20:20-24, 26:31-35, 69-75), and the Son’s determination to
serve the Father and his disciples at all cost (20:25-28). He refuses to alter the course he has
pursued from the beginning, and so becomes the definitive embodiment of the kingdom ethic he
has proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount. All parties follow their own wills but one – the Son
(26:39; see The Third Petition). When all others have stopped praying the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus
remains steadfast. He continues to invite and await his Father’s kingdom. Jesus allows the
divinely ordained powers, both Jewish and Gentile, to judge and reject him and the
Administration he represents (26:25, 26:63-64a, 27:11). He does so out of trust in the sown seed
to sprout and the buried treasure to last. He will wait for the One who ordained those powers to
vindicate him in the face of their injustices and insurgencies (26:29-32, 26:64b-66, 27:46). “The
hour has approached, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners” (26:45).

The crucifixion is Jesus’ tenure review, and the Father passes him. “Hereafter you will
see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven”
(26:64), he says at his trial. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (28:18),
he says at his first worship service. He is neither invested in the world nor withdrawn from it; he
is its Lord. The world is entrusted to him.

His disciples are still on their tenure tracks (7:21-27). Much is already entrusted to them,
and greater trust is on the way. This arrangement calls for disciples to be patient as Jesus was
patient if they are to remain faithful.

The Church has failed to exercise patience in two common ways that tie into the first
section of this chapter. I know them both from experience.
First, impatience with the limits of the Church’s authority has tempted trigger-happy disciples to retrench into its old Constantinian habits (Clapp 1996, 19-21) and turn mission into what Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon call “activism” (Hauerwas and Willimon XX, XX). The activist Church enters the world to take it by force. We want tenure now! Our kingdom become yours! Our will be done in heaven as it is on earth! Overreaching like this is an especially popular option among the emerging churches of the southern hemisphere for whom the most common contexts are persecution and new social dominance (Jenkins 2000, XX).

Activism acknowledges the Son’s incarnation but not his ascension, his resurrection but not his crucifixion.

Second, complacency with these limits has tempted disciples into the opposite mistakes of either capitulating to the present order and accepting the scraps of relevance it leaves for “religion” and “spirituality” as value systems, or retreating into insular and even private realms beyond the world’s apparent reach (Clapp 1996, 18-19, 21). This turns mission into what Hauerwas and Willimon call “conversionism” (Hauerwas and Willimon XX, XX). The conversionist Church enters the world only to pluck “souls” out of it. Never mind the tenure! Your kingdom stay away! Your will be done in heaven but not on earth! Underreaching like this is a classic stance of spiritualists who acknowledge the Son’s ascension but not his incarnation, his crucifixion but not his resurrection.

Of course the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension depend on each other. To respect any one of them is to respect them all. Impatience and complacency amount to unfaithfulness to the story of Jesus Christ and refusal to make that story our own. Such so-called disciples do not do the Father’s will on earth, and as a result we soon find ourselves impotent and hopeless, and at odds with the YHWH Administration.
To return to the apostle with whom we began this section, such people are like Paul’s fellow Israelites. These sought to establish a righteousness of their own and rebelled against the one which actually comes from God through trust (Rom. 10:3-4). As a result they have found themselves in the very position Moses warns Israel about in Deuteronomy 30 – intimidated by the challenges that face them in the promised land and oppressed by God’s demands on them. In their frustration they imagine God remains in the heavens, and thus aloof, or else panic that God is far away from them (beyond the sea in Egypt?), and thus defeated. The first fantasy turns Israel’s calling into a utopian fantasy, while the second nightmare turns it into a lost cause. Israel cannot help but fail to obtain what it seeks, and so has become hardened, marginalized, and trivial (Rom. 11:7). Spinning the passage with characteristic boldness, Paul advocates a proper strategy in response:

Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). … The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart – that is, the word of faith which we preach. If you confessed with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believed in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you would be saved. For one trusts with the heart unto justification and confesses with the lips unto salvation (Rom. 10:6-10).

My Constantinian ambition wants to storm heaven, while my counter-Constantinian timidity and para-Constantinian separatism want to flee to it. All are forms of unbelief. God is not out of our reach; Christ is Lord! We are not out of God’s reach; Christ is risen! The Father’s will has been done on earth. The kingdom has approached.

What then? Proper belief keeps praying, “your Kingdom come.” Thus it stays focused on the orders it has received from the master for the duration of his time away. That way what has been done once and for all can be made known and manifested in all the earth. Disciples confess the God who has come to justify and save the world in which he has invested his name, and continue to do so whether their boldness is met with agreement or opposition. They do not worry
about investing in the world or withdrawing from it, but *go into it* to announce the approaching
of God’s reign.

