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Rising to Heaven: The Ideology of Progress and the Semiotics of Church Growth

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RISING TO HEAVEN: THE IDEOLOGY OF PROGRESS AND THE SEMIOTICS OF CHURCH GROWTH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

LEN WILSON

PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 2020

Portland Seminary
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

Len Wilson

has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on February 20, 2020
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics and Future Studies

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The bulk of ideas in this work are shared. They are the ruminations of a hundred, a thousand conversations, mutual insights, and observations which once heard, become assimilated. As Samuel Clemens wrote, “ninety-nine parts of all things that proceed from the intellect are plagiarisms, pure and simple; and the lesson ought to make us modest.”[1] In an attempt to at least acknowledge some degree of honesty and thus modesty, it is important to note at the outset that it is impossible to track the origin of a thought.

In that spirit, the list of friends and colleagues to follow is assuredly incomplete.

First credit must be given to Dr. Leonard I. Sweet, the primary mentor of my ministry life, past and present. His thoughts and influence are underreported throughout the pages to follow and remain a source of inspiration for me.

I am indebted to cohort at George Fox University, including leaders Loren Kerns and Cliff Berger, advisors H. Colleen Butcher and Gregg Borror, and fellow students Michael Beck, Aaron Duvall, Keith Ham, Vern Hyndman, Matthew Lake, Christina McCully, Hoa Nguyen, Daniel Passini, Danny Payne, Guilherme Ribeiro, Thomas R Schiave, Jason Sedore, Steve Swinburne, Lori Wagner, and Julia Winward. Each provided great encouragement, community, and ideas which aided this research. In particular, Lori Wagner offered valuable editorial advice and assistance with this manuscript.

---

[1] Samuel Langhorne Clemens, *Mark Twain's Letters (Classic Reprint)* (New York: Forgotten, 2012), 306.

I am indebted to ministry colleagues at St. Andrew United Methodist Church in Plano, Texas, including pastoral and leadership colleagues Robert Hasley, Arthur Jones, Forrest Pool, Scott Engle, Kay Richardson, Kim Meyers, Jennifer Powell, Jimmy Decker, and Allison Jean, as well as creative team colleagues Kyle Focht, Diana McKnight, Chris Derrett, Briana Williams, Joaquin Aguilar, Aimee Ballard, and Christian Schlabs, who contributed valuable ideas, picked up slack, and enabled me to focus on this work.

In addition, readers Lori Fast and Jay Akkerman provided valuable insights and contributions.

Last, my patient wife Shar and children Kaylyn, Christian, Joslyn, and Austin have offered continual encouragement and assistance, without which this work would not be finished.

My prayer is that what I have cobbled together becomes both conscious and unconscious source of future intellectual proceeds for others.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS III
PREFACE VIII
GLOSSARY XV
ABSTRACT XVII
PART ONE: LINE OF DESCENT - THE PROBLEM 1
CHAPTER 1: DECLINE 2
  Growth Engineer 4
  The Church Growth Industry 6
  The Data of Decline 9
  Original Church Growth 11
  Growth of the Methodist Movement 12
  Methodism Since 1968 13
  The End of Engineered Growth? 15
CHAPTER 2: TREND LINES 17
  A Stretch Goal 17
  Pastor as Organizational Executive 19
  The Use of Data 22
  Innovations in Worship and Technology 25
  Emerging and Missional Church 28
  Slow and Steady 29
  Summary 32
PART TWO: LINE OF ASCENT - HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS 39
CHAPTER 3: INCLINE 40
  Circle 43
  Straight Line 46
  Finality 48
  The Rise of Progress 50
CHAPTER 4: DRAWING THE LINE 55
  Implications of the Incline 57
    Political 57
    Technological 58
    Social 61
    Economic 64
  The Meaning of Making 65
CHAPTER 5: THE END OF THE LINE 69
  The Paradox of Progress 72
    Political 72
    Social and Technological 75

Equal and Opposite ... 78
The Sine Wave ... 81
Generations ... 85
A Material World ... 88
Nihilism and Power ... 92
Part Two Summary ... 94

PART THREE: WHOSE LINE IS IT, ANYWAY? - THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS ... 96

CHAPTER 6: WALKING THE LINE ... 97
A Primitive Gospel ... 98
Ecclesiologies of Improvement ... 103
A Social Gospel ... 104
A Material Gospel ... 110
Summary of Christian responses to progress ... 115
The influence of our language ... 115
The problem of pride and power ... 116

CHAPTER 7: LINE BREAK ... 118
"(You) Make Disciples" ... 119
The Understood You ... 120
The Word Make ... 121
The Word Disciple ... 123
The Futility of Improvement ... 126
Jesus Builds the Church ... 128

CHAPTER 8: LIFELINE ... 132
The Need for a New Image ... 132
The Greco-Roman Household ... 137
Characteristics of the Household ... 138
Basic Cell of the Church ... 139
Semiotics of the Household of God ... 140
Authority ... 144
Birth ... 145
Personhood ... 146
Development ... 151
Maturity ... 153
Aging, Death, and Resurrection ... 155

CHAPTER 9: IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS ... 157
To Disciple ... 157
The Jewish Educational System ... 160
Unusual Disciples ... 164
Applications ... 166
Patience ... 166
Finding Purpose in Presence ... 168
Mentors and Protégés ... 171
Entrepreneurial ... 176

Theology of Work ... 177
Fruit ... 180

EPILOGUE ... 181

APPENDIX: LINE OF THOUGHT - SEMIOTIC FOUNDATIONS ... 185

APPENDIX A: LINE OF SIGHT ... 187
Everywhere Signs ... 190
The Relationship of Sign and Meaning ... 192
The Role of the Receiver ... 194
Metaphor and Language ... 198

APPENDIX B: CROSSING THE LINE ... 203
Perspectives on Knowledge ... 207
What we think: rational truth ... 211
What we feel: relative truth ... 213
What we share: relational truth ... 217
Metaphors Unlock New Perspectives ... 218
The Need for New Metaphors in Ministry ... 224

APPENDIX C: PLUMB LINE ... 229
Metaphor Themes ... 230
Deep Metaphors ... 234
Metaphors and The Church ... 236

BIBLIOGRAPHY ... 241

PREFACE

Attitudes about church growth among pastors and church leaders are complicated.

Twenty years ago, church growth seemed to be the most important topic of study for the practicing pastor or church leader.[2] Pastors read books and attended conferences to identify and implement a set of "best practices" that would turn a declining congregation into a growing congregation, at least as measured by worship attendance and other key, quantifiable metrics.

Yet, perhaps because growth has been extremely difficult if not impossible to achieve, the concept of church growth has fallen from favor. High profile scandals and a lack of measurable correlation between worship attendance and discipleship have contributed to the rise of a counter movement against church growth, at least the way it has been understood.[3]

While "church growth" is perhaps no longer a hot topic in pastoral literature, the assumption of growth remains. Instead of church growth, we now see titles talking about "renewal", "vitality," "flourishing," and more. The names have changed but the premise remains the same: How do we transform hearts, lives, and communities with the good news of Jesus Christ—and, in the process, grow? Our language continues to carry fundamental assumptions which are worth questioning: is it important that Christians

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[2] In an internal research study of titles I conducted as Senior Acquisitions Editor of the United Methodist Publishing House, church growth was the most consistent and highest selling category of professional/leadership books marketed to pastors from 2000-2011.

[3] Chapter two offers data on this lack of correlation.

"grow"? If so, what does this mean? Is it appropriate to be concerned with congregational growth? What do we mean by church growth, exactly?

On one level, the concept of church growth simply makes sense. Fundamentally, growth seems good. Organic metaphors, such as the type Jesus used for growth—weeds, seeds, and yeast, to name a few—suggest that while not all growing things are healthy, healthy things grow. Jesus' great commission to the earliest apostles, "go and make disciples", seems to be clear that growth is the mandate of the body of Christ. As part of the cloud of witnesses, we are descendants, progenitors, and caretakers of the health and growth of Christ's church.

But if growth is good, why has it been so difficult? The apathetic state of congregational life in USAmerica is well-documented. Perennial declines in quantifiable metrics such as worship attendance and engagement patterns continue a decline that began over fifty years ago. In spite of decades of vocational emphasis on church growth, mountains of data and a simple "eye test" of cultural attitudes toward Christianity in America today suggest that the church is doing anything but growing. Instead, the present-day church seems to be in a decades-long free fall, declining in size and influence, with no floor in sight.

In the midst of frightening data trends and ambivalence about our understanding of church growth, pressure on pastors to create vibrant, growing local churches is as urgent as ever. As worship attendance and giving continues to decline, pastors and church leaders deal with immense pressure to grow quantifiably. The goals of ministry are still measured by the same quantifiable growth metrics: the "3 Bs of church life—budgets, butts, and buildings"—remain a primary driving force behind the work of ministry.

These forces affect both overt decisions and implicit motivations to the daily work of the pastor. Consider Joe, a pastor assigned to a medium sized, declining church in Texas. Everything he has been taught about ministry, and his very career, are tied to his ability to turn a "declining church" into a "growing church." For Joe, the work of growing a church is the means by which he lives out his calling and Jesus' Great Commission. Envisioning himself to be a leader of a growing church, Joe makes a series of leadership decisions. Many of his decisions mimic current corporate American practices designed to stimulate economic growth. Usually, his leadership does not succeed in growing the church[4], at least according to metrics such as worship attendance, small group involvement and giving;[5] in a few cases, it does, and the church grows unexpectedly, or even quickly. The most likely scenario is that it grows, or declines, in small increments over time. But what about the congregation's faith in God or works of service? Is the Kingdom of God becoming more manifest through the congregation? These deeper questions are more difficult to quantify. Eventually Joe leaves, a new pastor is assigned to the church, and the process begins again. Because of the pressure to achieve growth, scholars and practitioners continue to advocate a variety of strategies and tactics to turn around declines in attendance and involvement, in spite of the fact that few strategies or tactics have achieved their stated goal.

Part One explores this problem by examining the landscape of congregational ministry in USAmerica in the last 50 years. Chapter 1 describes the recent history of

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[4] In a 2018 survey I conducted of the largest 250 United Methodist congregations in the United States, 70% show annual declines in worship attendance and/or budget.

[5] In the survey, responders indicated these as their top three preferred measures of church growth.

church decline and chapter 2 offers an overview of some of the strategies and tactics employed by pastors and church growth experts over the recent decades, including the "church growth" movement, also known as the seeker-friendly movement, and counter movements such as the missional movement and the contextual movement. In the current environment, how is a pastor or church leader supposed to think about growth?

Rather than add to the ongoing body of strategic proposals and tactical initiatives, I have taken on the audacious goal of trying to look at the underlying assumptions in our conversations. The failure of a generations-long dedicated emphasis on congregational growth suggests that the problem of church decline is not strategic or tactical. Congregational decline is a practical problem with a conceptual basis. The solution is not strategic, it is semiotic: the USAmerican, United Methodist church's understanding of "growth," whether realized or not, is understood through deeply entrenched semiotics and acceptance of specific secular and humanist theories of social, technological, and economic development. This ideology shapes our understanding of discipleship, how it happens, and how we think about the work of congregational ministry, to our detriment. Our very definition of "growth" is flawed.

Suggesting our current definition of growth is problematic invariably leads to alternatives— "What is your new definition?" The problem with suggesting new definitions for church growth is that words are rooted in images, and our dominant images for growth are so deeply embedded in our thinking that simply adding a new definition to the conversation about church growth will do little to foster substantive change. Thus, the primary goal of this work is iconoclastic. Like the reformers, we need to break old images first.

What is this image of improvement we carry around? In Part Two, I argue that we are carrying around a 400-year old image of growth rooted not in biblical imagery but in Enlightenment philosophy. Chapter 3 looks at the rise of an ideology of progress, signified as an image of an increasing line, or the “incline”, as a common philosophy of history. Chapter 4 examines contemporary attitudes about progress, and Chapter 5 suggests the hegemony of progress may be fraying, even as the church clings to it.

Our current definition of church growth is problematic because it gives too much agency to humankind. It suggests that we are responsible for creating God's kingdom. Congregations on the political left and political right each advocate for an ecclesiology of improvement. The work of exploring new images for church growth begins by looking at our tendency to think we are solely responsible for our own prosperity.

Part Three examines the conflation of progress and mission. Chapter 6 looks at church responses to progress, including ecclesiologies of improvement. Chapter 7 examines flaws in our biblical exegesis regarding the Great Commission. Chapter 8 explores what discipleship might look like when divorced from improvement. Chapter 9 concludes with a few alternate images for church growth worthy of further research.

