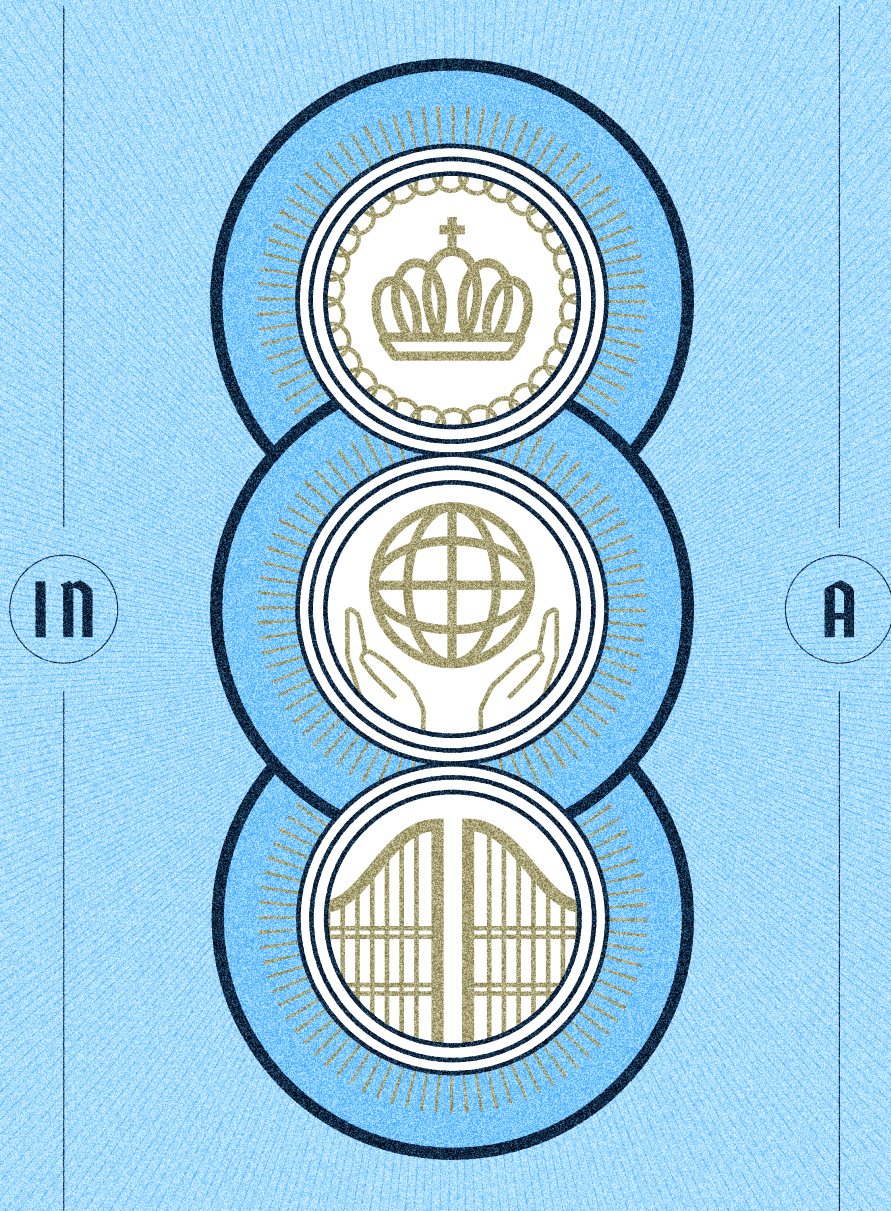


BEING THE CHURCH



POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE

BY S. MICHAEL CRAVEN



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We live in deeply troubled times, and the tendency may be [and it seems has been] to withdraw in the face of overwhelming forces opposing the Gospel. However, retreat is not an option the Lord has given to us. God, in His providence, has placed you and me in this very place, in this very time, and the call of Jesus Christ remains *Follow Me!* This is our only option and should be our only desire if we love Him. The last several decades have seen numerous efforts on the part of Christian activists to reverse these deleterious trends, but such efforts have, in the end, accomplished very little.