Preaching that God’s dominion has approached and praying for it to come seem
contradictory at first, but in fact they are two necessary aspects of mission. Praying accepts
God’s invitation in Jesus Christ to rule, while preaching extends that invitation to those who have
not received or accepted the offer. What sense does one make without the other? Protestants have
divided themselves over which has priority, but Philip Schaff (adapting the words of Francis
Cardinal Spellman) saw through the false dilemma: “Good Calvinists preach like Methodists, as
if everything depended on man,” he said; “good Methodists pray like Calvinists, as if everything
depended on God”[??]. For it does, if the Nicene Creed is to be believed.

Mission is the logical answer to our question in every thread of the New Testament that
we have examined. In Matthew 28 the Lord’s Prayer is answered in Christ’s resurrection, the
disciples’ worship, and their great commission. In Deuteronomy 30-32 Israel’s entry into the
land provokes even the Gentiles – from Rahab onward (cf. Josh. 1:9-14, Matt. 1:5) – to rejoice
along with God’s people (32:43). In Romans 12-15 the righteousness of Christ unites Jews and
Gentiles in a common life of sacrifice, purity, and fellowship in the midst of the powers that
echoes Christ’s deference to the Father (Rom. 15:5-6) and fulfills Deuteronomy’s promise to
confirm God’s faithfulness to Israel and his good plans for every nation.

The question Christ asks the world is whether or not it is invested in God’s reign. The
question he poses to his disciples is whether they have the patience to keep posing it.

§4. The Household of Cornelius: Fidelity in the Public Square [omit?]

To solve the dilemma of investment versus withdrawal, mainline Christian ethicists have
regularly turned to H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (Harper, XX), with its typology of
five relationships between “Christ” and “culture” (or, better, between “Christianity” and “civilization”). However no one of these types, nor even a synthesis of the five, will solve either Niebuhr’s “enduring problem” or ours. This is because each lacks a robust account of the **Christian community as indispensable agent of world mission.** Today our notions of the Church are, if anything, even more underdetermined than in Niebuhr’s day. Having played according to the rules of the Enlightenment and its grand American experiment, they have become captives, unable to describe themselves as much more than “religions,” “denominations,” “core values,” “worldviews,” or “interest groups.” These categories are both culturally sensible and theologically unintelligible. We can only escape their shortcomings by overthrowing them.

While Niebuhr is more helpful than critics like John Howard Yoder suggest (Stassen, ed., 1996), the more thoroughly one corrects Niebuhr’s categories, the more his typology recedes. Against withdrawal, capitulation, paradox, culmination, and transformation, we pose the category of mission.

Let us start with nationhood. This may seem premature: shouldn’t the Church come first and last? The answer depends on how one defines “Church”. If we define the Church to have begun with Adam and Eve, or even with Abel the Just, then yes. But if instead we consider the Church of Jesus Christ as the eschatological restoration of the people of God promised to Abraham in Gen. 12, the answer is no. For Gen. 10 has already displayed a “table of nations” spreading out to the postdiluvian earth in fulfillment of Noah’s blessing (10:32). These nations are part of God’s plan; the text makes this clear by putting the table of nations before the story of the dispersal of nations after Babel, in Gen. 11:9. Nations – discrete peoples with their own economies, governance, and even languages! (10:31) – are “protologically” significant: they belong to the first order of things.
Nations are eschatologically significant as well. In its closing scenes, the book of Revelation shows us nations entering the New Jerusalem to walk by its light, and their kings entering with their glory and honor (Rev. 21:22-27), and the tree of life offering its leaves for the nations’ healing (Rev. 22:2). Coming after the beasts and dragons and false prophets and whores of the preceding chapters, this is a stunning reversal. We expect the kings of the earth to be shut out forever, yet here they are!

We know the beginning of nationhood, and we know the ending. What about the middle, particularly today’s middle? We live in a “between times” in which the old creation and new creation collide. Theological categories from both ages apply to the relationship between national identity and Christian identity.

**Constantine or Jeremiah?** John Howard Yoder characterizes two figures as paradigmatic for our understanding of Christian identity and national identity in the present age (Yoder 1997, 8-9). One of them is Constantine, whom we have already discussed at length. We have already seen what patriotism looks like in various Constantinian visions: It is any formal alliance or fusion between civil institutions and Christian institutions. Yoder’s other figure is Jeremiah, prophet of Israel’s exile, whom God tells to “seek the peace of the city” of Babylon (Jer. 29:7). “Jeremian” patriotism honors the emperor, or any king of the earth, from its location of dispersion among the nations, a dispersion it has found to be its calling as a faith community (Yoder 1997, 52, 56).