It should be obvious by now that humans are not making God’s kingdom on Earth. In order for USAmerican, United Methodist congregations to grow, pastors and lay leaders need to abandon current definitions of congregational growth rooted in an ecclesiology of improvement. As long as we adhere to our current conceptualization of growth, which comes not from the Scriptures but from 18th century European philosophy, we will struggle to stop the decline of our churches in size and influence,

individually and culturally. We need to break our dominant image of growth, and until we do this, our attempts to revitalize the church will be in vain.

As additional support, the Appendix makes the case for hidden influences in the language we use. Appendix A introduces the discipline of semiotics and demonstrates how our words come from images. Appendix B claims that the relationship between word, image, and meaning is dynamic. As much as we would like to think precise use of language clarifies meaning, in reality our images can just as easily shape our words and therefore our meaning. Appendix C claims that the most powerful images are the ones we do not even recognize.

Identifying the semiotic limitations of an ideology of progress will free pastors to imagine new ways of understanding how to make disciples and grow churches. My hope is to help pastors, church leaders, and active Christians move past current, inadequate definitions of growth to imagine new signs, symbols, and structures for individual and congregational human flourishing rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus.

A couple of caveats: First, the trouble with iconoclastic endeavors is that any serious attempt to break the dominant meaning of a word, much less create a new definition for it, is by nature grand and prone to sweeping statements and contestable leaps. As such, this work will be too ambitious to some and woefully insufficient to others. Bold claims have been out of vogue for some time, as the scope of scholarly work continues to get slimmer and deeper[6], to the point of invisibility. My stated goal to break

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[6] In the introduction to his research on the growth of the early church, Alan Kreider notes that "scholars know that it is wise to restrict their attention to narrow topics that they can study with unimpeachable craft." Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Churc*h (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 3.

the dominant image of church growth as it is understood and acted on by pastors and church leaders is such that it is inevitable I write in large print type and sometimes screaming in all caps. History belies easy attempts to categorize. Indeed, in our deconstructionist age, students of history have given up on grand theories altogether. But abdication of the need for new images, through which we create new frameworks of meaning, is self-defeating, as relativism has borne out. Thus, I have tried as much as possible to minimize this tendency, given the physical constraints of a single work. In spite of these efforts, however, I have found myself scanning over a diverse set of disciplines including missiology, semiotics, history, theology, and philosophy.

Second, the primary audience for this work is what I describe as an "academic practitioner." I write in 2019, while serving a large United Methodist congregation in a full-time capacity, primarily to my fellow United Methodists clergy, church leaders and lay leaders on the eve of what may be the dissolution of the United Methodist Church as it has been known for the past 50 years. This exploration may have relevance to other faith traditions as well.

GLOSSARY

Church Growth: Refers both to the general concept of growing churches and a specific subset of ecclesiology and missiology focused on increasing quantitative values of local congregations over time, usually measured by worship attendance, giving capacity and physical campus. Throughout, I use capital letters when designating the specific missiological movement.

Deep Metaphors: Iconographic, invisible, longitudinal and cross-cultural metaphor themes that find resonance and shape meaning with large groups of people and for long periods of time.

Ecclesiology of Improvement: A model of ministry defined by a focus on incremental gains in a set of quantifiable metrics of congregational growth; also, colloquially known as a focus on the “3 Bs of budgets, butts, and buildings.”

Growth: to increase in size, value or importance over time.

Growing Church: A congregation showing incremental improvement in a set of quantifiable metrics such as worship attendance, small groups participation, missional involvement and giving.

Growth Engineer: A pastor or church leader whose vocational focus is to build a local church showing incremental improvement in a set of quantifiable growth metrics.

Ideology of Progress: A belief system which adheres to the incremental, inexorable improvement of the human condition through social, economic, and political advancement over time and achieved through science and technology.

Metaphors: signs and symbols in the form of words and images that we use to compare our embodied, sensory experience to other experiences and through these comparisons to establish meaning and define reality.

Philosophy of History: The philosophical study of history, particularly the question of the presence of a potential narrative or causal structure to the ordering of human events over time.

Semiotics: the study of ever-changing systems of signs, symbols, language, and meaning, represented through words and images.

Sign: a dyadic combination of sound pattern (a signifier) and concept (a signified) or between the sounds we call "words" and their respective "meanings."

ABSTRACT

Congregational growth remains a dominant model for pastoral ministry in a USAmerican, United Methodist context today. Yet producing sustained growth has proven to be immensely difficult. Ongoing quantitative and qualitative analysis of cultural attitudes toward Christianity today show that the long-standing vocational emphasis on growth has not proven fruitful.

The claim of this work is that the ongoing problem of church decline is not strategic, but semiotic: the basis for continued congregational decline comes not from faulty planning but from a problematic conflation of growth with improvement. For many, Church Growth is influenced by a definition of human and social development shaped by an Enlightenment ideology of progress and is signified with an image of a rising line, the logical end of which would be the achievement of the kingdom of God.

The primary goal of this work is iconoclastic. Attempts to create lasting change in the church begin not simply by naming new images, but by breaking persistent, problematic images. Part One outlines the current state of congregational decline and scans a fifty-year history of church growth initiatives. Part Two examines the development of an ideology of progress, signified as an ascending line to heaven and examines theological and historical foundations of a faulty understanding of growth. Part Three examines church responses to the ideology of progress, including "ecclesiologies of improvement", and offers biblical and theological rationale for the insufficiency of improvement as an image for understanding the nature and purpose of the church. Breaking the limitations of the image of the incline will free pastors to rediscover biblical definitions for growth. I conclude with alternative images worthy of further research.

PART ONE: LINE OF DESCENT - THE PROBLEM

Talk to any pastor or church leader about the state of the church, and you are likely to hear an earnest, eager, even desperate desire to grow. The presence of growth in ministry is assumed: pastors see their work as growing disciples, growing churches and even growing culture. In fact, Jesus' great commission to the earliest apostles - "go and make disciples" - seems clearly to suggest to us that growth is both the commission and blessing of the body of Christ. As part of the cloud of witnesses, we are descendants and progenitors of the health and growth of Christ's church.

Yet, in spite of decades of emphasis on church growth, mountains of data and a simple "eye test" of cultural attitudes toward Christianity in America today suggest that the church is doing anything but growing. The modern church is in free fall, declining in size and influence for decades, with no floor in sight.

The fifty-year period of congregational decline in America has a high correlation to a period in which the work of the pastor has been compared to the work of an organizational executive. To a large extent, corporate executives focus on improving efficiency to spur growth and generate profit. Aside from the profit motive, growth achieved through better systems and improved efficiency has not proven fruitful to the work of the church. The orientation of pastor as organizational executive is a fundamental "mistake in deployment" that cannot be overcome.

CHAPTER 1: DECLINE

The modern American church has been obsessed with making disciples and growing churches. Yet fifty years of focus on quantifiable improvements in the metrics of congregational life (also known as the 3 Bs of budgets, butts, and buildings) prove that a scientific, mechanistic approach to the work of ministry has failed to achieve its goals. Rather than rejecting the concept of "growth" altogether, though, the failure of church growth as a specific movement in American church history opens up new opportunities to explore biblical images for growth. The search for a better image of church growth begins with placing our current thinking about church growth in historical perspective.

A young pastor, an associate in a growing, large United Methodist congregation, listened to a cohort of clergy residents engage in a group diatribe. This next generation of pastors, each of whom had yet to lead a church, were rejecting concepts of congregational growth. One said, "Well, cancer grows, and fast." The young pastor was dismayed and wondered, "what are we about if not growing churches?"

The group's attitude was perhaps a reaction to a dominant contemporary ecclesiology in which the pastor is head of a "growing church", at least as measured by incremental improvement in a set of quantifiable metrics of congregational life such as worship attendance, small groups participation, missional involvement and giving. In the last 50 years, an entire industry formed within and across most major Protestant denominations and affiliations for the purposes of achieving quantifiable, congregational growth. This cottage "Church Growth" industry has served as pastoral sage, dispensing wisdom to diagnose decline and design prescriptions for a revitalized local church.

While the once-strong Church Growth movement has waned, and pastors may minimize an emphasis on growth, growth remains a primary vocational objective of pastoral leadership, according to anecdotal observations of 25 years of vocational ministry and a survey I conducted of the largest 250 United Methodist congregations in the United States.[7] Whether clergy are actively engaged in the work of growing a congregation or rejecting growth as a definition of the work of vocational ministry, growth continues to be a defining axis by which the purpose of congregational ministry is measured.

Perhaps the young pastors' group rejected an ecclesiology of growth because they are aware that achieving sustained congregational growth has proven to be immensely difficult, if not impossible. Ongoing statistical analysis of congregational life in the United States[8] and a simple "eye test" of cultural attitudes toward Christianity today show that 50 years of vocational emphasis on congregational growth has failed in American church life. In an effort to reverse relentless reports of decreasing congregational involvement, lay and professional church leaders have championed a variety of theological frameworks, initiatives, strategies, and tactical maneuvers. While these maneuvers have benefitted many, none have succeeded in the aggregate measure of increasing congregational involvement. In spite of herculean effort and decades of energy

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[7] Len Wilson, "Top 25 Fastest Growing Large United Methodist Churches, 2019 Edition", lenwilson.us (blog), May 28, 2019, https://lenwilson.us/top-25-fastest-growing-large-umc-2019/. This is the latest in a series of yearly updates on this ongoing research. Additional data and observations in this work are unpublished.

[8] One Gallup study reports the percentage of people who claim membership in a house of worship is now 50%, down from 70% two decades ago. Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades," gallup.com, April 18, 2019, https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx.

spent toward congregational growth, United Methodist churches in the United States, as well as churches in most other Protestant denominations and affiliations, continue a seemingly inexorable decline. In fact, 50 years of specific, institutional emphasis and activity devoted to growing churches has almost exactly paralleled 50 years of uninterrupted congregational decline in the United Methodist Church in the United States.

This high correlation is evident in the work of the Church Growth consulting industry, which rose through the work of a pastor, engineer and city planner named Lyle Schaller. It is to his story we turn first.

Growth Engineer

Lyle Schaller is perhaps the most famous pastor you have never heard of, at least if you were born after 1970. An ordained United Methodist pastor, Schaller wrote, co-wrote and edited 96 books, each helping pastors with the ecclesiological concern of how to grow a local congregation.[9] It is likely no single person coached, taught, and consulted more local congregations across the theological spectrum in the United States. One researcher estimated the number at 6,000 churches, saying that "Schaller is the most important and clear-headed observer of American Christianity in [the 20th] century."[10] At its peak, over 200,000 subscribers received Schaller's mailed, pre-digital monthly

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[9] Leith Anderson, "Lyle Schaller, Preeminent Church Consultant, Dies at 91," Christianity Today, March 18, 2015, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/march-web-only/lyle-schaller-dies.html.

[10] Lyle E. Schaller and Warren Bird, *Wisdom from Lyle E. Schaller: The Elder Statesman of Church Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 3.

newsletter, "The Parish Paper."[11] At the end of Schaller's ministry life, there were only 230,000 viable Protestant congregations in the United States.[12] In a survey of influential figures among Protestant leaders in America, published in 1989, Schaller topped other notable names such as Henri Nouwen, Martin E. Marty, and Billy Graham.[13]

Schaller's life focus was growing churches. He advocated a method of pastoral ministry that continues today: that the work of the congregational pastor in the USAmerican context is to grow the church. In a survey I conducted among the largest 250 United Methodist congregations in the United States from 2004-2018, "growth" was the highest-ranking vocational goal of pastoral leaders, with 94% of responders "extremely interested" in growing their congregations.

People who design, plan, and build systems using scientific and technological solutions are known as engineers; thus, the dominant model of the local church pastor today is what I term a "growth engineer." A growth engineer is a pastor or church leader whose vocational focus is to build a local church showing incremental improvement in a set of quantifiable growth metrics.

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[11] It is difficult to contextualize how big this number is. One parachurch company, co-owned and operated for a decade by this author, maintained a list of 18,000 churches. Well-known parachurch organizations Generis and Leadership Network have an estimated 75,000 subscribers each, based on email exchange with Warren Bird, director of Research at Leadership Network, Inc., February 25, 2015, and on personal conversation with Jim Shepherd, president of Generis Consulting Inc., August 23, 2017.

[12] The latest dataset from the U.S. Religion Census, published in 2012, states there are now 298,251 Protestant congregations in the United States, which collectively claim 78.8 million members. http://www.usreligioncensus.org/press_release/ACP%2020120501.pdf.