We have, no doubt, seen some significant victories on the legal and political fronts. The Supreme Court's decision, for example, in 2022, which overturned *Roe v. Wade*, seemed to herald a reversal in the decades-long culture war for the life of the unborn. This was encouraging to be sure until it wasn't! The fact is, the number of abortions has increased in the years hence (Issac Maddow-Zimet and Candace Gibson, "Despite Bans, Number of Abortions in the U.S. Increased in 2023," Guttmacher Institute, March 2024). And public support for abortion shows no signs of waning, while recent revisions to the Republican Party's Platform reveal where the trend is heading. We still live in a culture in which 63% of our society believes abortion should be legal in all or most cases (Pew Research, "Public Opinion on Abortion," May 13, 2024).

Suffice it to say, as long as the debate over this, and other *cultural* issues, remains confined to the political arena, there can be no real change in the underlying philosophical assumptions that gave rise to these changes to begin with. If our cultural institutions and social structures continue to rest upon the pagan/secular worldviews, we will never see sweeping social and cultural change such as those that transformed Rome in the wake of the early Church. In addition, the next generation—including many professing Christians—remains largely under the influence of this same secular philosophical consensus, having been catechized by an almost overpowering culture. Our failure to recognize this is, I think in large part, attributable to the legacy of Christendom, and the remedy is for the Church in America to both understand the present post-Christendom cultural context and recover an accurate understanding of its mission considering that reality.



THE LEGACY OF CHRISTENDOM

In granting the Christian Church special favors and privileges in the fourth century, the Roman Emperor Constantine ushered in the era of the church-state partnership that would profoundly shape European society and culture for centuries to come. As the protected and privileged religion of society, Christianity would come to achieve unrivaled cultural dominance. The resulting cultures in Europe and later in North America became known as Christendom. Even though the legal structures of Christendom were removed in North America (*i.e.*, the separation from the state), the legacy of this Constantinian system remained by means of powerful traditions, attitudes and social structures that could be described as “functional Christendom.”

In the age of Christendom, Christianity occupied a central and influential place in society, and the Western world considered itself both formally and officially Christian. So, when we speak of post-Christendom, we are making the point that Christianity no longer occupies this central place of social and cultural hegemony, and Western civilization no longer considers itself to be formally or officially Christian. This represents a monumental shift in the cultural context into which the Western, and specifically American, church is now attempting to carry out its mission. This raises two fundamental questions: What does this new cultural context mean for the Church and its mission? And what exactly is the Church’s mission?

To the first point, many American Christians still rest on the assumptions of Christendom, meaning they believe that Christianity still occupies a central and influential place in society, when this is simply no longer true. A brief survey of American culture should quickly and thoroughly convince anyone that Christianity, and specifically the Christian worldview, is no longer the central informing influence. Every culture forming institution from academia, media, the Arts, business, and government is convincingly secularized. Religion in general and Christianity in particular are excluded from the public square. At best, Christianity has become a marginalized way of thinking that is largely relegated to the elderly and so-called uneducated. In other words, Christianity is regarded as being irrelevant when it comes to having anything meaningful to offer relative to “non-religious” matters. At worst, Christianity is increasingly regarded as dangerous or harmful. As one writer declared, “That religion, specifically the

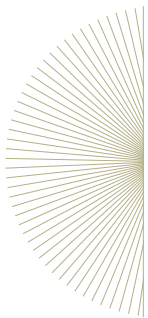


dominant brand of conservative Christianity in the U.S., is the force most responsible for tearing the country apart” (Brynn Tannehill, *Dame Magazine*, September 29, 2021).

CHRISTENDOM AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The prior reality of Christendom eventually led to what could be described as a church-centered or *ecclesio-centric* view of its mission. Since Christianity was now the dominant religion, the emphasis or mission of the church gradually became centered on recruiting “members” through evangelism, as its social and cultural authority was firmly established. However, I would argue that this does not fully represent the mission of the Church as God’s sent people. Furthermore, it tends to disregard our post-Christendom reality. Christendom, it seems, inevitably led to a view of “missions” as a *program* of the church while its *de facto* mission became centered on the institutional maintenance of the church.

In the *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, the authors offer critical insight into the problem. Written in response to research inaugurated by the *Gospel and Our Culture Network*, a diverse team of Evangelical theologians writes:



We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. “Mission” means “sending,” and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God in human history.... We have begun to learn that the biblical message is more radical, more inclusive, more transforming than we have allowed it to be.... We have begun to see that the church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness. God’s mission embraces all of creation.