*How* does Jeremian patriotism show such honor? By choosing the way of Jesus Christ and his disciples who follow Jeremiah’s vision (Yoder 1997, 68-69), over the ways of the political visions that opposed him in the first century. For Yoder, this means that

The good news of God’s original revolution is not, as the Zealots of right or left would say, that violence is only wrong when the bad guys use it or that enmity is only
wrong when it is violent. It does not say, with the emigrant to the desert, that you can
cop out and do your own thing unmolested. It is not concerned with the inner-worldly
emigration of the Pharisees, to refuse cooperation only at the point of personal
complicity. It does not promise, with the Herodians and Sadducees, that if enough
morally concerned people sign up to work for Dow, Du Pont, and General Motors, we
can beat the communists yet at feeding the world. All four of these classical strategies
have in common that they dodge the duty of beginning now, first, with the creation of
a new, voluntary, covenan
ting community in which the rejection of the Old is
accredited by the reality of the New which has already begun (Yoder 1997, 178-179).

The public face of this new, voluntary, covenan
ting community called the Church is described in

1 Peter 2:13-17 (RSV):

Beloved, I beseech you [all] as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the
flesh that wage war against your soul. Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so
that in case they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and
glorify God on the day of visitation. Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human
institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to
punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God’s will that
by doing right you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as free
people, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of
God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

This passage paints a picture of Rev. 21-22 in the making. Christian communities are “aliens and
exiles,” dispersed Jews who now seek the peace of new Babylons. Their captors might slander
and even persecute them, but they do so out of ignorance. While they are not named as God’s
agents for justice, they are still described as sent to punish evildoers and praise the righteous.

This is why the good works of Christians are effective: They defuse accusers and steer
authorities towards their eschatological end of bringing the nations’ glories into the city of God.
They teach governments to see resources for keeping the peace that rulers do not themselves
possess.

Peter does not envision Constantinian states that learn to glorify God before the day of
visitation. We might take this as a limitation on Scripture’s foreknowledge, a canonical oversight
that leaves us on our own to navigate Constantine’s brave new world. But we might also take this
as a future refused, unforeseen because it is would be an eschatological wrong turn. Today’s
faithful disciples will silence today’s pagan fools and move them to praise, but only at Christ’s return will the praise go to the Lord of these disciples.

Why not earlier? Let me count the ways we could arrive at our answer: The tenacity of sin. The King’s setting his servants in charge of only his household, commanding that they wait for his return. The sheer otherness of the Johannine Christ’s kingdom. The embarrassment of disciples trying to image their Lord with swords in their hands. The dilution of Christian distinctiveness when Christianity becomes an imperial religion either over or alongside others. The mixed results of seventeen centuries of Constantinianism. The taming of the Church under the social constraints of democratic pluralism. The intrinsic difference between consummation and all that must come beforehand (cf. Rev. 1:19).

Alien Citizens. Yoder follows Jeremiah over Constantine (Yoder 1997, 51-78), and it is hard to blame him if we restrict ourselves to these two alternatives. But these are not the only two towards which the New Testament Church points us.

Jesus, by living a representative, penitent, corrective life of Israel that ends in victory rather than exile, shows that Israel’s history is not ultimately failed history, but redeemed history. The New Testament appropriates every age of Israel’s history: the patriarchs (at Jesus’ annunciation and his calling of the Twelve), the exodus (in Jesus’ return from Egypt and his crucifixion and resurrection), Sinai (in the Sermon on the Mount and at Pentecost), wilderness wanderings (in Jesus’ temptations and Johannine crucifixion), Conquest of Palestine (in Jesus’ baptism and subsequent entry into the land as its restorer), Davidic Monarchy (in Jesus’ ministry, Triumphant Entry, and crucifixion), exile (in the Church’s dispersion and perhaps even in Jesus’ ascension), and Messianic Age (in the Kingdom present in Jesus and his Church and in the
promise of Jesus’ return). All of these chapters in Israel’s history are paradigmatic for Christians, especially the last.

In this spirit, the New Testament writers appeal to an astonishing variety of events in Israel’s history as types for the life of the Church:

1. In Matthew, wise men from the East pay homage at Jesus’ birth, fulfilling Isa. 60:6 and Ps. 72:10-11. Furthermore, Jesus’ disciples will be dragged before governors and kings, “as a testimony to them and to the nations” (Matt. 10:18).