[13] John Dart, "Church-Growth Analyst Leads in Survey of Influential Figures," Los Angeles Times, November 25, 1989, http://articles.latimes.com/1989-11-25/entertainment/ca-303_1_influential-figure.

The Church Growth Industry

Schaller's extensive work helped develop an entire para-church world—a professional ecosystem operating alongside the work of congregational ministry—known as Church Growth.

The genesis of Church Growth is generally accredited to Calvinist missiologist Donald McGavran.[14] The primary interest of McGavran's work in the 1950s was evangelism, and Church Growth became a strategy and then a missiological trend to maximize the efficiency of the work of salvation.[15] By the 1960s, though, mainline denominations had begun to build theoretical models of congregational growth as a social science. These twin perspectives, Church Growth as evangelism and Church Growth as social science, co-existed through the latter decades of the 20th century, likely due to a confluence of favorable factors including professional career interests of local pastors, goal-setting by lay business leaders in local congregations, judicatory bureaucratic pressure and the contextual explanations of researchers and practitioners responding to the first statistical reports of congregational decline in the early 1970s.[16]

Informed, pragmatic questions of Church Growth found an apropos home in United Methodism, which has long been known for a more "applied" ministerial ethos, as well as a mixture of mainline rationalism and big tent revivalism. As both Methodist pastor and social scientist, Lyle Schaller brought a unique skill set to the work of

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[14] See Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1955).

[15] David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway, eds., *Church and Denominational Growth: What Does (and Does Not) Cause Growth or Decline* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 142.

[16] Roozen, 136.

congregational growth. Following service in World War II, Schaller began his professional career as a city and regional planner in Madison, Wisconsin. He acquired four master's degrees by his early 30s—in history, city and regional planning, political science, and theology—and in 1955 began serving three small Methodist congregations on a circuit in rural Wisconsin.[17] Within five years he was advising other pastors on their work, applying his unique perspective of data-driven demographic and social analysis. Abingdon Press, the professional imprint of the United Methodist Publishing House, published his first book on the subject in 1964. Neither it nor the two that followed sold particularly well, but sales on his fourth title, *The Local Church Looks to the Future: A Guide to Church Planting* (1968) exceeded expectations, and the industry of congregational consultation was born.[18]

The final acquisitions editor at Abingdon, Schaller's sole publisher, once described him as a "kingmaker" for his singular influence in creating a genre of "growth" pastors and an entire industry whose aim is to help pastors grow their congregations.[19] An article in the *Los Angeles Times*, summarizing the aforementioned survey of influential Protestants in America, noted that "the most influential figure among most Protestant church leaders today is not a great preacher or theologian, but a veteran analyst of church-growth problems."[20]

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[17] Schaller and Bird, 8.

[18] During my tenure as Senior Acquisitions Editor at Abingdon, I developed the final title with Schaller's name on it, a 2012 retrospective edited by Warren Bird cited above. This observation comes from my institutional research for the book.

[19] Paul Franklyn, interview by author, Nashville, TN, January 15, 2011.

[20] Dart.

While interest in Church Growth as a discipline has waned since the turn of the millennium, the desire among pastors and leaders of local churches to grow congregations continues. Schaller died in 2015, but his approach to ministry remains the dominant model of the work of congregational leadership today: an understanding that the purpose of the local church pastor is to grow the congregation, at least as measured according to the famous "3 Bs" of pastoral leadership: butts, budgets, and buildings. This assumption is pervasive, despite a few dissenting voices.[21]

Further, in an age of deep political division, the desire to grow a church is common to the concerns of pastors across the ethical and political spectrum.[22] In the aforementioned survey, Schaller was the only person who appeared in every top ten list of influential Protestants, when separated by theological liberals, moderates and conservatives. While the most visible debates of the past 50 years of church life have centered on issues of Bible, theology, culture and ethics, it seems that, regardless of theological or political predilections, the primary aim of professionals in the daily work of congregational ministry is simply to grow their churches.

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[21] For a counter-argument to the presumption of growth, see Robert Hudnut, *Church Growth is Not the Point* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975). For an alternative ecclesiology to church as growing ecosystems of disciples of Jesus Christ, see Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

[22] Some consider growth to be a goal of "conservative" churches. While gatekeeper for leadership books for publication as Senior Acquisitions Editor of Abingdon Press, I approved titles by both conservative and liberal voices, united by a common desire to grow. For a recent example of a book by a centrist/progressive voice advocating church growth, see Matt Miofsky, *8 Virtues of Rapidly Growing Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018).

The Data of Decline

Yet, this focus seems to be failing. Statistical data outlining the decline of Americans participating in congregational life over the last 50 years is by now extensive and widely documented. According to the metrics of engineering, the goal of growth has not succeeded. Notably, church decline is a Western cultural phenomenon: the global church is growing and expects to reach three billion people by 2050.[23]

A brief sampling of USAmerican decline: Through jointly sponsored research from Lifeway, the Southern Baptist publishing imprint, and Exponential, the church planting network, Southern Baptist congregational researcher Thom Rainer discovered that "70% of churches are subtracting/declining or plateauing" and adds that his most recent research is "largely consistent with other research we have done."[24]

Churches are declining in size because fewer people attend, and those who do attend do so less often. While the number of people who claim they attend church in the United States has held steady around 40% for decades, the number of people who actually attend on a given Sunday is much lower, at around 18%.[25] Research studies of the church-going habits of the American public continue to document declining

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[23] "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050," Pew Research Center, April 2, 2015, https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/.

[24] Thom Rainer, "Major New Research On Declining, Plateaued, And Growing Churches From Exponential And Lifeway Research," Thom S. Rainer (blog), March 6, 2019, https://thomrainer.com/2019/03/major-new-research-on-declining-plateaued-and-growing-churches-from-exponential-and-lifeway-research/.

[25] "7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America," Church Leaders, April 10, 2018, http://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html.

attendance patterns, with one recent study showing that only 34% of Americans claim to attend worship on a weekly or "near weekly" basis,[26] another noting that actual attendance is about half of claimed attendance,[27] and another noting that we are on the cusp of the largest exodus of congregational participation in history.[28] Even those who consider themselves "regular" attend less often, with a well-traveled statistic reporting the average worshipper attends a service 1.2 times per month. Only 4% of worshippers attend 48 times a year.[29]

In part, fewer people are attending church because fewer people claim Christian faith. Using a three-part metric of affiliation, self-identification and monthly worship attendance, religion researcher George Barna reported in 2016 that only 31% of Americans demonstrated a commitment to Christian faith,[30] an anemic number by historical comparison. The most recent report from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, which conducts the most prominent, ongoing longitudinal research survey of congregational life in America, shows that "more than half of all American congregations [have] less than 100 people in attendance for their weekend worship for the first time in

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[26] "Religion," gallup.com, https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx.

[27] C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, "How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week? An Alternative Approach to Measurement," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 3 (September 2005): 307–322, http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2005.00288.x.

[28] Pinetops Foundation, "The Great Opportunity: The American Church in 2050," Last modified 2018, https://www.greatopportunity.org/.

[29] David Murrow, "Why is church attendance declining – even among committed Christians?" patheos.com (blog), March 7, 2016, http://sixseeds.patheos.com/churchformen/2016/03/why-is-church-attendance-declining-even-among-christians/.

[30] George Barna, "The State of the Church 2016," https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/.

our series" and that "for the first time median weekend attendance has fallen below 100."[31] Southern Baptist Convention President Al Mohler wryly noted in a recent article, "Those who live by statistics will die by statistics."[32]

Having only known a declining ministry narrative in their lifetimes, some pastors and Christian leaders have tried to reframe the conversation. A scan of "growth" titles today finds a shift away from direct appeals to growth and toward synonyms and euphemisms for growth such as "vital" or "fruitful."[33] Some have even begun to normalize decline or rejection of concepts of congregational growth altogether, such as one Episcopal bishop who announced that his denomination's decline was good because they were saving the planet from the risks of over-population.[34]

Original Church Growth

Blessing atrophy and decline is absurd; as evident through natural growth, while not all growing things are healthy, healthy things grow. Clearly, large scale congregational growth of the type to which many pastors aspire is both possible and historical. The early church grew, even though there is no indication from the biblical record that the apostles and early church initially thought of growth in the way of social

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[31] Roozen, *American Congregations 2015*, 2.

[32] R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "The Future of the Southern Baptist Convention: The Numbers Don't Add Up," albertmohler.com (blog), May 31, 2019, https://albertmohler.com/2019/05/31/the-future-of-the-southern-baptist-convention-the-numbers-dont-add-up.

[33] The best-selling congregational growth title published by Abingdon Press in the decade of the 2000s was Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

[34] Deborah Solomon, "State of the Church," *New York Times Magazine*, November 19, 2006. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/19/magazine/19WWLN_Q4.html.

science. The first anecdote of congregational growth is the biblical notation by the Gentile physician Luke about the remarkable moment witnessed by the apostles and disciples on the Day of Pentecost, when after hearing Peter's message, "about three thousand [men] were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:38).

The specific citation of three thousand, as religion sociologist Rodney Stark notes, was certainly rhetorical, not analytical, as well as a later mention in Acts that the community had grown to number five thousand (Acts 4:4). Yet, it is clear that something remarkable happened in order for a religious sect in an obscure sector of the empire to eventually reach the Roman palace. Stark estimates a 3.4% annual growth rate would have been sufficient to create an environment in which Roman Emperor Constantine would have "found it expedient to embrace the growth" by the year 313 CE.[35]

Growth of the Methodist Movement

The history of United Methodism is also instructive. Consider an article in *The Economist* titled "Wesley's Sons and Daughters," which referred to Margaret Thatcher, Nelson Mandela, and Hillary Clinton—three prominent political figures, each with a Methodist upbringing, each with quite different approaches to the world stage. The article acknowledges the disparity and notes,

> If there is any common denominator, it must be an ethos ... From the days of its founder John Wesley, Methodism has been an unusual mixture: passionate about ideas and faith but also passionate about service in the world. (By contrast, most

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[35] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 5.

> action-oriented churches are lukewarm in their theology, while others are too busy with ritual and theology to have much time for the world.)[36]

If anything, *The Economist* underestimates the power of the Methodist ethos in the American psyche. Early Methodism was one of the fastest growing religious movements in American Christian history. About 250 years ago, in 1767, Captain Thomas Webb organized the first Methodist society in America. From these humble beginnings, the Methodist movement grew like a thunderstorm rolling across the central plains. One hundred years later, according to historian Leonard Sweet, more than 40 percent of the population identified themselves as Methodist.[37] Further, about half of all churchgoing people in America were attending a Methodist church. One hundred years later, at the time of the merger that formed the United Methodist Church, that figure had dropped to 13 percent.[38] Today, another 50 years later, that figure is at 5 percent.[39] Methodism has declined as rapidly as it once grew.

Methodism Since 1968

One common narrative explanation for current attendance trends in United Methodism is what is referred to as "sheep swapping," or the phenomenon, akin to the

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[36] Erasmus, "Wesley's Sons and Daughters," The Economist (blog), April 14, 2015, http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2015/04/methodism-and-world-leaders.

[37] Leonard I. Sweet, *The Greatest Story Never Told: Revive Us Again* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), xv.

[38] Figure based on size of U.S. population in 1968, divided by percentage of U.S. population claiming worship attendance in 1968 as reported by Gallup (https://news.gallup.com/poll/166613/four-report-attending-church-last-week.aspx), divided by United Methodist denominational membership at time of merger in April, 1968, reported by John A. Lovelace, "Pastor recalls historic Uniting Conference of 1968," The United Methodist Church, http://archives.gcah.org/bitstream/handle/10516/4242/article37.aspx.htm.

[39] Sweet, *Greatest Story,* xv.

rural to urban migration in the 19th and 20th century United States, in which people vacated smaller congregations for larger ones, often to a different denominational affiliation. Yet my fourteen-year analysis of self-reported average worship attendance among the largest 250 United Methodist congregations in the United States, as recorded by the General Council of Finance and Administration office of the United Methodist Church, reveals that 2016 marked the first year aggregate attendance of the largest 250 United Methodist congregations declined year over year—a trend which has since repeated.[40] Further, in a given year, only about one third of these large churches grow in average worship attendance by at least one percent over the previous year. It seems that large United Methodist congregations, at least, no longer benefit from "sheep swapping."

The aforementioned Schaller milestone dates of 1964 and 1968 are notable. According to social scientist and Methodist congregational researcher Lovett Weems, 1964 marked the zenith of the Methodist institutional involvement in the United States. The next year, the largest predecessor denomination to the United Methodist Church reported a membership loss for the first time.[41] Three years later, in 1968, as sales of Schaller's books began to rise, the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren merged to form the United Methodist Church. But, as Weems writes, "the new

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[40] In 2017, the most recent calendar year for which there is a complete data set of the largest 250 United Methodist congregations, 86 of 260, or 33%, congregations self-reported an increase in average worship attendance of at least 1.0%.