Using this definition, the authors point out that “neither the structures nor the theology of our established Western traditional churches is missional. They are shaped by the legacy of Christendom,” and given the fact that the present cultural context is increasingly resistant to “member recruitment,” the American church is scrambling to define its mission. Many churches describe themselves as “missional,” but this is often nothing more than a new way



of speaking about evangelism while still operating under the assumptions of Christendom. It neither fully considers our post-Christian, much less anti-Christian, cultural context or includes the advent of God's healing reign over all of creation.

Because so many churches still labor under the illusion of Christendom, their response to this loss of cultural relevance and missional ineffectiveness often ends up being somewhat misguided. "The typical North American response to our situation is to analyze the problem and find a solution. These solutions tend to be methodological. Arrange all the components of the church landscape differently, and many assume that the problem can be solved. Or use the best demographic or psychological or sociological insights, and one can redesign the church for success in our changing context" (*Missional Church*, p. 2). This inevitably results in the church trying to look like the world to be to be *relevant* when what is needed is a thoroughly biblical understanding and courageous expression of the Truth that is relevant to what the world really needs to know: Christ is Lord!

The latter requires that the Church better understand the cultural context, dominant ideas, and worldviews shaping our culture. These worldviews, which purport to offer an all-embracing life system, must be met with a Christianity that offers an "equally comprehensive and far-reaching power" in the words of Abraham Kuyper. It is, in large part, the Church's present inability to both recognize the changing cultural context and to assert an all-encompassing view of the Christian faith and message that has rendered it irrelevant and left it confused about its purpose and mission. The American church must begin to see itself as existing within a "foreign" land, and like foreign missionaries, properly contextualize its mission and faithfully proclaim and demonstrate God's message.

REDISCOVERING THE GOSPEL

Up to this point, I have addressed the changing *cultural context* in which the contemporary American church finds itself by contrasting historic Christendom with today's post-Christian culture. I pointed out that despite its obvious eclipse, the American church still finds itself, largely speaking, operating under the old assumptions of Christendom. Meaning, that we continue to function as if Christianity still serves as the consensus view of truth and reality.



These assumptions have maintained the Constantinian or church-centered understanding of mission. Under the institutionalized church-centric model, the Church's *de facto* mission was focused mostly on recruiting "members" through evangelism while "mission" was thought of as a *program* of the church. The goal or *mission* eventually settled on the "institutional maintenance" of the local church, whose success or failure was inevitably, and I dare say exclusively, measured by the number of members. However, as I pointed out earlier, "the church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, *but rather its instrument and witness.*"

This brings us to our next question: What exactly is the Church's mission? To answer this question, we must first accurately define the gospel or "good news." I say accurately because I think many Christians, particularly in our highly individualized culture, have come to view the gospel as simply the personal plan of salvation. The modern emphasis tends toward "fixing the sin problem" in terms that are entirely personal. However, the Scriptures speak in a much more comprehensive way that goes beyond the private version of the gospel that we have come to know in the West.

Matthew records the beginning of Jesus' ministry and message with these words, "Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for *the kingdom of heaven* is at hand'" (Matt. 4:17). In Matthew 24:14 Jesus himself describes the gospel in relation to "the kingdom" when he says, "And this *gospel of the kingdom* will be preached in all the world..." Matthew describes Jesus' ministry as follows: "And Jesus went about all Galilee ... preaching the *gospel of the kingdom*..." (4:23). Matthew reiterates this theme again in chapter 9 verse 35 when he writes, "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages ... preaching the *gospel of the kingdom*..." Jesus told his disciples to "preach, saying, '*The kingdom of heaven* is at hand'" (Matt 10:7). Mark writes, "after John [the Baptist] was put in prison, Jesus came ... preaching the *gospel of the kingdom of God*" (1:14). Philip "preached the things concerning *the kingdom of God* and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12). Paul and Barnabas encouraged new believers to "continue in the faith ... saying 'We must through many tribulations enter *the kingdom of God*'" (14:22). Paul appeared in the synagogue in Ephesus "reasoning and persuading concerning the things of *the kingdom of God*" (19:8). Paul, writing about his own ministry said, "I have gone preaching *the kingdom of God*" (20:25). While under house arrest, Paul received many visitors to whom he "testified of *the kingdom of God*, persuading them concerning Jesus..." (28:23, 31). (Emphasis mine; NKJV.)