3. In John (often read as apolitical because of all the spiritual language), Jesus is immediately proclaimed as king by the disciples (1:49). This is no spiritualization of the royal office: Crowds seek to make him king by force (6:15). Jesus goes along with their acclamation at the Triumphal Entry (12:13-15). He has overcome the world (16:33), whose rulers are judged (12:31, 16:11). Greeks come to him already, a sign of his glorification (12:20-23), and the narrator hints at Jesus’ going to the Diaspora and to the Greeks (7:35). His basileia is not ek tou kosmou toutou, which means only that its power is not military power (18:36). The crowds understand that Jesus’ rule sets them against Caesar’s and vice versa (19:12-15). Jesus is crucified as King of the Jews (19:19-20). Pilate names him such in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, announcing his worldwide royal authority, and not merely as an allegation, but as a fact (19:22).

4. In Acts, the Church’s birth at Pentecost is the beginning of God’s judgment of the nations and restoration of Israel (cf. Joel 3:1, “at that time…”). This theme followed through as
imprisoned evangelists are freed. Also in Acts, Paul is God’s chosen messenger “to carry my name before the nations and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15), to testify to “the hope of Israel” (28:20), fulfilling promises delivered to Isaiah.

5. In Romans and 1 Corinthians, the Church is experiencing the prophesied coming of the nations to the rescue of the current Jerusalem (Rom. 15, 1 Cor. 16).

6. In Galatians, Paul includes Gentiles and Jews alike in “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).

7. In Ephesians, Gentiles are no longer “strangers” and “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel,” but “fellow citizens” (Eph. 2:19), the tension between Jews and Gentiles having been resolved.

8. Hebrews, addressed apparently to Jewish Christians (1:1), leads by establishing Jesus' kingship (1:3, 1:8, 1:13). Jesus’ Moses-like ministry is directed to “God’s house” (3:3-5). Jeremiah 31’s new covenant is explicitly with the “house of Israel” (Heb. 8:8-10). God’s judgment over Israel is still held out (Deut. 32:35-36) in a way that refuses to spiritualize or depoliticize Israel (2:7-9). Furthermore, its readers “have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (12:22-23), meaning a Jerusalem that has already been rebuilt. Yet here Christians “have no lasting city” here, but “seek the city which is to come” (13:14).

9. For the writer of James, sounding like his namesake in Acts 15’s Council of Jerusalem, Christians in Palestine and Syria are “aliens in the land.”

10. In 1 Peter, as we have seen, (Jewish?) Christians abroad are “exiles of the Dispersion” (1 Pet. 1) and “aliens and exiles” (1 Pet. 2).

11. In Jude, the agape feasts of wayward ones participate in Cain’s and Balaam’s and Korah’s sins, fulfilling Enoch’s prophecy (11-16).
12. In Revelation, both the Church’s persecutions and a coming millennial respite (Rev. 18:21ff, 20:4-6) are evidence of God’s judgment on ancient Rome by the One already ruling the kings of the earth (1:5, echoing Isa. 55:4?), who “has made us a kingdom, priests” (1:6, echoing Ex. 19:6 and Isa. 61:6). These things signify the gathering of nations before the God of Israel (Rev. 7).

On grounds such as these, while we might dismiss Constantinianism as a rehearsal of Israel’s failure to honor God as King, we can never dismiss the Kingdom of David and Solomon as authoritative politics for the Church and the world. We are not just aliens and exiles. We are spiritual children of Jeremiah and Joseph and Daniel and Esther, and Moses and Joshua and David and Nehemiah (cf. Yoder 1997, 57), who live in the restored Israel of Jesus the King. The life of the Church participates in all the ages of the fulfilled history of Israel in which the nations and their kings come to Zion, even while it awaits their consummation.

In the face of this variety, Jeremiah and Constantine both look like impoverished types for Christian life. Constantinian eschatology is too optimistic, too realized. It leaves no room for the wilderness wanderings and captivities of Christian Israel. It believes authorities to have been transformed more thoroughly by the work of Christ than they turn out to be. It sees them as having already brought their treasures into the New Jerusalem. It calls new what it still of the old. By contrast, Jeremian eschatology is too pessimistic, too futurist. In fact, in light of the variety of New Testament imagery, it is a counter-Constantinian vision whose positions are still inordinately determined by rejected Constantinian categories. It leaves no room for the good news’ new conquests. It cannot accept friendly treaties between the eternal Davidic realm’s representatives and its temporal neighbors. Like the circumcision party of the first century, it refuses to consider the revolutionary transformations that bring the authorities of new nations
into Israel by entire households. It appreciates the conversion of Cornelius and his household (Acts 11:14), but steps back from appreciating the ramifications of that conversion for Cornelius as a God-fearing centurion. It is quiet about the likely impact of Paul’s evangelizing of the Praetorian Guard (Phil. 1:12-14) and his tantalizing near-success in converting Agrippa (Acts 26:28). It calls old what is in the process of becoming new.