[41] Lovett H. Weems, *Focus: The Real Challenges That Face the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 3.

denomination continued to lose members at an even faster pace than the two denominations had separately."[42] In the 50 year existence of the United Methodist Church, Schaller's books have collectively sold over two million copies, aimed at helping pastors and church leaders develop strategic solutions to grow local churches. In that same time frame, the United Methodist Church in the United States has reported an almost continual decline in membership and average worship attendance, from 11.1 million[43] to 6.9 million[44] in 2019 and still falling.

The End of Engineered Growth?

Congregational growth remains a dominant model of pastoral ministry today. Many pastors understand their work akin to the work of an engineer, designing solutions, making plans, and building systems to grow disciples of Jesus Christ. An entire "Church Growth" industry formed over the last 50 years to advocate for and support this model of pastoral ministry. The biblical and historical record is clear that in specific time periods and cultures, the church has grown, sometimes exponentially. One of those times was the rise of Methodism in America.

Yet, Methodism has declined as quickly as it once grew. Decades of emphasis and strategic initiatives directed to achieve congressional growth has, on aggregate, failed to achieve its aim. In fact, the time frame of the pastor as growth engineer, at least as

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[42] Weems, *Focus*, 3.

[43] John A. Lovelace, "Pastor recalls historic Uniting Conference of 1968," The United Methodist Church. http://archives.gcah.org/bitstream/handle/10516/4242/article37.aspx.htm.

[44] "United Methodists At-A-Glance," The United Methodist Church, http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/united-methodists-at-a-glance

marked by the work of congregational social scientist Lyle Schaller, parallels an almost uninterrupted period of decline in USAmerican congregational involvement.

A plethora of endeavors have been put forth to reverse the downward trend of congregational involvement in America. Each of these strategies have succeeded in stemming decline and fostering growth in some settings and for a short period of time, but none, in spite of decades of emphasis, have solved the aggregate problem of continued decline among United Methodist churches in the United States today. Let us turn to these strategies next.

CHAPTER 2: TREND LINES

Pastors and church consultants have championed a variety of strategies to counter the ongoing decline in church involvement. In this chapter, I offer a brief overview of some of the more broadscale, widely-adopted initiatives, strategies, and tactical maneuvers local church pastors, judicatory executives, congregational consultants and the academy have deployed over the past 50 years. While the goals and aspirations of some of these strategies extend beyond congregational growth, growth forms a basis or maintains a strong correlation to the desired outcome of each. While an in-depth review of any of these initiatives is beyond the scope of this work, the goal of this review is to demonstrate that while each of these strategies have benefitted some congregations and helped many people, none have succeeded in stemming aggregate decline for a long period of time or on a broad scale. Each movement has been tactical in that each has assumed the problem of lack of congregational growth may be solved by a change of strategy and technique. These strategies have largely proven fruitless. Our attempts to grow disciples and congregations simply are not working. In spite of herculean effort, lay and clergy leaders seem unable to stop a seemingly inexorable decline.

A Stretch Goal

When I joined the staff of a large church in the northern suburbs of Dallas, Texas, the talk of the hiring committee and my colleagues was about growth. The congregation had a history of strong growth, and the investment the hiring committee was making in

my unusual position as a Creative and Communications Director was executed with growth in mind.

In a meeting early in my tenure, one of the committee members made an interesting remark. This particular member, who has become a friend, has been successful beyond any reasonable measure in his professional life. Prior to retirement from corporate life, he was a top executive at a major international technology corporation and a primary protege of the central inventor and developer of the transistor, perhaps the most influential invention of the 20th century.

During the meeting, we set some goals and discussed what the next year of church life was going to look like. One of my ministry colleagues declared that he would like to see a four percent increase in average worship attendance in the next year. My corporate friend replied, "That is not much of a stretch goal!"

From his perspective, he was right: based on his experience and understanding in the corporate world, no organization would declare to their shareholders that they were going to break records in the coming year by increasing profit by four percent. Based on the data we had concerning the state of our congregation, he suggested a more aggressive goal. What my friend did not know was that, according to the last 40 years of congregational life, using even the most generous metrics and figures for measuring growth, and even considering early church scholar Rodney Stark's estimation of 3.4% annual congregational growth, four percent was indeed a stretch goal.[45]

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[45] Stark.

Of course, that Methodism has been declining for 50 years is not news. The very thing that pastors and church leaders such as my friend so desperately want is the exact thing that is, according to any sustained metric, has been so difficult to attain. As my friend discovered, while the use of data may be helpful in making leadership decisions for the congregation, congregational life seems to belie the rules of the boardroom.

Pastor as Organizational Executive

The use of data reflects a more systemic approach to ministry that equates the work of the pastor with the work of an organizational chief executive officer. Schaller's approach, adopted by many, was to bring the mind of an engineering or business executive to the work of pastor. Schaller analyzed congregations in the same way an urban developer analyzes urban growth, decay and decline, or a chief executive officer analyzes internal manufacturing and production systems in light of market need and gain.

As outlined by former CEO of Proctor & Gamble A.G. Lafley, business management consultant Peter Drucker defines the role of the CEO as the primary person who 1) oversees the organization for the sake of improving shareholder profit, and 2) decides what to make.[46] This is the core "why" and "what" of corporate life: the why is to make money, and the what is deciding what to make in order to improve the company's ability or efficiency in making money. Schaller's assumption was that a pastor could use the same strategic thinking that might turn around a declining urban area or a declining corporation to turn around a declining church.

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[46] A.G. Lafley, "What Only the CEO Can Do," Harvard Business Review, May 2009, https://hbr.org/2009/05/what-only-the-ceo-can-do.

The rise of efficiency in production can be traced to Frederick Winslow Taylor. Known as the "Optimizer," Taylor was perhaps the premier corporate American consultant of the early 20th century. Prior to Taylor, most craftsman were artisans. They maintained their own tools and their own methods, and interacted directly with the customer, making each work a custom piece tailored to the needs of the customer.[47] Artisans were notoriously inefficient and tended to work according to their own timetable. Taylor applied empirical thinking to management practice. He believed there was one best way to do things. He broke down production into a series of tasks and assigned ideal times to complete each task.

There were benefits to Taylor's work. With a focus on efficiency, Taylor legitimized management as a discipline[48] and was also at least partly responsible for growing the rate of manufacturing in America.[49] His influential emphasis on efficiency helped form a management culture which in turn allowed the United States to quickly develop and deploy armies to defeat the Axis powers in World War II.

By adopting the methods of the mid-20th century boardroom, Schaller's model of church appropriated Taylor's vision of management, including the goal of efficiency. The "why" and the "what" of Schaller's approach correlated with Taylor's approach and was built on a core assumption that the purpose of ministry activity is to improve the

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[47] Stanley A. McChrystal, et al, *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (New York, NY: Portfolio/Penguin, 2015), 40.

[48] McChrystal, 42.

[49] McChrystal,187.

efficiency of production, with the difference of course that the church is maximizing its ability to make disciples, not widgets.

Yet, Taylor's approach to manufacturing came at a high human cost. Taylor worked in a pre-union era in which corporate management treated workers terribly and was willing to sacrifice the health of its work force for the sake of improved production.[50] Early 20th century history is replete with cautionary tales regarding the negative impact of manufacturing prowess on worker health and safety.[51]

Further, the role of the leader in the church is itself problematic. Jesus never recruited leaders.[52] Leadership, to quote Christ follower Leonard Sweet, is a "category mistake."[53] Christ is the leader of the church, and we are all followers, as Paul explained to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:1-9). A focus on leadership becomes a problem in congregational life because of the inevitable, problematic presence of pride. Leadership, as it is modeled in corporate life, is antithetical to the character of Christ, because as Sweet observes, it is a functional position of power, not a relational position of trust.[54] Because of pride, leadership becomes celebrity, and "celebrities end up as prisoners of their own personas, their own publicity campaigns. Celebrity status is a

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[50] McChrystal.

[51] One classic work is The Jungle, a 1906 novel by USAmerican journalist Upton Sinclair, which described deplorable worker conditions in the Chicago meat industry.

[52] Leonard I. Sweet, *I am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 19.

[53] Sweet, 25.

[54] Sweet, 40.

Faustian deal, not with the devil but with vampires. For the price of becoming a celebrity is the loss of self. Your very self is sucked out of you to become a public possession."[55]

The focus on pastor as a leader or organizational executive has not proven sufficient to stem the decline of the church. We will return to the topic of church leadership later.

The Use of Data

As noted, Schaller believed in the power of data as means of diagnosing and solving the seemingly intractable problems of church life. Prior to Schaller, very little thought was given to the demographics surrounding a congregation, or, for example, how far the parking lot was from the front door of the church. Schaller said, "You can't do solution-driven planning without first having a diagnosis. That would be like seeing a doctor who announces, 'I have an opening for you for surgery on Tuesday' without first analyzing what you need… A lot of people want to recreate yesterday or create a new tomorrow, but without a database."[56]

Schaller was prescient for his advocacy of statistical analysis 40 years before the current obsession with quantifiable analysis[57]. By the mid-Aughts, the use of quantifiable metrics had fully emerged as a primary way to measure the effectiveness of a church's

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[55] Sweet, 31.

[56] Bird, 8.

[57] Big data has emerged as its own discipline. For a primer, see Xiaolong Jin et al., "Significance and Challenges of Big Data Research," *Big Data Research* 2, no. 2 (June 2015): 59–64, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bdr.2015.01.006

efforts to grow. (The delayed adoption of business trends by the church is a common recurrence in the Church Growth era. There is a conventional wisdom in church life that pastors are laggards[58] and adopt trends a decade after the private sector. The unspoken assumption is that solutions to the problems of church life are the same solutions that make business successful.)

However, the data has not painted a favorable image. My analysis of fourteen years of worship attendance patterns of growth and decline of the 250 largest United Methodist congregations in the United States shows that only two congregations out of 33,000 have been able to maintain numerical growth over the entire period of the study. Only five have been able to maintain an annual growth rate of 10% or more for ten or more years.[59] Based on the same quantifiable measurements the movement advocates, congregational growth has proven to be quantifiably unsustainable.

As the use of data became more prevalent, and with it reports challenging pastors to increase their numbers, a counter argument developed, encouraging pastors and church leaders to abandon church growth, its invitational orientation, and the data that supported it. Befitting typical cycles of innovation, both the use of data and resistance to the use of data as a tool of ministry seemed to solidify in the professional ecclesial consciousness at the same time. Extensive use of quantitative measures of growth begs the question: Is the

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[58] In Everett Rogers, *The Diffusion of Innovations: Fifth Edition* (The Free Press, New York, NY: 2003), Rogers defines a laggard as the final and most traditional adopter category to change in a social system.

[59] For the most recent report on this study, see Len Wilson, "Top 25 Fastest Growing Large United Methodist Churches, 2019 Edition", lenwilson.us (blog), May 28, 2019, http://lenwilson.us/top-25-fastest-growing-large-umc-2019/.

use of quantifiable metrics a helpful way to answer the question if a church is growing? Data, and for that matter growth, are seen as strategic and tactical questions. Millions of words on leadership have been published addressing issues of best strategy and tactics to succeed in growing the local congregation.[60]

Questions of this nature may differ on the means but agree on the end. What is not questioned are the unnamed epistemological assumptions that drive our understanding of church growth, and that have driven the plethora of church leadership books written in the last 50 years—including my own. As a movement and means of ministry, is church growth a good and a true reflection of Jesus' Great Commission, as expressed in Matthew 28:18-20?

