

On Serving God in Our Generation¹

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Abstract

How are Christians to serve Christ at this point in history? We approach the question from the perspective of faith in a sovereign God, not in pessimism or defeatism. While activity is required, God's chief concern is with being rather than doing. We ask first, "Who are we?" Identity is not self-generated but given by God. Christians are Christlike people—redeemed, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, loving, and holy. They are also a covenant community—united with the Triune God and with one another. We then ask, "What should we be doing?" After repenting of our failures, we are, according to our particular callings and contexts, sent to preach the Word, spread the gospel, engage with society, and endure persecution.

Both inside and outside the church a confusing cacophony of voices offers advice regarding what we ought to be doing in our generation. The recommendations range from the distinctly spiritual through what may appear to be baptized versions of secular programs to, at the opposite end of the spectrum, an abandonment of spiritual concerns in favor of pursuing this-worldly

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betterment for the human race, or perhaps the entire planet. While many options can be summarily dismissed, there remains considerable room for disagreement among those equally committed to the authority of Scripture. Recent debates between proponents of a “Two Kingdom” theology and advocates of a “transformational” perspective are but one example of this diversity.²

Such a situation underlines the need for men and women like those from Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:32, “men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (ESV). It is evident from the context that these are not men distinguished primarily for their political or sociological insight nor, in our contemporary context, men with facility in technology or social media. There is a place for such endowments, but what is surely of greatest significance is the spiritual insight of the men of Issachar, rooted in “the fear of the Lord [which] is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps 111:10). If we are to understand how to serve God in our generation, our foundation must be the fear of the Lord, nurtured by engagement with his self-revelation in Scripture.

Despite the complexity of the circumstances in which we are called to serve God and what appears to be an increasingly overt opposition to the Christian faith in our society, we do not undertake this task in a pessimistic spirit. We are serving a God who remains sovereign over all things and in whose Word we have a unique and authoritative revelation, a “God-breathed” revelation (2 Tim 3:16).

Our first inclination may well be to think of what we should be *doing*—proclaiming the gospel, planting churches, caring for the poor and oppressed, and, perhaps, a multitude of other activities. That, however, would be indicative of the activism that often characterizes evangelicals. Biblical priorities are strikingly different. While activity is required, God’s chief concern is with *being* rather than doing. Jesus’s condemnation of the Pharisees in Mark 7:6–7 is significant in this regard. By any standard, the Pharisees were doers, trying to fulfill all the demands of God’s law and also their own traditions. There was no shortage of activity, yet the Lord exposed their fundamental shortcoming, quoting Isaiah 29:13, saying, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” The key issue is the “heart”—the inner core of a person’s *being*, which then manifests itself in his *doing*.

² See, for example, David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), and Ryan C McIlhenny, ed., *Kingdoms Apart: Engaging in the Two Kingdoms Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012).

I. *Who Are We?*

Issues of identity are currently being hotly debated in Western societies. Who has the right to determine my identity? The answer offered by many is that ultimately, I alone determine my identity. This trend is evident in discussions of sexuality, including homosexuality and transgenderism. Increasingly individuals are claiming the right to self-identify in any way they choose, regardless of their biology. If someone is biologically, genetically male but wishes to self-identify as female, then society must do everything necessary for the acceptance of that identity. Thus, Facebook offers “male,” “female” and seventy-one other options for gender identity.

After noting some of these examples, Vaughan Roberts comments,

Although most people would feel that these self-identifications have gone too far, there is still an uneasiness about challenging any individual’s chosen self-expression. There’s a deeply rooted conviction that everyone is free to define themselves as they wish, and no-one has the right to question that self-definition.³

Such assertions of independence are, of course, nothing new, the first occurrence being in the garden of Eden. One of the factors that contributes to contemporary confusion is the rapid development of the digital technology that has in turn fueled the growth in social media activity. Having noted that the question of identity is as old as humanity, Ed Brooks and Pete Nicholas, writing in *Virtually Human*, go on to comment,

But it is pressed on us in a particular way in a virtual environment where attaching images, ideas, experiences and preferences to our personal icon effectively defines who we are.⁴

The apparent freedom that people have to define themselves is nevertheless an illusion, as Adam and Eve discovered almost as soon as they had rebelled. Their “self-defined” freedom left them cowering behind a tree, trying to hide from the sentence of their Creator and Judge. The pattern is endlessly repeated in human experience. Even in the supposed freedom of the digital world, electronic media are now seen to shape their users far more than the users realize, and in the end, the technology becomes an idol. As Tim Challies notes,

³ Vaughan Roberts, *Transgender* (Purcellville, VA: Good Book, 2016), 30.