What is becoming new is the whole world, and the heavens too: “Behold, I am making all things new,” says the one on the throne (Rev. 21:5). Richard Mouw thus improves upon Yoder’s “seek the peace of the city” with an exhortation from Hebrews to “seek the City which is to come” (Mouw 2001, 34-36, cf. Heb. 13:14). It is an odd image, seeking a place that is not yet here while we live in cities that cannot last. Yet it will be familiar to communities schooled to pray for a kingdom to come.

Cornelius’ Caesarea, “the capital of Palestine,” is one of those temporal cities where we can see God’s regime approaching its own political frontiers. (In the next section we will appeal to Syrian Antioch for a better appreciation of the approach on its cultural frontiers.) How is Cornelius different from Constantine? In his vision he receives the word, “Send to Joppa and bring Simon called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household” (Acts 11:13-14). This is a long way from the vision of Constantine the warrior, whose message is in hoc signo vinces, “By this sign you shall conquer.”

The concept of “treaties” between missionaries of Jesus the King and the kings of the nations might point forward helpfully beyond the alternatives of Constantinianism and counter-Constantinianism – or back unhelpfully to new forms of Constantinianism. Every new city and every new prospect for such a treaty calls for eschatological clarity, dovelike innocence, and serpentine wisdom (Matt. 10:16). There is in fact no tension between qualified Christian loyalty
to human communities, and unqualified Christian loyalty to God. But the faithful expression of those two loyalties cannot help but raise tensions that will only truly be resolved at the Last Day. Sooner or later, our communities’ powers will demand that we compromise our calling as an indispensable vessel of special grace. And we will inevitably offend them, if we remember who we really are.

We are brothers and sisters of Cornelius. Many of us serve in the midst of those powers by exercising our citizenship and wielding the influence we have gained in the public square. Yet we are free from captivity by those powers, because our real master is God. We are fellow citizens in what Ephesians calls the commonwealth of Israel. Our practices depend for their justification on only the regime headed by the one at the Father’s right hand. The victory of Jesus, the cornerstone whom the builders and everyone else rejected, proves that. We are sworn agents of the YHWH Administration. And if we are faithful, our civil, cultural, and economic authorities will see Jesus the King reigning in what we do, and then in what they do, and they will turn from rebellion to allegiance at his coming. Our deaths and resurrections are the beginning of theirs.

§5. Education as Mission: The Course as Sign of the Kingdom


The Place of Education. Where do you put a school? Sooner or later in the life of an educational institution, trustees face the choice of their “college town.” The very character of a school is at stake in that decision. My own institution, Westmont College, began humbly in fundamentalist Los Angeles in the thirties. We would have moved to Altadena but for residents’
objections. Instead we settled on an estate in beautiful and ultra-rich Montecito. Our location has marked us ever since.

All educators face these dilemmas, figuratively if not literally. What texts we adopt, how we structure class sessions and assignments, who happens to register, whom we admit, and even whether and how often we have class outside are matters of physical, social, and intellectual location.

Whole traditions of education are culturally located. David Kelsey describes two typical locations of education when he portrays current theological education as perched “between Athens and Berlin.” Athens is education as *paideia*, emphasizing moral training, while Berlin is education according to the agenda of the modern European research university, emphasizing the systematic acquisition and application of information.

Our commitments to these college towns have radically informed our goals and structures of education, and not just in theology. Athens and Berlin (and a few other college towns we can skip for simplicity) characterize western education at every level: primary through graduate; academic, professional, and vocational; secular and ecclesiastical; formal and informal; reactionary and radical. In all these contexts, education as intellectual progress creates programs for transmitting information gained through expertise, while education as moral development creates regimens for developing personal character and shared citizenship.

Is this the way it should be? Many Christian educators have thought so. For inspiration and guidance we have often looked to the catechetical past or the propositional present. While some have chosen one town over the other, others have tried to inhabit both. Kelsey’s own instinct for typologizing locks him into recommending no more than a troubled synthesis of the
two approaches: we should research like Germans and train like Greeks – have an east and west
campus, so to speak – despite the disjointedness that results (Kelsey 1993).

    Disjointedness does certainly result. Insoluble problems are built into curricula and
faculties bifurcated between theoretical and practical disciplines. Similar conflicts distinguish
schools of different types – liberal arts colleges and professional schools, for example. The
complementarities, tensions, and incompatibilities between Athens and Berlin have become ours
as well. Partisans take one side or the other, while Kelsey pursues the supposed via media of an
incoherent synthesis.