My ministry began among and has been heavily shaped by mentors who shared a value that a pastor or ministry leader should grow his or her local congregation. By growth, in this instance, I am referring to a commonly held conviction that the number of

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[60] Schaller's application of urban planning to the work of the church was a major factor of the rise of the role of the pastor as an organizational leader. For significant works in the resulting disciplines of church growth and church leadership over the past quarter century, in addition to Schaller, see Nancy T. Ammerman, ed., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998); Carl F. George and Warren Bird, *How to Break Growth Barriers: Revise Your Role, Release Your People, and Capture Overlooked Opportunities for Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993); Adam Hamilton and Cynthia Gadsden, *Selling Swimsuits in the Arctic: Seven Simple Keys to Growing Churches* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005); John E. Kaiser, *Winning on Purpose: How to Organize Congregations to Succeed in Their Mission* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006); Gordon McDonald, *Who Stole My Church What to Do When the Church You Love Tries to Enter the 21st Century* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010); Gil Rendle, *Back to Zero: The Search to Rediscover the Methodist Movement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012); Robert C. Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007); Michael Slaughter and Herb Miller, *Spiritual Entrepreneurs: 6 Principles for Risking Renewal* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995); Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012); Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2007); Richard Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995); and Lovett H. Weems, *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, and Integrity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993).

people who call a particular congregation their faith home should increase over time, as measured quantifiably by average weekend worship attendance. There has been a core conviction that growing a church is the most desired outcome of professional ministry life, and that to not grow a church represents a failure of some sort on the part of a church's pastoral and lay leadership. I have not been alone in this assumption; as noted in the introduction, the vast majority of pastors (94%) in 800+ average worship attendance United Methodist congregations in the United States today continue to adhere to the same assumption.[61]

Innovations in Worship and Technology

Strategic and tactical innovations in worship, music, and the application of digital technologies emerged concurrent to leadership trends.[62] Much of my early ministry focus was in the area of application of digital-imaging technology in worship. Professional roles in three large churches, with work as a consultant to many other congregations,

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[61] The survey of the pastors of the top 250 United Methodist congregations in the United States revealed that 94% are "extremely interested" (the highest possible answer) in growing their churches.

[62] An incomplete list of significant works on musical and technological innovations in Christian worship and ecclesiology includes Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2006); Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017); Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995); Quentin Schultze, *High-Tech Worship?: Using Presentational Technologies Wisely* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004); Michael Slaughter, *Out on the Edge: A Wake-Up Call for Church Leaders on the Edge of the Media Reformation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998); Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2000); Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008); and Len Wilson, *The Wired Church: Making Media Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), among others.

have given me a view akin to a vice president of research, development, and innovation in the area of new technologies in worship and church life.

The effect was, for a period, powerful. Worship attendance in my first professional ministry role, where I was hired as the first Media Minister at Ginghamsburg Church, tripled from roughly 1,000 a weekend to 3,000 in the two-year period from 1996 to 1998. Innovations in worship spurred by new technology were a significant part of what may have been the fastest organic, in-venue explosion of growth of a United Methodist congregation in the last 50 years.[63] Innovative worship was also the calling card for the bellwether church for congregational growth in the United States for the past 25 years, Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, outside Chicago. Willow Creek peaked at around 26,000 in attendance each weekend in worship.[64]

These innovations drove what became known as the "seeker-sensitive" movement. Yet in spite of innovative worship practices and success as measured by weekend worship attendance, both Ginghamsburg and Willow Creek recognized they were missing something. Congregational emphasis at Ginghamsburg shifted in the early 2000s to mission work in Sudan. In 2008, Willow Creek published a controversial study that questioned whether their well-known and much emulated worship and technology

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[63] For more on the story of this growth, refer to Michael Slaughter, *Out on the Edge: A Wake-Up Call for Church Leaders on the Edge of the Media Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

[64] An annual list of the Top 100 largest churches in America cited Willow Creek's weekly worship attendance as 26,000 in a 2010 ebook entitled Outreach 100: The Largest and Fastest Growing Churches in America, and 25,343 in 2017 at https://www.sermoncentral.com/content/Top-100-Largest-Churches.

outreach efforts were succeeding at their named ministry goal, "making disciples of Jesus Christ." The study, called REVEAL, made a distinction between on-site weekly worship attendance and the "Great Commission" Jesus gave the earliest disciples, as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20.[65] As pastor Dottie-Escobedo Frank notes regarding the release of the REVEAL study, "thousands of church pastors, who had learned from this very model, were suddenly disillusioned and began a healthy questioning around the core purpose of the church."[66]

Scandal in the lives of prominent pastoral leaders has also played a role in diffusing energy and momentum. The history of churches in this era has been marred by repeated tragedies of high-profile pastors who have fallen to scandal and impropriety, culminating (so far) with the 2018 resignation of the senior pastor of Willow Creek, Bill Hybels, as a result of allegations of sexual misconduct.[67] The impact of negative trends, along with the general fatigue of strategies that have failed to generate significant, sustained numerical growth, have strengthened long-standing, minority counter views regarding the role of data in congregational life.

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[65] It is worth noting that among "seeker-sensitive" congregational methodologies there is not a uniform adherence to quantifiable measurements as indicators of discipleship In an analysis of the Willow Creek REVEAL study, a Christianity Today editorial notes, "Our ongoing concern about seeker-sensitive churches is not their willingness to change church culture so that it is not a needless stumbling block to the unchurched. We're only troubled when such churches uncritically accept the metrics of marketing culture and let consumer capitalism shape the church's theology." "What REVEAL Reveals," Christianity Today, February 27, 2008, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/march/11.27.html

[66] Dottie Escobedo-Frank, "The Church Revolution From The Edge" (2012). George Fox University, D.Min. http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/34, 23.

[67] Bob, Smietana, "Hybels Heir Quits Willow as New Accusations Arise Before Global Leadership Summit", Christianity Today, August 5, 2018, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/august/bill-hybels-steve-carter-resigns-willow-creek-gls-summit.html.

Emerging and Missional Church

As worship and technological innovations proliferated into churches of all sizes and cultural contexts, opponents wary of commercialization and of continued reports of congregational decline, along with increasing antipathy to church in the public square, began to group these innovations under a single, pejorative label: "attractional" church. Driven in part by an emerging cohort of adult children of Church Growth era congregations, these opponents questioned the validity of decision-making based on the goal of increasing weekend attendance, and of the validity of the concept of "relevance" in worship altogether. As I wrote in *The Wired Church 2.0*, some applications of digital innovations in search of growth redefined "relevant" from "resonant" to "recent", which led to a variety of unorthodox experiments in worship and local church life.[68]

This counter-movement instead advocated for a "missional" approach that focused on "going into the world", as opposed to inviting the world to "come and see," and advocated for the re-emergence of theologies of mission and contextual engagement.[69] Yet these strategies, too, focused on growth. Lest the reader consider missional strategies to be fundamentally different in purpose than the previous strategies

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[68] Len Wilson, *The Wired Church 2.0* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008), 37.

[69] Other significant works include Michael Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture* (Greenville, SC: 3DM Publishing, 2009); Michael Frost, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003); George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000); Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009); and Alan Roxburgh, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), among others.

listed, consider leading missiologist Alan Hirsch's lead argument in his influential book *The Forgotten Ways*, that being "missional" enabled the early church to grow from 25,000 members to 20 million members in the 200 years prior to Constantine.[70] Missional church growth is church growth, differently deployed.

Slow and Steady

Generations of church decline do not necessarily suggest that church growth is a red herring. Congregational growth has been possible, historically and in the modern record. As noted, sociologist of religion Rodney Stark estimated that the early Christian church eventually permeated Rome using a meager estimated annual growth rate of 3.4%. Corporate executives may argue that three percent is not a "stretch goal," according to today's standards of economic progress as measured by quarterly stockholder return, but three percent annual growth fits with a 14-year study of worship attendance patterns of the largest 250 United Methodist congregations. In fact, consistent 3.4% annual growth eventually places a congregation on a list of the top 25 fastest growing United Methodist congregations in the United States.[71]

An aphorism dictates that we overestimate what we can do in one year and underestimate what we can do in ten years. So, is the solution simply for pastors and church

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[70] Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006), 19.

[71] For those seeking a number, 3-4% annual congregational growth seems to be a worthwhile target. Christ Church in Fairview Heights, Illinois, pastored by Rev. Shane Bishop, helps provide a bounding range. Christ Church is one of only two churches in the study that have maintained consistent growth over the entire fourteen-year period of the study. Shane became pastor of Christ Church in 1995. Over the 23-year period of Shane's pastorate from 1995-2017, Christ Church grew from an annual average of 210 in worship to an annual average of 2,396. Using Christ Church, a sustained annual growth rate of around 11% seems to be the peak possible target.

leaders to lower expectations to a three percent annual growth rate and be patient? If it was that simple, more churches would do it. One issue is sustainability. To average 3.4% every year, year in and year out, becomes increasingly difficult over time with changes in context, resources and administrative needs as raw numbers increase. Further, not only has three percent annual growth by all reports proven unsustainable over a long period of time, it does not solve the deeper problem that the vast majority of the congregations in America cannot net an increase of 1 person in attendance in a 12-month period.[72]

The bottom line is that most churches do not grow, at least as measured by numerical increases in involvement over time. If growing churches is the goal of congregational ministry, or at least the outcome, then why has the United Methodist Church consistently declined through 50 years of quantifiable emphasis on congregational growth?

For 50 years, the work of ministry has been defined according to strategic solutions and engineered systems. But it is no longer sufficient to diagnose the causes of congregational decline in America, nor is it sufficient to suggest new strategies that might reverse this trend. The dominant model of pastor as parish organizational executive, strategizing the work of church as an engineer would the work of business, has failed in its chief aim. The implementation of innovations in technology, while beneficial in some contexts, has proven insufficient to the problems of decline. Finally, while the re-

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[72] The oft-quoted observation that the majority of churches in the United States are in decline is affirmed by my fourteen-year study, which reveals that in a given year, an average of 70% of the largest 250 United Methodist congregations in the United States decline in average worship attendance.

introduction of missional models has presented needed ecclesiological conversations, aggregate reports of congregational life continue to show decline.

Though each of these named strategies has merit and has clearly benefitted many persons, in aggregate, congregational growth efforts of the last 50 years, at least as measured by the same methods and models that have driven its decisions, have failed. When one strategy for growth failed, churches tried another. Each movement is tactical, each assumes the problem may be solved by a change of strategy and technique, and none to date have succeeded in their aims. The result, at least according to data analysis and engineering models, is continued decline, atrophy and apathy. According to research from congregational social scientist John Thornburg, "nine out of ten churches act as though slow death is preferable to deep change."[73]

Further, in spite of 50 years of ongoing, directed ministry activity specifically geared toward spurring congregational growth, and in spite of a professional clergy appointment system that rewards growth and punishes decline, the rate of decline is actually increasing. This phenomenon of decline is consistent with reporting among and across most Protestant, Western, "first world" faith traditions.[74] If anything, it seems that as the focus on growing churches gets more desperate, the decline accelerates. Church

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[73] John Thornburg, lecture, Texas Methodist Foundation, Dallas, June 10, 2019.

[74] "First world" is notable: there is a strong correlation between congregational decline and Western-influenced cultural contexts. This phenomenon does not extend to congregations in other, less "developed" parts of the world.

Growth social scientist Donald R. House projects that unless trends change, “the last [United Methodist] worship service … will be held in the year 2065.”[75]

Summary

To acknowledge continued congregational decline is not to disparage valiant efforts and sincere intent from ministers and church leaders such as Lyle Schaller whose commitment to Christ’s church is clear. Yet in spite of these herculean efforts in ministry, and in spite of individual success stories scattered throughout United Methodism as well as in other denominational settings, it is clear that a strategic approach to creating congregational vitality and growth has failed. In fact, such an approach correlates significantly with the exact time frame of decline in United Methodism, as well as in most Western Protestant church bodies.

To talk about the failure of church growth can seem shocking. It is akin to declaring the American Dream to be dead. Declaring the decline and even death of Church Growth as a movement may lead to an existential crisis among clergy and church leadership. The questions stack up quickly: Is the goal no longer to grow a church? If a congregation never grows, and only declines, it will atrophy and die. If not growth, then what is the purpose and role of congregational ministry? What is a pastor or church leader who reads the Great Commission to do, if not “grow churches”? What is the purpose of our work in the church? Are we building God’s kingdom with our focus on growth or not?

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[75] Donald R. House, “A National Projection Model for the Denomination in the US,” n.d., https://www.gbhem.org/sites/default/files/documents/clergy/GS_NationalProjectionModel2014.pdf.

What do we do next? How do we as United Methodists recover our hope and the vibrancy of our heritage? What relationship, if any, exists between continued congregational decline prevalent in United Methodist congregations today and broad, cultural understandings of what it means to grow?

U.S. Army Colonel H. Wayne Wilson, commenting on the life and death situation of leading troops in combat, said, "Mistakes in the initial deployment cannot be overcome."[76] The mistake of Church Growth is the deployment of a litany of strategies to solve a problem that is not primarily strategic. Instead, the primary problem lies in our language,[77] including our understanding and deployment of the word "growth" and in our understanding of the Great Commission. The core question and human problem of congregational growth is the basic question of how we define growth itself. In order to reconcile the problems of congregational growth, the church needs a new definition for "growth."