⁴ Ed Brooks and Pete Nicholas, *Virtually Human: Flourishing in a Digital World* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 78.

There are always spiritual realities linked to our use of technology. We know that there is often a link between our use of technology and idolatry, that our idols are often good things that want to become ultimate things in our lives.⁵

In this context of widespread confusion regarding identity and the increasing possibilities for expressing rebellion and supposed autonomy, Christians seeking to serve God in our generation must begin by asserting that identity is not self-generated, or self-invented, but is in fact given to us by God. It is our sovereign Creator who defines who and what we are. At the most basic level, as set out in the opening chapters of Genesis, we are made in the image of God, dependent creatures who ought to respond to the Creator's goodness in loving worship and service. As image-bearers we are made for relationships, primarily with our Creator, a fact expressed in the covenant established with Adam in Eden. Adam, as representative of the human race, broke the covenant, sin entered the world, and all human-kind is implicated: "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Rom 5:12).

Creation in God's image and the fall into sin are constitutive of the identity of all men and women. For Christians, however, the key element in their identity is their re-creation in Christ. In the language of 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." In Christ, the greatest possible transformation is effected in those who were sinners, under the wrath and curse of God. The Lord's people receive a new identity that is secure and liberating, shaped by the Holy Spirit and not by the forces of a fallen world.

Those who are seeking to serve God in their generation are therefore people who are being progressively conformed to Christ, transformed into his likeness (2 Cor 3:18), by the gracious work of God. This new identity can be thought of both individually and corporately.

1. *Christ-Like People*

We are redeemed.

As Peter expresses it, "You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers ... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet 1:18–19). We begin our service of God in our generation from the perspective of those who "were bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:20); this creates in us not a sense of self-satisfaction, but

⁵ Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 74.

rather a spirit of humility and thankfulness, a gratitude to God that often expresses itself in joy.

Our thankfulness to God for his wonderful gift of salvation stirs in us a joy in the Lord and also enables us to rejoice in all that is good in his creation. It even enables us to “count it all joy ... when [we] meet trials of various kinds” (Jas 1:2). This is not a transient happiness but a deep-seated spiritual joy that permeates the Christian’s life.

Serving the Lord as redeemed sinners in humility and joy is a powerful testimony to the world.

We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

To think of being conformed to Christ and of manifesting characteristics such as joy inevitably leads to thoughts of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23) and texts such as Romans 1:4, which refers to “the Spirit of holiness.” In fact, every element of Christian life and service is dependent on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, from the new birth “of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5), through transformation into the image of Christ, which “comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18), culminating in the gift to all believers of “a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44)—a body indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Of particular significance is that the Holy Spirit equips the Lord’s people for service. The indwelling of the Spirit means that we are fully equipped to serve God in all the ways that he has planned. We are not equipped to do anything or everything we may want to do, nor to pursue our own agendas or build our own empires. We are, however, completely sufficient for the implementation of God’s agenda as he brings in his kingdom for his glory.

We are loving.

As the apostle John reminds us, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). In response to the love of God that “has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5), a responding love wells up in the hearts of his children. Fundamental is love for God “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37). Without that love, our “service” will be drudgery that the Lord will not accept.

We also need to take account of 1 John 4:11, “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” The community of God’s people is to be characterized by mutual love among its members. It is significant that as the Savior in his Farewell Discourse (John 13–16) prepares his disciples for his imminent departure by way of the cross and for their ministry, which

they are to undertake after his resurrection as the foundation of the church in its New Testament form, he several times stresses this commandment. In John 15:12, for example, he says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” It is his sacrificial love, illustrated by his washing the disciples’ feet (John 13:1–20) and consummated at the cross, that provides the pattern and the power for the disciples’ mutual love.

Christ makes it starkly clear that love is not an optional extra for disciples: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20). And this is not just an internal matter for the church: it is to be evident to a watching world. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

We are holy.

