

FORMED FOR
FAITHFULNESS

*Why the Church Must Be Shaped
Again for a Post-Christian Age*

S. MICHAEL CRAVEN



COLSON CENTER

© 2026 by S. Michael Craven. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission from Colson Press, P.O. Box 62160, Colorado Springs, CO 80962.

www.colsoncenter.org

Unless otherwise identified, all Scripture quotations in this publication are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.
All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked ASV, ESV, ISV, MSG, NLT are from . . .

The American Standard Version, public domain.

The English Standard Version. © 2001 by Crossway Bibles,
a division of Good News Publishers.

The Holy Bible, International Standard Version™. © 2000 by the ISV Foundation, Santa Ana, CA. All rights reserved.

The Message by Eugene H. Peterson. © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000.
Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Holy Bible, New Living Translation. © 1996, 2004 by Tyndale Charitable Trust. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

PREFACE

I did not set out to write this booklet in response to a single event or cultural controversy. Rather, it has grown out of years of listening—listening that comes from my work as Dean of the Colson Fellows Program, where each year I have the privilege of walking alongside more than 1,700 faithful Christians. In conversations with pastors, lay leaders, parents, professionals, and students from across the country, I hear a common unease. They sense that something fundamental has shifted in our culture, and that the forms of Christianity that once seemed sufficient are no longer forming people capable of living faithfully in this moment.

These men and women love Christ deeply. They are not hostile to the faith, nor indifferent to the Church. Yet they feel disoriented. They struggle to understand how their Christian convictions relate to the pressures they face in their work, their communities, and their families. They wonder why the Church so often feels reactive rather than resilient, fragmented rather than grounded, anxious rather than hopeful.

I share that concern.

This booklet is not an attempt to offer quick fixes or clever strategies. It is not a call to political activism, nor a plea for retreat. It is, instead, a call to recovery—specifically, the recovery of a robust, formative Christianity rooted in the gospel of the Kingdom of God and the full biblical story.

For too long, we have been content with a faith that is sincere but thin, orthodox in confession but weak in formation. We have often treated Christianity as a set of beliefs to affirm rather than a way of life that shapes our loves, our imagination, and our understanding of reality itself. In doing so, we have unintentionally conceded vast territory to the surrounding culture, allowing other stories to form us more deeply than the one we claim to believe.

The central conviction of this booklet is simple: The crisis we face is not merely cultural or political, but spiritual and formational. The Church's task in such a moment is not to become louder or more anxious, but deeper—recovering the gospel in its fullness and intentionally forming disciples who can live faithfully under the reign of Christ.

History reminds us that renewal has come before in moments far darker and more chaotic than our own. Scripture assures us that God remains sovereign, faithful, and at work, even when the cultural ground beneath us shifts. The question is not whether God is able to renew His people, but whether we are willing to be formed—patiently, communally, and faithfully—by the truth He has revealed.

What follows is offered as a contribution to that work. My hope is that these reflections will help readers better understand the times in which we live, rediscover the coherence of the Christian story, and recover confidence in the Church's calling—not as a political force, but as a formed people bearing witness to the Kingdom of God.

If this booklet unsettles you at points, that is intentional. Formation often begins with discomfort. But it is my prayer that it ultimately leads not to despair, but to hope—hope grounded not in cultural outcomes, but in the faithfulness of God and the quiet power of a Church that knows who she is, Whose she is, and the story she inhabits.



Formed For Faithfulness:

Why the Church Must Be Shaped Again for a Post-Christian Age

I find myself, more often than I would like, having conversations with thoughtful, faithful Christians who are weary—sometimes deeply so. They look at our cultural moment and confess, often with a sigh, that they feel discouraged, even disheartened. And I understand why. Over the last fifty years, the moral and spiritual landscape of our nation has changed dramatically. What was once broadly shaped—however imperfectly—by Christian convictions now seems almost unrecognizable.

Christianity has not disappeared, of course. Churches still gather. Christian language is still spoken. But it is increasingly clear that the faith no longer carries much cultural weight. Christianity remains present, yet strangely absent—visible but ineffective, tolerated but easily ignored. And that should give us pause.

What troubles me most is not cultural hostility from the outside, but confusion within the Church herself. Too often, we have accepted a privatized faith—one that concerns personal salvation and individual morality, but says very little about the nature of reality, the ordering of our loves, or the shape of the good life. We have learned to speak of Jesus as Savior, but not always as King. We have preached forgiveness of sins, but neglected formation into holiness. We have emphasized belief, but not discipleship.

Many Americans still identify as Christian, but that identification often functions as a thin cultural label rather than a comprehensive way of life. It is entirely possible—indeed increasingly common—to profess Christian faith while being formed almost entirely by the assumptions of a secular age. In such cases, Christianity becomes an addendum to our lives rather than the story that gives our lives coherence and meaning.