What do we mean by growth? The first prerequisite is to revisit the mission of the church in light of the word "growth." Church growth is personal faith growth, in community. Willow Creek's aforementioned REVEAL study marked a symbolic close to the end of the Church Growth era. Our present situation is one in which it seems like pastors value the concept of growing churches but no longer value the practice of Church Growth. Part of this shift is related to personal faith growth. American religion is

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[76] H. Wayne Wilson, interview by author, Temple, TX, April 4, 2019.

[77] I am not the first to suggest our problem is in our language. In his book on missional church, consultant Reggie McNeal advocates both "changing the scorecard" and "changing the language." See Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 19-20.

notorious for its overly individualistic approach to faith. But Jesus calls his followers to be in community with one another and healing the breaks that sin causes in human relationships is a core part of what it looks like when someone follows Jesus. This is not an exploration of privatized religion.

Second, church growth is a part of the life of the body of Christ. It is in local churches—etymologically, little "bodies of Christ"—where people find community and grow into the full human life for which they were designed. The entire New Testament can be read as a story of growth, in people, in communities and in congregations. The desire to help guide people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ is a fundamental telos of ministry. The more a pastor shepherds people into a relationship with Jesus, and other followers of Jesus, the more a church grows; thus, congregational growth is a natural outcome of ministry, insofar as it reflects the aims of discipleship.

According to this understanding, congregational growth should be quantifiable. Indeed, many pastors continue to look to metrics as a measure of congregational growth, where growth is defined according to incremental improvements in the so-called 3 Bs of ministry—butts, budgets, and buildings. This form of evaluation is not new. As long as there has been weekly worship, church leaders have looked to an increase in the number of heads in the room as an indicator of the vitality of the congregation and community.

Yet this definition of growth is insufficient. My aim is to offer more than a recommendation of a specific instrumental, strategic, or tactical approach to the work of ministry, but to question axiomatic views about ministry. By digging up and changing deeply entrenched metaphors, I aim to reframe the way in which we view the very work of ministry. This solution to our problems of decline is about the church and it is about

growth—but it is about much more than simply exploring new strategies for growing churches. It is about our definition of growth itself, and all that it entails.

The problem is not with "growth," per se. Jesus affirms growth as a value in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-9). Growth is good and desirable, in plants and in humans. Our problem is with the way in which we have conflated growth with deep metaphors of modern culture. To our detriment, we have adopted specific meanings for growth that shape our behavior in ministry, and these meanings come from sources outside of the Scriptures and Christian tradition.

Growth begins in relationship. It suggests fruit of the new creation, a core theme of the New Testament.[78] It leads to mission. But naming definitions and strategies for any of these characteristics will not solve our problem. And while these words may sound disparate, and may lead to a variety of ends, what girds all of the above together is a common word, and it is this word that we must parse if we are to truly understand what we are doing in church life today. This word is progress. Our understanding of the word "growth," like all words, is semiotic. It exists as but one sign within an entire system of signs. This work argues that the word growth exists within a "deep metaphor" of improvement rooted in a secular belief of progress that, as historian Ronald Wright observes, has "ramified and hardened into an ideology—a secular religion which, like the religions that progress has challenged, is blind to certain flaws in its credentials."[79] Deeply embedded ideologies become myths, or unseen metaphors that shape our

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[78] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 20.

[79] Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), 4.

assumptions. These deep metaphors, which the Appendix to this work explores in depth, become iconographic, invisible, longitudinal and cross-cultural, and find resonance and shape meaning with large groups of people and for long periods of time.

Our semiotics of the word "growth" are shaped by such a myth. The ideology of progress is a belief system consisting of incremental, inexorable improvement of the human condition through social, economic and technological advancement over time and achieved through science and technology. Ironically, progress finds its roots in Jewish and Christian theology, but has been secularized by the influence of Enlightenment philosophy. We have based our congregational work on an ideology of progress, and our resulting culture of improvement is rooted deeply in our psyche. It exerts an enormous, subconscious influence on our decisions and behaviors. As Americans, we believe in progress. The power of positive thinking is built into our founding documents. It can be argued that, in spite of the ferocity of our disagreements, the majority of social and political difference in culture today are strategic and tactical, and even false in their assumed dichotomies—left versus right, holiness versus justice, scripture versus reason, institution versus mission.

Regardless of our preferred strategy for getting there, it seems that we believe we are progressively improving God's kingdom in some capacity, even though both secular and Christian critics rightly note the inadequacies of the "power of positive thinking". One meta-study claims that "positivity" produces success as much as it reflects success[80]

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[80] Barbara Fredrickson, *Positivity: Top-Notch Research Reveals the Upward Spiral That Will Change Your Life* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 27.

while positivity researcher Barbara Ehreneich writes that "perpetual growth, whether in a particular company or an entire economy, is of course an absurdity, but positive thinking makes it seem possible, if not ordained."[81]

Further, in the language of growth we like to look "onward and upward." We describe our actions and futures as generating hoped-for social, political, economic improvement via technology. We signify growth as an upwardly sloping lines, or an "incline," represented by a chart with a line going up away from the center point, increasing in both X and Y values. When we describe "growth" using images and signs of progress such as an incline, we conflate our efforts to live faithfully in God's kingdom with secular ideologies of progress and incremental improvement.

What influence does this image have? Deep metaphors such as progress form unseen bounding boxes that influence what we assume to be real. They shape our assumptions and actions, which are helpful pragmatic frameworks but become limiting and even dangerous when as incomplete representations of reality, they prevent us from discovering new references and categories for meaning. When meaning becomes conflated with a deep metaphor, our understanding of a word can move from "sticky" to "stuck."

How does unexamined adherence to the deep metaphor of improvement, and conflation of improvement with classic Christian virtues, shape Christian work and life? If the church has adopted a social construct of progress, we need to know more about the conflation of improvement with classic Christian virtues, so that we can develop a more

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[81] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 8.

biblical understanding of human creativity, Christian ministry and the inauguration of God's kingdom.

If we want to change our fifty-year long inability to grow the church, the most important thing we can do is not improve our strategic plans or rational arguments. It is to examine the deep metaphor in our minds about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. If we are to understand growth, we must understand the influence of the incline. It is to this subject that we will turn next.

PART TWO: LINE OF ASCENT - HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

The work of redefining a word as seemingly fundamental as "growth" necessitates more than facile offerings to be blithely accepted or rejected. Instead, it is necessary to dig into deep images that drive our assumptions and therefore our behavior. Attempts to create lasting change in the church begin not simply by naming new images, but by breaking old images that limit us. In other words, true ecclesiastical reform is an iconoclastic endeavor.[82] *But what image are we trying to break? What, if any, is the comparative, dynamic relationship between our use of the word "growth" and any deep metaphors of improvement? While the original reformers broke images hanging on sanctuary walls, the core image we must break today is an image in our mind. The goal of Part Two is to examine the development of the deep metaphor of improvement in light of an ideology of progress, signified as a line rising to heaven.*

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[82] Matthew Wills, "A Short Guide to Iconoclasm in Early History," JSTOR Daily, January 28, 2015, https://daily.jstor.org/short-guide-iconoclasm-early-history/.

CHAPTER 3: INCLINE

The work of understanding the deep metaphor of improvement begins with identifying the image of the ascending line, or the incline. This begins with a philosophy of history. This chapter establishes the relationship of growth to time; the emergence of linear history—including its Christian roots; the emergence of progress as an Enlightenment ideal; and the signification of history as an incline.

Progress, like growth, presumes a relationship with time. When we talk about growth, we suggest that to grow means to improve or get better over time, whether it is the size of our house, bank account, social media following or our local congregation. Thus, the first place to begin with an examination of the semiotics of the word growth is the relationship between growth and time.

Such a question is as old as history itself. In order to understand church growth, we must begin with a philosophy of history, which takes us to views of history from antiquity. Ancient creation myths and the Greek concept of *physis*[83] are indications that as long as humankind has had a sense that time passes from one experience to the next, there has been with this passing an awareness of a corresponding question of purpose. Is there a teleological structure to history? If so, what is it, and what is our role in it? A philosophy of growth necessitates a philosophy of time, which can be broken down into

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[83] *Physis* represents an "intrinsic pattern of growth through which everything that exists in the universe moves towards the fulfillment of its intrinsic ends." The difference between *physis* and progress is the application of natural growth to societal development. See Daniel Chernilo, "Social Change and Progress in the Sociology of Robert Nisbet," *Society* 52, no. 4 (August 2015): 324–334. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12115-015-9908-0.

an understanding of the past, present, and future. Our conceptions of the past and future have profound implications on our actions in the present, particularly in Christian ministry. The thinking Christian must develop both a philosophy and a theology of history. To be anti-historical is to accept the Gnostic heresy. If we do not live in history, we are not a people of the God of history.[84] Thus, addressing questions of meaning in history, which we may consider a theology of history, is a necessary prerequisite to addressing questions of Christian growth.

In our present age, to talk about a philosophy of history is to talk about a philosophy of progress. For the last three hundred years, Jewish-Christian Western civilization has lived with a view of history known as progress, which I define as belief in the incremental, inexorable improvement of the human condition through social, economic, and political advancement over time and achieved through science and technology. American intellectual Stephen Pinker names reason, science, humanism, and progress as the four ideals of the Enlightenment era, which he identifies as a period spanning roughly the last two-thirds of the 18th century through the first half of the 19th century.[85] Counter to the later Romantic mysticism attached to progress, Pinker claims that Enlightenment progress is "prosaic, a combination of reason and humanism," and anti-spiritual.[86] True scientific progress is specific, tangible, and deliberate. The

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[84] Dr. Leonard I. Sweet, lecture, George Fox University, March 11, 2019.

[85] Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York, NY: Viking, 2018), 11.

[86] Pinker.

Enlightenment era introduced progress as a specific philosophy of history, signified as an upward sloping line.

Historically speaking, progress is a new creed.[87] It is also a dominant creed. Its hegemony has made impugning it difficult—even sacrilegious. “To reject the very idea of progress must appear extreme, if not willfully perverse,” philosopher John Gray writes. “Yet the idea is found in none of the world's religions and was unknown among the ancient philosophers.”[88]

While commonplace today, the idea of progress was once radical and even revolutionary. Progress was so seditious that it disrupted millennium-old Christian theology. If it is truly possible to improve society over time, to change the world for the better, then how should Christians live? Progress implies that perfectibility, including the “kingdom of God”, might be achievable on Earth. Its influence has gradually oriented the Christian life toward work conducted for the sake of developing, or to use a term I often hear in church life, “advancing”, this kingdom. Progress forced foundation shaking questions on followers of Jesus in the age of science. It raised questions of human purpose (teleology) and human destiny (eschatology). The image of progress became normative in culture. Everyone has believed in it; political theories of socialism versus capitalism have been merely questions of tactics.

While progress is a big topic spanning a variety of disciplines and hundreds of years of scholarly activity, and a comprehensive study of philosophies of history is

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[87] John Gray, “An Illusion with a Future,” *Daedalus* 133, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 10, http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A122376623/AONE?u=newb64238&sid=AONE&xid=005041ee.

[88] Gray.

beyond the scope of this work, this overview provides necessary context to enable us to identify progress as a deep metaphor, contextualize it, and separate it from the work of the church.

Circle

A philosophy of history may be signified as a set of shapes, and any analysis of the shapes of history must begin with a circle. Indeed, the most well-worn axiom on a philosophy of history is that it repeats itself. American scholar Thomas Cahill writes, "All evidence points to there having been, in the earliest religious thought, a vision of the cosmos that was profoundly cyclical."[89] Because a circle ends where it begins, nothing was ever new; thus, meaning was found not in the future but in an immutable, eternal past. "No event is unique, nothing is enacted but once … every event has been enacted, is enacted, and will be enacted perpetually; the same individuals have appeared, appear, and will appear at every turn of the circle."[90]

Because a circle ends where it begins, meaning in antiquity was found in an immutable, eternal past. Various ancient, pagan cosmologies shared this common philosophy of history, with seasons to every year and life, and gods to oversee them. As the writer of Ecclesiastes observes, "whatever has happened—that's what will happen again; whatever has occurred—that's what will occur again. There's nothing new under

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[89] Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Knopf Doubleday), 5.