It is vital to understand our true situation: it is not simply that we are to *become* holy but that we *are* holy. Passages such as Romans 6:1–14 indicate that those united to Christ in his death and resurrection have been delivered from the enslaving power of sin. Since believers “have died with Christ” (v. 8), as a result “you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v. 11). This may be termed “definitive sanctification.” The dominating power of sin has been broken: “Sin will have no dominion over you” (Rom 6:14). As Michael Horton puts it, “all that is found in Christ is holy, because it is in Christ.”⁶

An understanding of definitive sanctification is immensely liberating for Christians but must be accompanied by an awareness of our need for progressive sanctification. “The believer is a new man, a new creation, but he is a new man not yet made perfect,” writes John Murray.⁷ By faithful use of the God-given means of grace, under the blessing of the Holy Spirit, Christians are to grow in holiness. To be more specific, we are to grow in likeness to Christ. Notice how Paul expresses his pastoral concern for the Galatians “for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Gal 4:19), a theme also expressed in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

We undoubtedly need more of the “splendor of holiness” (Ps 96:9) that demonstrates the transforming power of God’s grace. There should be a holy attractiveness in the church that is rooted in our relationship with the

⁶ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 652.

⁷ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 219.

Lord. Bryan Chapell captures this well when he writes that “those who are truly in union with Christ increasingly have the desires of the Author of that union, since his heart beats within them.”⁸

2. A Covenant Community

One of the main weaknesses of Evangelicalism is its rampant individualism. A proper emphasis on the necessity of personal salvation can develop into the idea that Christian faith and discipleship are all about “Jesus and me.” The perspective of Scripture is fundamentally different: the people of God are always thought of in terms of a community, a community united in covenant with God and consequently united with one another.

United with the Triune God

This is the foundation of the church’s existence. It is helpfully summarized by Murray:

The church is the assembly of the covenant people of God, the congregation of believers, the household of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ. It consists of men and women called by God the Father into the fellowship of his Son, sanctified in Christ Jesus, regenerated by his Spirit, and united in the faith and confession of Christ Jesus as Lord and Saviour.⁹

The church is therefore divine in its origin, not the result of human planning or pragmatic development. Historically, Reformed Christians in particular have had a high view of the church, reflected in John Calvin’s comment that for those to whom God is Father “the church may also be Mother.”¹⁰ Indeed the goal of Christ’s redemptive work is stated in these terms in Ephesians 5:27: “... that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she may be holy and without blemish.” The church is at the center of God’s gracious work in the world.

The church is thus united to God in the covenant of grace. Among the implications of this truth is the unity of the church of Jesus Christ. That unity is a fact that stands on the basis of union with the Savior in his death and resurrection, but it is also to be expressed increasingly clearly in a visible way. The burden of Jesus’s prayer in John 17:21, “that they may all be one,”

⁸ Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace: Delighting in the Joy That Is Our Strength* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 50.

⁹ John Murray, “The Church: Its Identity, Functions and Resources,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 1:237–38.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 edition, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.1.1.

has in view a unity that the world can see and, as a result, “believe that you have sent me.”

United with one another

As Paul reminds his readers in Ephesians 4:25, “we are members of one another,” and that union is vividly portrayed in 1 Corinthians 12 in the metaphor of the body: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (v. 27). The New Testament never envisages Christian service and discipleship divorced from the church.

The church is not an appendage or optional extra for Christian service. It is the place where service begins. Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck sum it up pithily: “Churchless Christianity makes about as much sense as a Christless church, and has just as much biblical warrant.”¹¹

However, we recognize that some, perhaps a growing number, believe that as Christians they are members of Christ’s universal church but are under no obligation to belong to a local organized congregation. They may argue that any gathering of believers is “church.” Institutional expressions of church are ignored or ridiculed; living spirituality is pitted against dead structures. While recognizing that structures can inhibit the work of the church and that institutional expressions of Christianity have at times eclipsed Christ and the gospel, nevertheless this understanding of church is not biblical. The New Testament describes a mission that had as its goal the establishment of local congregations under the oversight of duly appointed elders, assemblies of God’s people where the worship of God is conducted “decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40), where authoritative instruction is given, where baptism and the Lord’s Supper are administered, where discipline is exercised, and where loving care to those within and outside the church is provided.

In this ordered community, God’s people are to serve the Lord. It is here that they engage face-to-face as they cultivate fellowship with one another. Made for community as image-bearers of God, they model what community could and should look like. The explosive growth of social media in recent years demonstrates this hunger for community. It would seem, however, that many efforts to connect people digitally have had the opposite effect. Brooks and Nicholas reflect this view when they state,

¹¹ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 164.