    Others refuse the whole dialectic. Following Michael Polanyi, Lesslie Newbigin shows
(1995b) that when we place theory over against practice or “integrate” the two in any way that
assumes a dichotomy between them, our education tells another gospel – a story other than the
good news of Jesus Christ. Sometimes that story is of a supranational academic community,
sometimes a western or world culture constructed from “great books,” sometimes a nation-state,
sometimes an abstracted humanity, sometimes a realized self, sometimes a tribal or corporate
identity. Sometimes it is a story that imagines it is no story at all. All these stories locate
education in the civics of an earthly rather than heavenly polis, in a politeia other than the
commonwealth of Israel (Eph. 2:12).

    Jerusalem, then, seems the theologically correct choice of college towns. Yet Christ was
crucified outside its gates, and we are to follow him there (Heb. 13:12-13). And our final campus
is yet to come in a heavenly city for which we still wait (Heb. 13:14). The new Jerusalem is, for
now, Utopia, and that is no place for a college.

    A better way envisions education – not just formal theological education, but all
education – as cross-cultural mission on behalf of the eschatological Kingdom of God that has
arrived and is still to come in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Against Athens and Berlin, Old
Jerusalem and New Jerusalem, I appeal to Syrian Antioch as our most promising college town
(Acts 11:19-26). Long ago a small group of anonymous Jewish refugees from Cyprus and
Cyrene traveled there, broke with the educational conventions of their day, and proclaimed their
nation’s risen and exalted King to Greeks. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great
number turned in belief to the Lord (Acts 11:19-21). They became the first to be called
“Christians,” receiving from their opponents a Greek name fitting for such a new people. They
also presented the young church with a wrenching cultural dilemma. The unexpected harvest
exposed the whole community to a searching critique from the Spirit that shook its catechetical
practices onto new and firm foundations. Antioch names not a school of thought, a method, nor a
cultural inheritance that must be preserved, but an eschatological location at which the old
creation meets the new in unpredictable encounters that leave all parties forever changed.

*Exchanging Emissaries.* In Antioch the instructor is not so much a premodern
pedagogue or modern expert as an eschatological *emissary* who brings an embodiment of the
gospel to audiences in the hope of furthering the reconciliation of all things under Christ’s
lordship. They meet in a forum – the *course* – where not the professor but the culture is the
*paidagogos* (Gal. 3:24, Gal. 4:2) and the Lord the true *didaskalos* (cf. Rom. 6:17). The course
topic and the students’ backgrounds are the guardians and disciplinarians. They have raised the
participants in such ways that they might meet and know the Teacher in this appointed event of
new creation. The course is a time when the Word is sown onto fallow (or hard) cultural soil and
cultivated in the hope that it might bring an ultimate harvest of embodied good news
(McClendon 2000, 59-63).
A course brings participants together for a season of exploring any and every academic field – not just Christian theology in its technical sense, but *whatever there is* (cf. McClendon 2000, 416) – in the hospitality of the Kingdom’s holy order of just relationships and mutual edification and in the conviction of Christ’s reconciling reign over all things. The whole project awaits, invites, and ponders manifestations of Christ’s future-present reign. It displays and inculturates the good news in specific practices of exploration. It invites guests to remain in the reign of God as it manifests itself there. It cultivates leaders among those who accept the invitation. It also challenges the emissaries themselves with the radical, unpredictable implications of any new sign of Christ’s unfolding reign throughout the cosmos.

Newbigin’s missiology is as helpful as James McClendon’s theology of culture in showing the eschatological, cross-cultural quality of education. For Newbigin, as for McClendon, mission is not a *tour de force* that makes others look like us either intellectually or ethically. Neither is it just a dialogue that affirms what we all look like already or splits the difference. Both imperialism and relativism are educational strategies that would leave us impervious to unwanted change, and that make humanity the measure of all things (cf. Reno 2002, 37-41). True education is not so violent and not so comfortable. Since mission understands *Christ* as the measure of all things, it submits all other agendas – even the teacher’s, even the students’, even the school’s – to the respect of Christ’s reign. It makes all parties vulnerable to change as that unfolding universal reign manifests itself. Newbigin looks to the High Priestly Prayer of the Gospel of John “an outline of the way in which we are to understand the witness of the church in relation to all the gifts that God has bestowed upon humankind” (Newbigin 1995a, 179). He says:

I do not suggest that the church go into the world as the body with nothing to receive and everything to give. Quite the contrary: the church has yet much to learn. This passage
suggests a Trinitarian model that will guide our thinking as we proceed. The Father is the giver of all things. They all belong rightly to the Son. It will be the work of the Spirit to guide the church through the course of history into the truth as a whole by taking all God’s manifold gifts given to all humankind and declaring their true meaning to the church as that which belongs to the Son. The end to which it all looks is “a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10) (Newbigin 1995a, 179).