A CRISIS OF FORMATION

This helps explain why Christianity has been so easily marginalized in the public square. A faith that has been reduced to private sentiment or therapeutic comfort cannot sustain public witness. A gospel that speaks only to the afterlife has little to say about how we live now. And a Church that does not intentionally form its people will inevitably see them formed by something else—whether by the market, the state, technology, or ideology.

The cultural unraveling we are witnessing—confusion about human identity, the erosion of moral limits, the redefinition of life and dignity—is not merely the result of bad ideas “out there.” It is also the consequence of a Church that, for too long, has failed to offer a robust vision of reality rooted in the full biblical story.

Despair, then, is understandable. But it is not inevitable.

LEARNING TO READ HISTORY—AND SCRIPTURE—FAITHFULLY

Scripture teaches us to see history not as a straight line of inevitable progress or decline, but as a story shaped by God's providence. The biblical narrative reveals a recurring pattern: blessing gives way to complacency; complacency to unfaithfulness; unfaithfulness to judgment; and judgment, by God's mercy, to repentance and renewal.

At the heart of this pattern is a simple truth: When God's people forget who they are and the story they inhabit, they lose their distinctiveness. When they recover that story—when they return to faithfulness—renewal follows, often in ways that exceed human expectation.

————— *Church history confirms this pattern.*

WHEN “REAL CHRISTIANITY” IS LOST

Late eighteenth-century Britain offers a sobering example. Despite its Christian heritage, the nation had sunk into deep moral and social decay. Widespread cruelty, exploitation, and injustice flourished alongside outward religious forms. Churches existed, religious language remained, but the faith had lost its power to shape lives and restrain evil.

William Wilberforce diagnosed the problem with remarkable clarity. Britain had not rejected Christianity outright; it had simply lost what Wilberforce described as “real Christianity.” According to Wilberforce, the Christian faith had been reduced to ideas and customs, stripped of its moral seriousness and formative power. Christians knew certain doctrines but had little sense of how those truths ordered life, shaped character, or demanded love of neighbor.

————— *That diagnosis sounds uncomfortably familiar.*

RENEWAL THROUGH FORMATION, NOT FORCE

What followed was not a political awakening first, but a spiritual one. Through the evangelical revival, men and women were re-formed by the gospel—not merely converted in belief, but reshaped in imagination, desire, and practice. Faith became public again, not through coercion, but through embodied witness.

Wilberforce's long struggle against the slave trade was sustained by this deeper formation. He understood his work not as a political project detached from faith, but as a natural expression of the gospel's moral vision. He labored faithfully for decades, often without success, because his hope rested not in outcomes but in obedience.

The abolition of slavery was only one fruit of this renewal. What followed was a broad reformation of British society—care for the poor, reform of prisons, education, missionary expansion, and the creation of institutions shaped by a Christian understanding of human dignity and responsibility. A nation was changed because a people had been formed.

RECOVERING THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

————— *This brings us to our own moment—and to the heart of the matter.*

The answer to our cultural crisis is not withdrawal, nor nostalgia, nor the pursuit of power for its own sake. It is the recovery of the gospel in its fullness—the gospel of the Kingdom of God. This is the announcement that Jesus Christ is not merely Savior of souls, but Lord of all creation; that God's reign has broken into history; and that we are called to live now as citizens of that Kingdom.

This gospel situates us within the full biblical story: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. It tells us who God is, who we are, what has gone wrong, and where history is headed. Most importantly, it forms us—shaping our loves, disciplining our desires, and training us to live faithfully in the midst of a broken world.

Christian formation is not optional. It is the Church's central task. Without it, belief becomes brittle, morality collapses into sentiment, and hope fades under cultural pressure. With it, even small communities of faithful Christians can bear extraordinary witness.

WHY I STILL HAVE HOPE

I do not underestimate the seriousness of our moment. But I also do not believe it lies beyond God's redemptive purposes. History proves otherwise. Scripture insists otherwise.

Hope, for the Christian, is not optimism about trends or confidence in institutions. It is confidence in the faithfulness of God—and in His habit of renewing the world through a people who know who they are, Whose they are, and the story they inhabit.

If renewal comes again—and I believe it may—it will come through the recovery of real Christianity: a faith that forms the whole person, orders the whole of life, and bears public witness to the reign of Christ.

That kind of faith has changed the world before.

And by God's grace, it may yet do so again.

A CONCRETE EXPRESSION OF FORMATION

If what we are facing is truly a crisis of formation—and I believe it is—then the Church's response must move beyond diagnosis to deliberate, patient action. Good intentions alone will not suffice. Occasional sermons, isolated Bible studies, or Christian content consumed piecemeal cannot bear the full weight of forming believers to live faithfully in a complex, post-Christian culture. These things are good and necessary, but by themselves they are not enough.