We have moved from conversation to connection, from talking to texting, from solitude to isolation, from interdependent to interconnected.¹²

Writers who seek to make discerning use of digital technology have nevertheless noted the decline in face-to-face engagement, especially on the part of young people, and Tim Challies comments, “Studies now show that many young people are actually losing their ability to relate to one another in an offline context.”¹³

In biblical churches with biblical ministry, the people of God are to put into operation the “one anothers” of Scripture that build strong and attractive communities that are ready to address the needs and opportunities of our generation.

II. What Should We Be Doing?

By God’s grace and the Holy Spirit’s power, the church is to be a “city set on a hill” (Matt 5:14). There is the risk, however, that this remains at the level of generalities: we need to identify some of the specifics of the church’s calling and the particular challenges that face us in each area.

Before engaging with these specifics, however, it seems to me that in answering the question of what we should be doing, we should first answer, “Repenting.” Christians are often portrayed as arrogant and self-righteous, imbued with a “holier than thou” spirit. Much of this is a grossly unfair caricature, maliciously motivated, but not all of it. When we look honestly at ourselves and our churches, we see many failures, with regard to both what we are and what we do. We need to let John’s words sink into our hearts and shape our fundamental attitudes: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). In those who proclaim a gospel of forgiveness for sin, the world needs to see an awareness of sinfulness that required such a gospel as well as a personal appropriation of “the blood of Jesus his Son [that] cleanses us from all sin” (v. 7).

The servant church must see its own failings and avail itself of God’s remedy daily as it serves its Lord and Savior. We may now go on to identify a number of things that we should be doing.

1. Preaching the Word

None of us should need to be reminded of Paul’s exhortation to Timothy: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke,

¹² Brooks and Nicholas, *Virtually Human*, 104.

¹³ Challies, *The Next Story*, 77.

and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2). We should not require any convincing that preaching the Word of God to saved and unsaved is an indispensable element of our calling. We do, however, need to understand the challenges posed by the culture in which we find ourselves.

Writing in 2001, Graham Johnston identified three dangers that need to be faced in “preaching in a postmodern climate”:

The first is preachers could lose confidence in God’s Word, or with only a Bible in hand, feel overwhelmed by postmodernity’s tidal-wave-like force. The second: Preachers might stoop to a type of reduced perspective that shrinks God and His truth to accommodate listeners. Third: preachers might adopt an essentially pragmatic approach.¹⁴

Whether we believe we are in a postmodern world or a post-postmodern one, and bearing in mind that some of our listeners will be unreconstructed premodernists, these words still seem accurate. In the space available I will focus on our need to have confidence in God’s Word and also confidence in preaching itself.

Confidence in God’s Word

Scripture has always come under attack, with its inspiration, trustworthiness, and relevance being questioned and denied. We are familiar with these challenges, and an essential task of theological education is to prepare ministers and Bible teachers to address them. In our generation, thoroughly shaped by digital technology, we also need to be ready to state our confidence in the *stability* of God’s Word.

Most of us have become accustomed to seeing people in our congregations following the reading and the sermon on an electronic device (while hoping that they are not surfing the Internet or reading their e-mails). What we may be slow to realize is that apps for Bible translations may update the text without the reader being aware of it. On a large scale, this happened when some discovered their app had updated the 1984 NIV to the 2011 NIV without notice. Stephen Holmes of Saint Andrews University views such possibilities in a positive light and comments, “A truly digital Bible can embrace every advance in textual scholarship the day it is made, or can review or update one book a month.” He draws out the following implication:

A natively electronic text will be in a constant state of flux—as unstable as the copied texts that everyone in the Christian world worked with before the fifteenth century.¹⁵

¹⁴ Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 61.

¹⁵ Steve Holmes, “From Scrolls to Scrolling: How Technology Has Shaped Our Bible Reading,” *The Bible in TransMission*, Spring 2016, <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/content/ex->

Our response might be to insist that one definitive version of any translation be produced and placed beyond alteration, but the controversy that erupted in August and September 2016 when Crossway first stated that it was producing a text of the ESV that “will remain unchanged in all future editions” and within weeks had to acknowledge the place of ongoing textual scholarship, not to mention disagreements over the choice of wording in a verse such as Genesis 3:16, indicates the complexity of the issues. The idea of a Permanent Text ESV perished.¹⁶

Preachers must be able and willing to address these questions and equip themselves to be able to say with confidence to their hearers that we *do* have the Word of God reliably transmitted to us, the Word in which we can have full confidence and which we as preachers seek to expound faithfully.