Education facilitates this declaration and exchange of gifts. The educational authority is steward of both “the mystery of the gospel,” *i.e.,* the truth that all things belong to God in Jesus Christ, and of prior specific embodiments of that mystery: traditions of learning such as mathematics, history, engineering, music, athletics, theology, and so on. A course entrusts students with these resources – and, equally importantly, entrusts these resources to students. It does so in the hope that Christ’s ownership may be manifest, and that students, resources, and steward may all be transformed in the encounter.

Newbigin’s description of overt Church witness in the context of world religions applies by analogy to any faithful educational endeavor. Our knowledge as teachers is not our own but belongs to the crucified and risen Lord. We have it as treasure in earthen vessels. We proclaim its true value at every opportunity, while acknowledging that it can be known only by trust – an act Christians know as faith. We take on the mission of teaching despite its considerable risks. We risk mistaking ourselves for owners rather than mere stewards, and glorifying ourselves accordingly. We risk losing confidence in the ultimate significance of our trust, and settling for inaccuracy, sloth, and ignorance. We risk letting worries about misunderstanding and distortion get the better of us, ‘teaching’ petrified orthodoxy by rote rather than letting course content truly live and flourish in unfamiliar settings (Newbigin 1995a, 189).

Ecclesially, these temptations correspond to Catholic, liberal, and conservative Protestant tendencies as Newbigin describes them (Newbigin 1995b, 93ff). All are errors of eschatology and pneumatology. Newbigin’s concluding words apply as much to teachers as to any trustee:
The mystery of the gospel is not entrusted to the church to be buried in the ground. It is entrusted to the church to be risked in the change and interchange of the spiritual commerce of humanity. It belongs not to the church but to the one who is both head of the church and head of the cosmos. It is within his power and grace to bring to its full completion that long-hidden purpose, the secret of which has been entrusted to the church in order that it may become the open manifestation of the truth to all the nations (1995a, 189).

The danger to both the treasure and us is grave. But the gifts and the calling are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29).

**Cross-Transformation.** When we announce Christ’s reign in “Antioch” – in the presence of others who embody it less or differently or not at all – what happens is transformation. A course replicates the “three-cornered relationship” Newbigin sees in formal missions “between the traditional culture, the ‘Christianity’ of the missionary, and the Bible.” However alike students and teachers may imagine they are, education is still a mission across cultures. Bringing these three into contact sets the stage for “a complex and unpredictable evolution” in both cultures (Newbigin 1995a, 147). (Indeed, the Bible might evolve as well, as it is a tradition held by the two parties.) Newbigin calls the story of Cornelius’ conversion no less a conversion of the Church (1995a, 59). Likewise, through a fruitful course the teacher culture and what is taught might evolve even more profoundly than the student culture.

It is right that they evolve together. “Mission is not just church extension,” says Newbigin. “It is an action in which the Holy Spirit does new things, brings into being new obedience. But the new gifts are for the whole body and not just for the new members. Mission involves learning as well as teaching, receiving as well as giving” (Newbigin 1995a, 139). The eschatological character of mission judges teachers who command conformity to their agenda or attempt to replicate themselves in “disciples” who are really only clones. It also judges the ones whose systems of preserving and promoting prior student identity pass for education in pluralist
and multiculturalist America. Assimilation and self-realization are not Christian transformation. They amount to imperialism and relativism, not eschatological exchange.

When schools avoid these confusions, they offer treasures both new and old. Europe’s medieval universities offered much more than just assimilation or self-realization. McClendon chronicles their emergence as one of the Church’s gifts to the cultures it was helping create. This gift was one truly received. As a stadium generale, the convocation of students and faculty became an institution working alongside the Church and the state and having a life of its own (McClendon 2000, 391). Its ethical practices correlate with originating practices of Christian community: conflict resolution with the reconciling rule of Christ, inclusiveness with the hospitality of new peoplehood, economic leveling (at least in comparison with the wider culture) with eucharistic fellowship that shares what is most precious, acknowledgement of vocation with the interdependent corporate fullness of Christ, and provision for a voice for all with the rule of Paul in which all gifts and givers take their place. Its theological practices correlate as well: community servanthood with McClendon’s theological loci of the reign of God alone, honest and courageous inquiry with the knowable and known identity of God and God’s world, and corporate and personal unity with the new humanity of one perichoretic people of all peoples. Finally, its structural commitment to learn from others and spar with them reflects the long missionary conversation that shares and trusts the good news with any who might hear and respond (McClendon 2000, 402-412). Europe’s college towns were new Antiochs.