From the beginning, the Church has understood that Christian formation is not merely about the transfer of information, but about the shaping of a people. Faithfulness is learned over time, as men and women are formed by the Word of God—read, taught, prayed, and lived out—within a community committed to shared practices and mutual accountability. Scripture does not merely inform the mind; it trains the heart, orders the loves, and directs the life.

The Bible itself assumes this kind of formation. God's people are told to meditate on His Word day and night (Psalm 1:2), to let it dwell richly among them (Colossians 3:16), and to be shaped by its continual rehearsal. Truth takes root not only through explanation, but through repetition—through hearing, remembering, practicing, and obeying.

Over time, these rhythms do their quiet work. They shape how believers pray, how they repent, how they love their neighbors, how they endure suffering, and how they remain faithful when obedience is costly. Formation happens as Scripture moves from being something we study occasionally to something that inhabits us deeply.

Over the years, I have become increasingly convinced that one of the Church's most urgent needs today is to recover this formative vision of discipleship. We must help serious, thoughtful Christians see how the gospel speaks to the whole of life—not only to personal belief or private morality, but to our work, our families, our cultural engagement, and our public witness as ambassadors of Christ.

We need men and women who understand not only what they believe, but why they believe it; whose faith has been shaped deeply enough by Scripture and practice that it can withstand the pressures of a fragmented and often hostile culture. In short, we need Christians who are not merely informed or inspired, but formed—formed by the Word of God, within the community of faith, for the sake of the world.

This conviction lies at the heart of the Colson Fellows Program.

WHY THE COLSON FELLOWS PROGRAM EXISTS

The Colson Fellows Program was created to address precisely the kind of moment we now inhabit. It is not a political training ground, nor an academic exercise, nor a retreat into nostalgia. It is a formational program—one that takes seriously the task of shaping Christian imagination, conviction, and vocation in light of the gospel of the Kingdom.

At its core, the program seeks to help participants recover the coherence of the biblical story—Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration—and to understand how that story makes sense of the world, the only Story that offers the true interpretation of reality. Participants are invited to wrestle with Scripture, theology, philosophy, history, and contemporary cultural challenges, not as detached observers, but as disciples seeking faithfulness.

Just as importantly, the program is intentionally communal. Formation does not happen in isolation. It happens as believers learn together, pray together, and sharpen one another in the context of shared pursuit of truth. In an age marked by fragmentation and individualism, this kind of community is itself a countercultural witness.

FROM KNOWING TO BEING

One of the great temptations for thoughtful Christians is to mistake knowledge for formation. The Colson Fellows Program resists this by insisting that what we know must shape who we are—and how we live. The goal is not merely to produce well-informed Christians, but well-formed ones.

Participants are challenged to examine their own assumptions, habits, and loves. They are encouraged to see their work, their relationships, their civic responsibilities, and their cultural engagement as arenas of discipleship. Faith is no longer confined to the private sphere, nor reduced to abstract belief. It becomes a lived allegiance to Christ the King.

In this sense, the program echoes what we see in moments of renewal throughout church history. Wilberforce and his contemporaries were not formed overnight. They were shaped by Scripture, prayer, disciplined reflection, and mutual accountability. Their public faithfulness flowed from deep internal formation.

FAITHFULNESS FOR THIS MOMENT

We often ask whether the Church can still make a difference in a culture such as ours. History suggests that the better question is whether the Church is willing to be faithful. God has always worked through a remnant—through men and women who take their calling seriously, who resist accommodation, and who live as ambassadors of another Kingdom.

The Colson Fellows Program exists to serve that purpose. It is one modest but meaningful way of equipping Christians to live with clarity, confidence, and courage—not because the times are easy, but because the gospel is true.

My hope is not simply that people will enroll in a program. My hope is that the Church will once again take formation seriously—that pastors, lay leaders, professionals, parents, and students will commit themselves to being shaped by the mind of Christ so they can resist and refute the spirit of this age.

AN INVITATION

If you find yourself unsettled by the cultural moment—if you sense that something more is required than private faith or borrowed convictions—I would encourage you to consider whether God is inviting you into deeper formation. Not for your own sake alone, but for the sake of the Church and the neighbors God has placed in your care.

The future of Christian witness will not be secured by volume or visibility, but by depth. By men and women who know the story they belong to, who understand the times, and who live faithfully under the reign of Christ.

That is the kind of hope worth investing in.

And by God's grace, it is still very much within reach.

© 2026 by S. Michael Craven

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. Michael Craven is the Vice President and Dean of the Colson Fellowship, the Colson Center's flagship program for the study of public theology and Christian worldview.

FORMED FOR
FAITHFULNESS