Confidence in preaching

Many have abandoned preaching as a viable means of communicating God’s truth in a digital, visual, postmodern culture, and all kinds of substitutes are being proposed. At the root of a significant proportion of objections is the issue of authority: preaching is an exercise of authority as it presents the authoritative Word of God and calls for an obedient response; in so doing it is profoundly counter-cultural.

The sinful heart has always resisted authority. The heart of the first sin was a refusal to submit to God’s word, entertaining the devil’s question, “Did God actually say...?” (Gen 3:1). There is nothing new in challenging authority, but our contemporary culture offers a multitude of new possibilities for expressing that inclination. We live in the age of Wikipedia, where millions of articles on a vast variety of subjects can be created and edited by millions of registered users, many of whom have no particular qualifications relevant to the subject and who may indeed be pursuing a personal agenda. While there is such a thing as the “tyranny of the experts,” online sources of information readily undermine healthy concepts of authority or destroy authority altogether. Indeed, a preacher might well have a listener checking his exegesis against some online source even as he delivers his sermon.

While such factors should stimulate preachers to do their “homework” as thoroughly as possible, making good use of whatever resources are available, we must not allow ourselves to be intimidated by these cultural forces. The Lord who has “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18) has

plore_the_bible/bible_in_transmission/files/2016_spring/BiT_Spring_2016_Holmes.pdf, 7.

¹⁶ For the Crossway statement withdrawing their original proposal, see Lane T. Dennis, “Crossway Statement on the ESV Bible Text,” Crossway, September 28, 2016, <https://www.crossway.org/blog/2016/09/crossway-statement-on-the-esv-bible-text/>.

sent us to preach, and our textbook is “God-breathed” Scripture (2 Tim 3:16). Preachers sent by God therefore have a God-given authority. The statement of the Second Helvetic Confession, penned by Heinrich Bullinger in 1566, captures this thought well:

Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received by the faithful.¹⁷

This is sometimes stated as “The preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God.”

We can therefore preach in an antiauthoritarian culture with humble boldness, knowing that God’s Word will accomplish God’s purpose (Isa 55:11) and all the glory will be his.

None of this exempts preachers from making their best efforts to understand the context in which they are called to minister. We of course cannot be experts in every field, nor do we need to be, but we do need to have a good grasp of the main trends of thought in our culture. We need to engage with the forces that are shaping the minds of those who may listen to our preaching. We need to be answering the questions people are asking and, if necessary, leading them to the questions they *should* be asking.

2. *Spreading the Gospel*

A church cannot fail to be outward looking if it takes seriously the Lord’s final command, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). Without obedience to that command, we are not truly serving God in our generation. The Great Commission is a mandate that demands much of Christ’s church. As Horton notes,

First, this Commission is *deep in its intensiveness*. The eleven disciples of the Lord are called to make disciples, not just converts. Secondly, this Commission is *wide in its extensiveness*. Not only are the nations streaming to Zion; Zion itself is a mobile, spirit-powered chariot winding its course throughout the earth.¹⁸

In considering what this mandate means for the church, we need to recognize that there are conflicting understandings of it even among those committed to a high view of biblical authority. In recent discussions two main approaches may be identified: some focus on proclaiming the gospel with a

¹⁷ The Second Helvetic Confession 1, in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 3:832.

¹⁸ Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 91.

view to sinners repenting and receiving forgiveness and justification before God, while others proclaim the gospel with a view to God's people bringing all of life into submission to Christ and so transforming society. There has been considerable conflict in evangelical circles as a result of these differences, with charges of "reductionism" and "diluting the gospel" common.

A possible means of resolving these tensions is suggested by DeYoung and Gregg Gilbert in *What Is the Mission of the Church?* Their view is that both approaches are justified, since the New Testament uses the word "gospel" in two senses:

Sometimes it looks at the good news of Christianity with a wide-angle lens, calling "gospel" all the great blessings that God intends to shower on his people, starting with forgiveness but cascading from there all the way to a renewed and remade creation in which they will spend eternity. Other times, though, the New Testament looks at the good news with a very narrow focus—with a zoom lens, if you will—and is quite happy to call "gospel" the singular blessing of forgiveness of sins and restored relationship with God through the sacrificial death of Jesus.¹⁹

The first step in making disciples is the presentation of God's call to sinners to repent and receive the forgiveness that Christ offers, and so in this section, we will concentrate on the zoom-lens view of the gospel.