[90] Cahill.

the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:3) Journalist Frederick Raphael writes, "progress was neither celebrated nor expected in the ancient world. Greeks were more likely to refer back to their Golden Age, Jews to Eden (and later to lost Jerusalem); Romans set great store by the *mos maiorum*, the routine of aristocratic ancestors, who knew best."[91] Greek philosophy offered perhaps the most well-articulated enunciation, described by French political theorist Alain de Benoist:

> For the Greeks, eternity alone is real. Authentic being is immutable: circular motion, which ensures the eternal return of same in a series of successive cycles, is the most perfect expression of the divine. If there are rises and falls, progress and decline, it is within a cycle inevitably followed by another (Hesiod's theory of the succession of the ages, Virgil's return of the golden age). In addition, the major determining factor comes from the past, not the future.[92]

Perhaps the premiere progress scholar is historian J.B. Bury, who wrote that Aristotle believed "all arts, sciences, and institutions have been repeatedly, or rather an infinite number of times … discovered in the past and again lost."[93] And then later: "The theory of world-cycles was so widely current that it may almost be described as the orthodox theory of cosmic time among the Greeks, and it passed from them to the Romans."[94] Gray writes that "for Aristotle, history was a series of processes of growth

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[91] Frederic Raphael, *Antiquity Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 44.

[92] Alan de Benoist, "A Brief History of the Idea of Progress," *The Occidental Quarterly*, 8 no. 1 (Spring 2008), 8.

[93] J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (London, UK: The Macmillan and Company, 1920), loc. 173-174.

[94] Bury, loc. 208-209.

and decline no more meaningful than those we observe in the lives of plants and animals."[95]

Although other shapes of history emerged over time, the circle has persisted. Notable adherents include Giambattisa Vico (whom one scholar described as the "father of the concept of a philosophy of history"[96]), Oswald Spengler, Henry Adams, Nikolay Danilevsky, Albert Schlesinger, Jr. and Karl Marx, who famously wrote that history always repeats itself, "the first as tragedy, the second as farce."[97]

Marx aside, socialist ideals of the Enlightenment are largely built on a philosophical foundation of political progress, as we will explore. Notably, however, socialist idealism and revolutionary experiments of the last 200 years have largely failed to prevent the reassertion of longstanding cultural attitudes; for example, "in the Soviet Union, by the 1930s, most of the attributes of the Russian empire had reappeared."[98]

Anthropologist Mary Douglas observes the permeation of the image of the circle in ancient thought through an analysis of literature, in which she highlights the presence of what she describes as "ring composition." Ring composition "is based on parallelism in the straightforward sense that one section has to be read in connection with another that is parallel because it covers similar or antithetical situations… But the parallel

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[95] Gray.

[96] Matthew W. Slaboch, *A Road to Nowhere: The Idea of Progress and Its Critics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 112.

[97] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon," *Die Revolution* (New York, NY, 1852).

[98] David Lempert. "The Myth of Social Progress, Revisited." *Human Figurations* 5, no. 1 (March 2016), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0005.107.

sections are not juxtaposed in the texts. They must be placed opposite each other, one on each side of the ring. The structure is chiastic [mirrored]; it depends on the "crossing over" or change of direction of the movement at the middle point."[99]

The circle, notably a core feature of story structure,[100] offers a hint regarding the power of deep metaphors in shaping views of the world. In introducing the ubiquity of ring composition in ancient literature, Douglas highlights the deconstructionist prejudice of linear thinking, noting for example that "the structure of Jeremiah, and especially of its apparently chaotic chronology, has proved elusive to linear, critical investigators, many of whom have declared the text to be in disarray and have attempted a reconstruction of an 'original.'"[101]

Straight Line

The Jewish people of the Old Testament were the first group to break out of the circle. What caused Jewish thinking to become distinctive from its contemporaries was their understanding of Yahweh's presence. According to anthropologist David Lempert, the Jewish people introduced four innovative concepts which influenced other cultures: "beliefs of individual free will, of a single 'God', of a method of how societies would

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[99] Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition. Terry Lecture Series* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 6.

[100] Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (Los Angeles: Michael Wiese Productions, 1998), 187-188.

[101] Douglas, 11. Douglas' insight offers a succinct summary of the hubris of form critical theories of Scripture.

advance in parallel to the advance of technology, and the idea of historical processes moving linearly as a result of human action."[102]

One of the influences of the emergence of monotheism is a change in the orientation toward time. If God interacts with humankind, then history becomes driven by a series of unique events and the past no longer defines the future. These concepts became signified as a "straight line" orientation toward history. French political theorist Alain de Benoist writes,

> Temporality … is directed towards the future, from Creation to the Second Coming, the Garden of Eden to the Last Judgment. The golden age no longer lies in the past, but at the end of times: history will end, and it will end well, at least for the saved… This linear temporality excludes any eternal return, any cyclic conception of history based on the succession of ages and seasons.[103]

Thus, the circle and the line became two distinct orientations toward history: the circle's orientation is toward the past and the straight line's orientation is toward the future. Eventually the Hebrew tradition's conception of linear time spread across multiple religious traditions.[104]

The shift from the circle to the straight-line view has been, to this point in history, absolute. The Hebrew understanding of history eventually became the predominant philosophy of history in the ancient world.[105] The circle as a philosophy of history and an

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[102] Lempert.

[103] Alain de Benoist, "A Brief History of the Idea of Progress." *The Occidental Quarterly* 8 no. 1 (Spring 2008), 8.

[104] Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 88.

[105] de Benoist.

epistemological structure is so lost in contemporary rhetoric that in a lecture on the presence of "rings" in ancient literature, anthropologist Mary Douglas treated them as a discovery akin to finding a textual fossil.[106]

Finality

Establishing the difference between the circle and line, however, does not satisfy any particular sense of meaning or purpose, because "if linearity and uniqueness are the sole features of history it is consistent to argue that history is but a collection of unique events moving aimlessly forward."[107]

From its beginning, what made the Christian story distinct from its Jewish roots was not just that a line existed, but what happened at its end. Whereas a straight line at some point simply stops—indeed, the Sadducees, the ruling Jewish class of Jesus' day, did not believe in bodily resurrection (Mark 12:18)—the story of the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth suggests a fundamental "transformation," or changing of shape, at the end of the line. Because of the Resurrection, the end of the line introduces a structurally different reality than the events of history that preceded it.

Christian theologian Augustine explored a distinct philosophy of history through an emphasis on linearity coupled with change: "time does not exist without some

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[106] Douglas, 10. The recognition of rings in ancient texts requires a macro analysis of long form writing, which runs counter to the micro emphasis of biblical criticism.

[107] Victor Dias, "St. Augustine on the Structure and Meaning of History" (master's thesis, Concordia University, 1996), 83.

movement and transition, while in eternity there is no change."[108] The Christian story introduces a third variable, finality, to the structure of history.[109] It is not linearity and unique events, per se, but the resulting transformational change in ontological state that characterizes the Christian story. Sociologist Daniel Chernilo writes, "While in antiquity cycles were understood to have repeated themselves, the key transformation that was elicited by Christian philosophy, and which was then adopted in modern times, was that history moves in a progressive trajectory that is depicted as unique and directed to the fulfillment of its own pre-inscribed ends."[110]

In other words, in the Christian story, the end of history is more than simply a line that stops. In *City of God*, Augustine expands on Jesus' metaphor of child development to codify a radical new Christian idea that the story of humanity ends with positive change, both for the individual and for all of civilization.[111]

The basis for the future ideology of progress is evident in the combination of variables of linearity, uniqueness, and finality.[112] After Christianity became the dominant religion of the Western world under the Roman ruler Constantine, the Christian understanding of history as a line, coupled with some sort of transformed finality, emerged as the *de facto* cultural understanding of time. But this understanding was more eschatological than historical - while Christianity provided an end to history

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[108] Augustine, *City of God, Book 11.6.*

[109] Dias, iii.

[110] Daniel Chernilo, "Social Change and Progress in the Sociology of Robert Nisbet," *Society* 52, no. 4 (August 2015): 324–334, http://link.springer.com/10.1007/s12115-015-9908-0.

[111] Augustine, *City of God, Book 5.2.*

[112] de Benoist, 10.

(eschatology) and from it a purpose to our place in history (teleology), events themselves were not necessarily understood as part of a grand sequence on a gradual, incremental incline to said end.

While from the vantage point of millennia, this shift seems definitive and irresolute, neither linearity, unique events or even finality prescribe a concomitant inexorable increase or improvement in value or orientation. What caused the straight line to become an increasing line, or, to use the linguistic shorthand, an "incline"?

The Rise of Progress

In part due to the 2016 election of U.S. President Donald Trump and apparent cultural rejection of longstanding, positive attitudes toward science and technology, a set of books emerged defending the ideal of progress. A key justification of these apologetics is the rise of standards of living since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in early 19th century England. The beginnings of progress however, go back much further.

In the 1600s, the philosopher Descartes created a research methodology that "revolutionized the developing field of science and changed the way mankind thinks in the world."[113] Descartes was a devout Catholic who was obsessed with certainty. His obsession culminated in *The Discourse on Method*, which ended with the simple observation that all might be doubted except one thing; namely, that he, the doubter, existed, because he doubted. His famous dictum *cogito ergo sum*, "I think therefore I am"

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[113] Charles Lincoln Van Doren, *A History of Knowledge: Past, Present, and Future* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1993), 203.

includes a lesser-known margin note that says, “we cannot doubt of our existence while we doubt.”[114] This has been summarized as d*ubito ergo sum*, or “I doubt; therefore I am.” The Cartesian *raison d’être* is doubt—not faith. In his obsession with knowledge, Descartes created a divide between science and religion that lasts to this day: while the epistemological basis for religion is faith, the epistemological basis for science is doubt.

Cartesian doubt provided a basis for scientific inquiry as philosophy. Empiricism, introduced by natural philosopher and Reformed Protestant Francis Bacon, promised to answer questions through the systematic use of human sense and experience—which Bacon championed not outside the church but as an “instauration” or restoration of humanity’s dominion over creation lost in Adam’s fall.[115]

Previously, the eternal balance of the fundamental “humors”—earth, fire, water, and air—had formed the basis for knowledge. All knowledge was rooted in sense experience, as art historian Jack Hartnell writes about medieval medicine:

> …so revered were these texts that they often took precedence over observation of the actual medieval body itself. This goes some way toward explaining why anyone might have kept going with cow dung, boar's bile or bleeding. Consistency in implementing the medicine of their learned forebears was the paradigm of this medicinal movement, not innovation. Even if a particular method seemed questionable or ineffective—and at times they must have—to find a new route through medieval bodies would have required the overturning of centuries of thought.[116]

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[114] Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, 1637, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/59/59-h/59-h.htm, Part IV.

[115] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years, 1st American ed.* (New York, NY: Viking, 2010), 775.

[116] Jack Hartnell, *Medieval Bodies: Life, Death and Art in the Middle Ages* (London, UK: Profile Books Ltd, 2018), 16.

Empirical thinking provided the foundation for this intellectual revolution. Practical observation, rather than theological tradition, led to an “enlightenment” of the Western mind. Perhaps more than any other orientation, the fundamental shift of the Enlightenment epoch has been a move away from a backward-looking way of thinking, toward a future orientation defined by “principles of experiment and trial and error.”[117] The Enlightenment replaced the four ancient pillars of earth, water, fire, and air with four new, “modern” (etymologically, “measure”, suggesting experimentation) pillars: science, reason, humanism, and progress. Empirical discovery replaced the intertwining of the four humors as the basis for shared, applied human knowledge.

Empiricism introduced inquiry and testing, through which scientists and scientific thinkers began to solve longstanding human problems in a variety of fields, and over time began to realize tangible change and improvement in problems that had once seemed intractable and unsolvable. These improvements, particularly in areas such as medicine and engineering, were measurable, widespread, and visible, and led to growth in human knowledge, standards of living, and longevity. Improvements were so rapid and so ubiquitous that an entire philosophy of history began to emerge which suggested that, because of science, improvement in the human condition itself was, over time, incremental and inexorable. What was happening in science seemed possible in society, politics, and even religion.

The application of scientific thinking and subsequent improvements to the human condition seemingly made its value self-evident. To the Christian, the discovery of

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[117] Hartnell, 15.

powerful new technologies offered a natural explanation to Augustine's different ending of history with social improvement created by the scientific method. The image of history as an incline toward a perfect end, the ideology of progress, and the concept of a philosophy of history itself begin here.

The split came into full form in a philosophical argument in the late seventeenth century that pitted two opposing worldviews.[118] A group of philosophers including Terrasson, Charles Perrault, the Abbé of Saint-Pierre, and Fontenelle[119], building on ideas established by Descartes and his contemporary, the cleric and theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet[120] a generation earlier, began to argue that the rise of new technologies, specifically, the printing press, firearms and the nautical compass, had created a definitive split in history. This "quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns," as it was called, challenged longstanding beliefs about authority and whether authority was best found in antiquarianism or experimental science.