In fact, the New Testament record reveals that Jesus mentions the kingdom 108 times while only mentioning being born again once. This single occurrence took place during his conversation with Nicodemus when he was explaining the spiritual transformation that must occur to see the kingdom of God.

As Norman Perrin points out in his book *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, "The central aspect of the teaching of Jesus was that concerning the Kingdom of God. Of this there can be no doubt.... Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the Kingdom; all else in his message and ministry serves a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it."

THE IN-BREAKING REIGN OF GOD

By his own words and the testimony of the apostles, Jesus was preaching the good news that through him God's reign has come. The gospel or good news is the fact that in Christ the reign of God is at hand and is now breaking into the world. His kingdom, which has come, continues to come forth and will be fully consummated on the day of Christ's return. This is the good news, which offers both a future and present hope to sinners and the whole of God's creation!

This may raise more questions than it answers, most notably, "What is the kingdom or reign of God?" While a definitive answer to this question is not given in Scripture, we are given insight through the teachings of Jesus. First, Jesus makes clear that the kingdom has come; when speaking to the Pharisees he said "...the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28 NKJV). Again, the commission given to the apostles was to preach that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 10:7 NKJV). This statement is taken to mean that the kingdom of the Messiah, who is the Lord, is now being set up according to the Scriptures.

Throughout the parables, Jesus uses the preface, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." to describe the character and nature of God's ruling reign, which offers a sign and foretaste of the world to come. The Old Testament's prophetic forecast of the coming day of God envisions a world characterized by peace, justice, and celebration in which the full prosperity of the people of God living under the covenant of God's demanding care and compassionate rule is realized. The picture given is one of a world full of peace grounded in justice.



In Jesus' very first sermon, recorded by Luke, he enters the synagogue in Nazareth where he had been raised and, taking the book of Isaiah, quotes the following passage:



The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19 ESV).

Upon conclusion he closes the book, sits down, and when every eye is "fixed on Him" he says, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21 NKJV). Jesus is describing the kingdom of God in which *all* that has resulted from sin and the fall is being restored. The call upon humanity is to *repent* of their sins, submit to the Lordship of Christ, and thereby *enter* the kingdom and be saved.

It is the reign of God—this full gospel—that the Church is sent into the world to bring forth by God's grace and as God's instrument, and to which it bears witness in its life and community. The reign of God applies to the whole of creation, including society and culture, in which the Church *demonstrates* life under the rule and reign of God within a distinct community, *serves* the world through compassion and mercy, and *proclaims* the risen Christ as the only means by which one may enter the kingdom of God.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S MISSION?

If the ecclesio-centric view of the Church's mission tends to focus on the building and maintenance of the church, then a proper theocentric view rightly focuses the Church on the mission of God or *missio Dei*.

For the Church to be a relevant instrument and faithful witness of the gospel, especially in the wake of Christendom's collapse, we must recover this God-centered understanding of the Church's mission. The "mission" of the Church is not reducible to simply maintaining the institutional church; it is not a program of the church, and it is not an activity that only occurs on foreign fields. The Church is a body of people who are *called* together and *sent* by God



into the world to represent His rule and reign: the kingdom of God. The Church exists for the mission of God and not for itself!

My friend and former pastor of *Church of the King* in Corpus Christi, Dave Lescalleet described the in-breaking reign of God well when he said:



There is a great conversation in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings where Samwise is talking to Gandalf, and he asks Gandalf a great question: "Will everything sad come untrue?" The Kingdom message is that Christ (because of his death and resurrection) is setting things right again—making everything sad come untrue.

The Church bears witness to the in-breaking rule and reign of God and serves as the instrument by which God is making "everything sad come untrue." There is an optimism that should naturally flow from the perspective that "our God reigns." (cf. Isaiah 52:7) Sadly, this optimism is, in my estimation, largely missing from the Evangelical church in America. Many Christians seem to live and think as if Christ has been overcome by the world rather than vice versa (cf. John 16:33). Or that the gates of hell do indeed prevail against the Church. By recovering the biblical mission of the Church as participation in God's unrelenting reign; we can, once again, be a people who live as more than those who are simply surviving!