What needs to be emphasized in the contemporary context is that evangelism, mission, spreading the gospel, is fundamentally *God's work*. The focus must be on a sovereign, gracious God. The gospel is "good news" not because it tells sinners what to do to be saved: it is good news because it tells of what God has done in Christ to save sinners. Only in light of that fact is the call for a response meaningful. Not only that, but the command to make disciples is issued by the risen Christ, who says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:18). The power for disciple-making comes from the Holy Spirit poured out by the ascended Lord at Pentecost, so that the apostles and their spiritual descendants "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 4:8) bear witness to the world. When there is a saving response to the message it is because God has opened the heart, as in the case of Lydia (Acts 16:14), granted repentance that leads to life (Acts 11:18), and opened a door of faith (Acts 14:27).

Crucial to biblical evangelism is the church's "being church," being what God designed it to be. As the people of God seek to fulfill the two great commandments—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart

¹⁹ Kevin DeYoung and Gregg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 94.

and with all your soul and with all your mind. ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37, 39)—they do so in communities that testify to the transforming power of the gospel they proclaim. It exercises a holy attractiveness to those who are being drawn by the Spirit of God. The failure of the church to be what God has ordained it to be cannot be compensated for by any amount of evangelistic activity.

The church, however, does not fulfill its evangelistic calling simply by putting up a “Lost Sheep Welcome” sign and waiting for some to drop in. The good shepherd goes out looking for the lost sheep: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). There must be a going out to seek the lost so that they might become disciples. A biblical church will be outward looking and outward going.

3. *Engaging with Society*

Christ’s mandate to his church is “Go and make *disciples*” (Matt 28:18). It is not fulfilled by seeing men and women come to saving faith: converts must grow in discipleship. It is indeed such growth that provides the evidence of true conversion. To formulate a biblical perspective on this task we need to take a “wide-angle lens”²⁰ view of the Savior’s gospel proclamation.²¹

Jesus began his public ministry with the proclamation, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Jesus proclaimed the arrival in his person and work of the “kingdom of God” (*hē basileia tou theou*). As many New Testament scholars, such as Herman Ridderbos, have pointed out, the term *basileia* is most often used in the New Testament in a dynamic sense to describe the reign of God, the putting forth of his royal power.²² The spatial meaning of realm is certainly present, but it is secondary. The New Testament focus, however, is on the coming of the King with power to redeem and judge. Thus, a text such as Mark 9:1 can speak of the kingdom coming with power. The Gospels make it clear that Christ is the messianic King, and as a consequence of his death and resurrection he can say, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18). In Jesus the powers of the age to come

²⁰ DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 95–100. The use of this terminology does not imply that DeYoung and Gilbert would necessarily agree with the view worked out in this section.

²¹ In this section I draw at various points on my paper presented at the 2005 Affinity Theological Conference, “The Crown Rights of King Jesus Today,” in *Tales of Two Cities: Christianity and Politics*, ed. Stephen Clark (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005).

²² Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. H. de Jongste (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), Part II.

have broken into the present age: *already* the kingdom has come but *not yet* in its final glory.

If *basileia* is taken in this sense, it is clear that Christ's kingdom is universal and embraces all things. Not all human beings, however, submit willingly to the reign and authority of King Jesus. It is only those who are changed by grace and who are brought to experience the redemption accomplished by Christ who willingly give allegiance to the King. In Richard Gaffin's words, "The church and only the church is made up of the citizens of the kingdom, those who by repentance and faith submit to the redemptive lordship of Christ."²³

Disciples are therefore citizens living by grace in the kingdom of King Jesus, which is universal in extent. This unified view of the reign of Christ reflects more accurately the New Testament material than more traditional Reformed views that think in terms of "Two Kingdoms."²⁴ Disciples willingly submit to the Lordship of Christ in every area of life, following the injunction of John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." That obedience must be worked out in every area of life, since Christ is king of every area of life. Abraham Kuyper summed this up well:

Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: "mine!"²⁵

Disciples serve God by seeking to bring all aspects of life into conformity with the pattern given by King Jesus. Despite the language used by some proponents of this approach, this activity cannot be described as "bringing in the kingdom" or "building the kingdom." God alone brings in his kingdom, but his people are to seek the king's glory in all of life, and through them he advances the cause of his kingdom, especially as his saving grace brings willing sinners under his reign.