In some ways, they still are. It is not just Christian educators or even teachers of religion per se who embody God’s reign and invite others into it. Jesus already reigns in the agnostic’s math class, the secularist’s history department, and everywhere else. The Kingdom relates to
every redeemable form of life, and vice versa. Education as mission applies along the entire frontier between the new creation and the old.

Yet this eschatology is double-edged. In heaven’s genealogy yesterday’s children can become tomorrow’s outcasts, and vice versa (Mark 3:31-34). Having a historical tie to Christian mission, or even a formal one, is not the same as “abiding in him.” The light can die. Vital mission demands the very renewal it offers. In a course, teaching and giving come before learning and receiving. These priorities signify the priority of God’s operative grace to the nations’ cooperative grace, in the logic of election by which God chooses some to bless all (Newbigin 1995a, 66ff; Newbigin 1989, 80ff). The Spirit’s work is up to us teachers. So as missionaries we strive to create courses that will be signs of the Kingdom.

As this realization has sunk in over my brief teaching career, I have drawn more and more on ecclesiological, missiological, and cultural categories to develop ways of respecting a course’s signification of the Reign of God. There is no need to repeat them here; the specific tactics are less important than their efficacy in signifying the Reign of God over all things. I adopt them to further the goal of truly Christian education to transform all things under the lordship of the Spirit-Anointed Son.

**The Gift of Frustration.** Surprisingly, these tactics signify even when they fail pedagogically. This is consistent with education’s missionary character. I close by illustrating this point with some of the transformative moments that arrive over a typical semester.

At the outset I experience the intimidation of the challenge to structure a course in ways that respect and display the reality of the Kingdom, and often the exhilaration of believing I have met that challenge. I have chosen texts and topics to articulate the marvelous tradition that will be our common focus. I have developed assignments to challenge and form students in
potentially fruitful ways. I have introduced students into a community whose camaraderie reflects, however indirectly, that of the fellowship of saints. The first day of class is a wonder, full of potential and proleptic fulfillment.

A greater joy is seeing students catch on. We teachers should admit it: we live for those moments when our students discover what we have hoped and prayed to show them. They make even the grading worthwhile. (Well, almost.)

Yet the sign of greatest promise is actually neither of these. It is the long agony that begins in the early middle of each semester as my excitement crumbles into puzzlement, frustration, shock, and resolve to do better next time. While there is always blame to assign – unprepared, pressured, slothful, and overworked students; my own overambition, indiscipline, incoherence, and pedagogical dullness; texts that are obtuse, shallow, or both – some of my shock always remains unexplained.

Newbigin explains why this might be: What could be happening is an authentic pneumatic exchange across cultures, as students respond to what I have offered them in ways I could not have predicted. Teaching a course confronts me, the so-called expert, with the sovereign agency of the Holy Spirit as his reconciliation of all things in Christ reaches a new and perhaps stubborn frontier. In the mysterious teaching, reproof, rebuke, and training in righteousness that happen in my courses, God is giving me and my tradition a humiliating new chance to learn rather than just teach, to receive as well as give, to grow qualitatively as well as quantitatively.

Perhaps the greatest temptation that faces teachers is not to take those chances. If we seek to ensure success or inure ourselves to failure by being content with the past, we put ourselves on the wrong side of the eschaton, in the old city rather than outside its gates. But the more we
create conditions for the Spirit not just to affirm my students, me, and my own embodied
tradition, but also to correct us all, and the more open we all are to discerning and receiving those
lessons, the more truly educational our seasons together can be.

**Antioch’s Challenge.** Antioch is not a kind of education but a place where education
happens. That means *everywhere* is Antioch – even Athens, Berlin, Jerusalem, and Santa
Barbara. In this realm of every nation and a common king, no one pedagogical culture either
dominates or maintains its independence. Yet the world’s communities of discipline continue to
teach, train, and inform in ways whose relationships with that realm remain hidden – in fact,
which often seem more and more cryptic all the time. Some of these traditions have even learned
to expect disinterest or hostility from Christ’s disciples, rather than the Kingdom’s embrace. As
far as they are concerned, the Reign of God deserves its retreat into private values, social
servanthood, ancient superstitions, voluntarist ethics, religious affection, otherworldliness,
outmoded ignorance – or just the unknown and unwanted. Do we agree? Is Christ our common
Lord or not? Are we willing to find out? And if he is, are they *or* we ready to face the
consequences?