REPRESENTING GOD'S REIGN

So, understanding that the Church is *not* the kingdom of God but rather its ambassador, how does the Church represent the mission of God in the world? The biblical narrative outlines a three-fold approach. One, the Church *demonstrates* the rule and reign of God within a distinct community; two, the Church serves the world by doing justice and meeting human needs through compassion and mercy thereby setting right what sin has set wrong, and three; the Church *proclaims* the message of the risen Christ as the only means by which one may enter the kingdom of God.



DEMONSTRATING GOD'S REIGN

Given that “service” and “proclamation” are self-explanatory, I want to focus on what I believe is both the Church’s greatest weakness and her greatest opportunity: *Demonstrating* the rule and reign of God within a distinct community. Because as George Hunsberger put it, “Before the church is called to do or say anything, it is called and sent to be a unique community of those who live under the reign of God.” In a radically individualistic America, this may be the Church’s greatest obstacle to the *missio Dei*.

Jesus’ invitation is to “enter the kingdom of God.” Practically, this means that we are saved out of our individual isolation and alienation and into the community of faith. Recall that the Great Commission given by Jesus was to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matt. 28:19). Jesus is stressing the conversion of individuals through relationships (*i.e.* make disciples) followed by their being joined to the Body of Christ through baptism. There is a “corporateness” to the kingdom message.

Paul stresses that the Gentiles who were once alienated from “the commonwealth of Israel” (God’s covenant people) have been brought near “by the blood of Christ” that “he might create in himself one new man (or humanity) in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross” (Eph. 2:12, 13, 15). There is a corporate sense to God’s redemptive plan that carries forward from national Israel to form a new covenant people (the Church) out of both the Jew and Gentile into the new Israel.

At the conclusion of chapter two Paul writes, “Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:20-22). Again, the emphasis is on the corporate nature of God’s redemptive plan.

One commentator writes: “The last verse...reminds the readers of the enormous privilege that they are part of this whole construction. They are incorporated in the building, the one universal Church, which God makes his dwelling by the Spirit. And they are incorporated in it



precisely by union with Christ, in whom all things are being brought into the cosmic harmony and peace enabled by reconciliation inaugurated at the cross.”

This community is not merely the social gathering of a people with common values but rather a people who display proof of God’s redemptive kingdom and work in the world. This “proof” flows forth from converted individuals whose transformation is authenticated first through their interaction with each other. This community, the Church, is intended to bear testimony to the restoration of fellowship with God and each other—a community of self-sacrificial love and support that stands in stark contrast to the fallen world. Jesus himself established this as the authenticating fact of our faith when he said, “By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Was this not the preeminent testimony of the early church in which “they had all things in common?”

UNDERMINING AUTHENTICATING COMMUNITY

As Americans, we enter the church with overpowering individualistic inclinations. We come with and cling to “expectations” and demands that are centered on ourselves. We want people to talk to us, but we are often unwilling to talk to strangers. We have a myriad of personal preferences that we impose on the church about worship styles, music, and the like. We grade the pastor on whether he has met *our* needs through his sermon. And we certainly are not interested in anyone *gettin’ in our business!* We do not humbly submit to one another. We argue and divide over inconsequential issues. We attack those outside our theological traditions, and we rarely listen to those with whom we disagree. Often our attitudes and actions toward each other are shameful and bring disgrace on the name of Christ.

We often fail to fulfill this essential part of God’s mission because we do not understand to what we are called to bear witness or how to demonstrate what life looks like under the rule and reign of God within this authenticating community. If we do not get this right, our *service* will remain indistinguishable from any other and our *proclamation* of the risen Christ will appear shallow and without basis. If we want to be faithful witnesses to the King who has come and is coming again; we must repent of our self-centered individualism that thwarts the authenticating community of God’s people and humbly love and submit to one another. Make it so, Lord!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. Michael Craven is the Vice President & Dean of the Colson Fellowship at the Colson Center for Christian Worldview where he serves as the chief executive and architect of the Colson Fellows program—the Colson Center’s flagship program for the study of public theology and Christian worldview.

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