The citizens of Christ's kingdom therefore go into every part of society, according to God's calling, to seek the glory of their king. They are to act as the salt and light spoken of in Matthew 5:13–16. No area of life is "secular"

²³ Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Kingdom of God," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 369.

²⁴ A recent defense of the "Two Kingdoms" perspective is found in VanDrunnen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms*.

²⁵ Stated by Abraham Kuyper in his Inaugural Address at the Free University of Amsterdam. See *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

and outside the scope of disciples. Despite the pressures from various directions that are being brought to bear on Christians today, faith must not be privatized, and discipleship cannot be confined within the walls of our church buildings.

We do not know what effects our labors will have, and results are not our responsibility. The church is to maintain a testimony to God's truth for all of life, including bearing witness to those in authority, and individual disciples are to pursue righteousness in all of life. It may be that the witness will be ignored and that our labors produce few visible results, but our call is to be faithful (1 Cor 4:2), and the King will be glorified.

4. Enduring Persecution

Biblical realism and a sober assessment of our circumstances suggest that Christ's church in our society will face hard days. That should not surprise us. The normal situation of the church, taking the long view historically, is one of hardship and opposition. Jesus warned his disciples in the Upper Room, "In the world you will have tribulation," while also sounding the note of victory, "But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). The latter statement did not cancel the former.

Violent persecution of Christians is on the increase in many parts of the world: as yet that is not the situation in Western Europe. For us, persecution comes in many lesser ways within families, in the workplace, and in countless other settings. Often it is what Don Carson calls "sneering condescension"²⁶ as our Christian views become more and more out of step with the prevailing culture. Carson has also highlighted perceptively the reality of a professed commitment to "tolerance," perhaps the virtue most highly regarded in our culture. It often and easily becomes intolerance of views that do not conform to cultural "orthodoxy." He suggests that if opposition to Christianity increases in Western countries, it will not come in a sudden outburst of overt hostility: "It is far more likely to come incrementally and in the name of preserving tolerance."²⁷ Contemporary examples are not difficult to find.

Serving God in our generation thus requires that we endure with God-given patience the level of persecution we presently face and that we prepare ourselves and our people, especially the young, to endure greater hardship if that should be the Lord's will.

²⁶ D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 175.

²⁷ Ibid.

III. *People of Hope*

There is much in our contemporary situation that could tempt us to adopt a gloomy outlook. Things are difficult for Christian witness and in some respects, there may be worse to come. On a bad day, we may despair of the cause of the gospel. We should not. As the people of God, we are consequently people of hope. We are in fact the only people in our society who have a solid basis for hope.

The part of John 16:33 that we most readily recall is “In the world you will have tribulation.” The disciples to whom those words were first spoken would know only too well what tribulation meant, and their first experience of it lay a matter of hours ahead of them. The Lord, however, did not leave them with a word of warning but with an assurance of his victory: “But take heart; I have overcome the world.” This text provides for us a perspective of biblical realism that issues in hope. By his life, death, and resurrection Christ has conquered the forces opposed to God and his purpose and will carry that purpose through to its glorious conclusion at his return.

To serve God in our generation we need to cultivate a soundly biblical eschatology. We need always to keep in mind the “already” and the “not yet” of the coming of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus. In his person and work the kingdom of God had truly come.

The kingdom has not yet come in its final glory, but it will come. Christ “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor 15:25). At the appointed time, he will return in glory to judge the world and complete the salvation of his people with their bodily resurrection (Phil 3:21) and the ushering in of “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13). The supreme object of Christian hope is expressed by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, “so we will always be with the Lord.”

This perspective on the future enables disciples to serve God faithfully in every way he provides, knowing that the results are in his hands and that, whether we appear to meet with success or failure, he “works out all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph 1:11). From the divine perspective, failure is impossible. Beyond the present age, there is then the certainty of glory, when faithful servants will be commended and rewarded (Matt 25:33–40) and the creation will be renewed as a fitting home for the redeemed.

We are therefore people of hope: hope grounded in the finished work of a great Savior. Far from weakening our commitment to serving God, this hope in truth provides a tremendous stimulus to godly living and service. We serve in the knowledge that “in the Lord [our] labor is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58)

and that the Lord's triumph is sure. Therefore "everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure" (1 John 3:3), and in this spirit, we serve God in our generation.