As noted, to the Ancients time was immutable, eternity alone was real, and any progress was inevitably followed by decline, in a perpetual cycle. As such, authority was found in the past, not the future. Consider our words for authority, such as monarch or oligarch, which find their root in the Greek *arche*, a word that means the origin or beginning. Fueled by the new collision of ideas of nature and history, the Moderns argued for a new form of authority based on empiricism, which modeled itself after the scientific

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[118] Philip P. Wiener, ed. "Ancients and Moderns in the Eighteenth Century," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Volume 1* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 76-87.

[119] de Benoist, 8.

[120] Chernilo, 4.

method and consisted of forming arguments and citing evidence in a step-by-step forward progression, from beginning to end. The Moderns combined "the early idea of *physis* as the necessary movement towards the fulfillment of any unit's intrinsic properties … into an idea of natural history that is to account for the unfolding of these constitutive properties over time."[121] Where the new, modern view shifted from orthodox Christian teaching was with the notion that knowledge was discovered through empiricism, as opposed to revealed by God. Opposing the long-held belief in immutable truth, in which all knowledge had been discovered in a previous age, the Moderns argued for a fundamental re-orientation toward knowledge through discovery, which oriented the locus of knowledge toward the future, not the past. Moderns agreed with Christianity in the concept of a fundamental unity of humanity but suggested that all are called to improve or even transform in the same direction together, a consequence of which became that it is the responsibility of humankind to do the work. Thus, moderns concluded that humankind must assert itself over nature.

This future orientation supplanted the straight line begun with the Hebraic understanding of God, Greek concepts of *physis* and early Christian theology, replacing it with an incline, and circular concepts of time and knowing continued a slow fade in human consciousness.

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[121] Chernilo.

CHAPTER 4: DRAWING THE LINE

Consequences of the semiotics of the incline on culture are vast, including political, technological, social, economic, and epistemological. The rise of mechanization has correlated with a rise in human agency. We all think we are makers now. This deep metaphor plays out in daily life as a focus on improvement.

Consider again the field of medicine to understand the power of the emerging ideology of progress. Before the introduction of Cartesian doubt, and Baconian empiricism, authority was rooted in the past, and knowledge of authority was artisanal—which was fine in the arts, but often deadly in the sciences. For example, the use of leeches to "bleed" patients continued for centuries, in spite of its failure as a practice. Political scientist Philip Tetlock writes,

> When George Washington fell ill in 1799, his esteemed physicians bled him relentlessly, dosed him with mercury to cause diarrhea, induced vomiting, and raised blood-filled blisters by applying hot cups to the old man's skin. A physician in Aristotle's Athens, or Nero's Rome, or medieval Paris, or Elizabethan London would have nodded at much of that hideous regimen. Washington died.[122]

Empiricism shifted authority from the past to the future. Science promised to answer questions through the systematic study of natural human experience. As shared knowledge gained through inquiry incrementally improved many facets of society, humans gradually avoided making the same mistakes over and over. Doctors (eventually)

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[122] Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2015), 26.

quit sticking leeches on people to heal them. Indeed, it is not difficult to see that empiricism has made people healthier.

Out of its success in the scientific disciplines, the notion of incremental improvement began to permeate the humanities, philosophy, and the realm of knowing and epistemology, eventually creating a meta-narrative of "progress," that things are continuing to get better over time. McGilchrist notes proponents of this "enlightenment" believe "that all genuine questions can be answered, that if a question cannot be answered it is not a question, that all answers are knowable, and that all the answers must be compatible with one another."[123] It was a proverbial cultural light being turned on after centuries of endless dusk.

That society was improving incrementally with every passing generation was perhaps self-evident to thinking, affluent Europeans of the time. Industrial culture yielded massive improvements to standards of living for many British citizens. The "incline" as an historiographical image is prominent in 19th century literature, particularly in the wake of Marx.[124]

In retrospect, it is easy to see how the Enlightenment challenged a centuries-old epistemology rooted in Christian faith. The English etymology of the word "progress" is tied to a king's journey through the kingdom. In Latin, it is literally to "take steps forward." Progress became not just a result of empiricism, or even an ideal, but an

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[123] McGilchrist, 336.

[124] Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society; Or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization (*New York: H. Holt, 1877).

ideology, a belief in social, economic and technological improvement that is incremental, inexorable—and increasingly immediate.

Implications of the Incline

Incremental improvement gave the ideology of progress an allure that became hegemonic. Let us briefly consider the implications of the incline, as opposed to the circle or line, as a dominant historiography.

Political

One implication is that the ideology of progress raised new questions of political control—namely, under whose agency does the end of history, whether initially characterized in Christian terms as God's kingdom or in more recent secular terms as a "great society,"[125] emerge? Does it emerge as the result of the work of a sovereign deity, a king given god-like power, or the result of human agency, also known as "the people"? As Dias writes, "one of the differences between the idea of progress and Augustine's view of providence ultimately depends on whether or not the psychical and social elements of humanity are the sovereign factors in history."[126]

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[125] U.S. President Lyndon Baines Johnson introduced the "Great Society" as an ambitious set of social reforms in 1964. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-64*. Volume I, entry 357 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1965), 704-707.

[126] Dias, 94.

It has been said that America and the entire democratic experiment was founded on the Enlightenment.[127] Pinker's four pillars are evident in the founding constitutional papers of the American experiment. Progress emerged in the Enlightenment, was articulated in the British empire, was reinforced by the early American pioneer spirit, and reached its peak in the technology that achieved American victory in the Second World War. Slaboch observes, "There is no alternative tradition to optimism in America. It is a country founded at the height of the Enlightenment and imbued with a faith in progress."[128]

Technological

The engine of Enlightenment progress has been mechanization, which began in the English textile industry in the mid-18th century and replaced ancient hand processes with efficient machinery. "Luddite" workers broke the machines, but the machines eventually took over the industry. The Industrial Revolution was based on two simple, scientific concepts: every endeavor could be broken down into simple tasks, and those tasks could be accomplished on assembly lines. This thinking gave rise to machines that

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[127] For a counter view, consider Daniel R. Griswold (@danielrgriswold), "What Christianity is about — much to the horror of the Enlightenment — is that world history really did reach its climax, not when Thomas Jefferson wrote the American Constitution, or Voltaire or Rousseau wrote what they were writing, but when Jesus of Nazareth died & rose again," Twitter, September 30, 2019, 8:46 a.m., https://twitter.com/dannonhill/status/1178667425635733509.

[128] Slaboch, 111.

could replace human labor.[129] The vast majority of jobs available in the early 1800s no longer exist, a phenomenon now known as "technological unemployment."

Technology found a good fit in the United States. Founded at the height of Enlightenment intellectual hegemony, the United States is an experiment in the power of progress. From the beginning its values have been Enlightenment values and technology its calling card. For example, the 40-year period prior to World War I was a period of intense technological innovation and social disruption, much like the one American culture experiences now. Conventional references to the "modern" world begin here, with such disruptive technological advancements as electricity, the automobile, film and radio, and more. These new technologies broadened people's view of the world, such as one young man in the first decade of the 20th century who could not believe it when he picked up the radio signal from a doctor in a neighboring town, broadcasting, "Can anyone hear me west of Steubenville?"[130] Reflecting on the power of radio, broadcaster Peter Jennings writes, "radio was to the air as the automobile was to the earth, an agent of transport to a world as wide open as the imagination."[131]

The human imagination seemed to be the only limit to what was possible. One of the foremost American progress prophets was "imagineer" Walt Disney. His theme park remains a sanctuary of family-friendly Enlightenment ideals. After a half-century, the

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[129] Isaacson, 33. While there is no agreed-upon inventor of the modern computer, Isaacson attempts in his book *The Innovators* to give credit to Charles Babbage, an English mathematician whose prototype "Difference Engine" aimed to replace human tasks with machines.

[130] Peter Jennings and Todd Brewster, *The Century* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 108.

[131] Jennings, 110.

number one family vacation destination in the United States remains Walt Disney World.[132] One of its signature attractions, and one that supposedly Walt loved the most,[133] is called The Carousel of Progress, which resides in the middle of a themed area titled Tomorrowland.

While Tomorrowland has been a staple of Walt Disney World since its opening in 1971, the ride itself premiered several years earlier, in the 1964 New York World's Fair. By the early 1960s, Disney's oeuvre had become synonymous in the cultural lexicon as both art and ode to technology and scientific progress, while over the previous century, a series of World's Fairs in Europe and the United States had been commercial showcases for human scientific advancement.[134] Walt Disney and the World's Fair were a fitting marriage. When New York World's Fair chief architect Robert Moses "bragged months before opening day that 'Michelangelo and Walt Disney are the stars of my show,' it wasn't an exaggeration." Moses' public relations executive called it the greatest single event in human history.[135]

Mid-twentieth century America was a time and space in which such exaggeration seemed reasonable. Of the three American World's Fairs, the 1964 New York World's Fair aimed to be the biggest. The nation had survived the Great Depression and won the

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[132] "Best Family Vacations," U.S. News and World Report, https://travel.usnews.com/rankings/best-family-vacations/.

[133] Jena Pugh, "5 Oldest Walt Disney Rides That Are Still Around Today," Best of Orlando, May 16, 2016, https://www.bestoforlando.com/articles/5-oldest-walt-disney-world-rides-still-around-today/.

[134] Joseph Tirella, *Tomorrow-Land: The 1964-65 World's Fair and the Transformation of America* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2014), 3.

[135] Tirella, 48.

war, and technology had become a prime metaphor for both American religious faith and scientifically driven technological innovation. The American zeitgeist had adopted a kind of "faith in faith," such that even filmmakers who did not belong "to any of the classical intimations of faith" created films "that used science fiction to tell a distinctively American story about the power of faith and the necessity of belief."[136]

While critics such as Orwell and Huxley, among others, argued that not only does progress not happen, "it ought not to happen,"[137] the popular view tended toward optimism for a streamlined, leisurely future of convenience. Public fascination with "futurology" and the benefits of technological advancement outran literati pessimism. This bifurcation remains, in spite of evidence to the contrary. As Paul McCartney seemingly summarized for all of Western popular culture in the 1960s, "It's getting better all the time."[138]

Social

A 400-year old belief in scientific progress, and the power of technology to inaugurate a better future, continues to drive public rhetoric today. Assurance of the potential of technology to usher in a better future has never fully diminished in American

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[136] Catherine Newell, "The Greatest Adventure Awaiting Humankind: Destination Moon and Faith in the Future," *Implicit Religion* 17, no. 4 (December 2014): 463.

[137] Peter J. Bowler, *A History of the Future: Prophets of Progress from H.G. Wells to Isaac Asimov* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3.

[138] The Beatles, "Getting Better," by Paul McCartney and John Lennon, recorded March 9, 1967, on Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, Parlophone EMI, 33 ⅓ rpm. Notably, in the background of the recording, John Lennon responded, "It can't get no worse."

society, even though "large-scale narratives about how we supposedly came to be" have become uncoupled in recent historical reconstructions from "rosy evaluations of an onward-and-upward, progressive view of Western history."[139]

Belief in the ideal of progress spans the political and religious spectrum. One recent popular work declared, "we do not know where an investment in creativity will take us. But if we could see the future, its flourishes would surely stagger us."[140] Rosy endorsements of empirically-based improvements to Western culture indeed seem historically justifiable. The statistical evidence supporting progress is impressive. Massive technological changes across society resulted in improved standards of living around the world. Swedish liberal historian Johan Norberg notes that since 1820, the risk of living in poverty has been reduced from 94% to less than 11%.[141]

For the first time, poverty is not growing just because population is growing. Because of this reduction, the number of people in extreme poverty is now slightly less than it was in 1820. Then it was around 1 billion, while today it is 700 million. If this does not sound like progress, note that in 1820, the world only had around 60 million people who did not live in extreme poverty. Today more than 6.5 billion people do not

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[139] Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 10.

[140] Anthony Brandt and David Eagleman, *The Runaway Species: How Human Creativity Remakes the World* (New York, NY: Catapult, 2017), 251.

[141] Johan Norberg, *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future* (London: Oneworld, 2017), 78.

live in extreme poverty.[142] Pinker notes that over the last 25 years, the rate of death due to cancer has fallen about a percentage point every year, saving millions of lives.[143]

Improvements are social and humane as well. Conservative author Eric Metaxas, in a survey of William Wilberforce's role in changing British policy on human slavery twenty years after Lord Byron's speech, describes Wilberforce's second named life goal, along with the abolition of slavery, as the "Reformation of Manners" of British society. The squalor of London society in the early 1800s is staggering. Poor children as young as five years old were assigned 12-hour workdays in factories. 25 percent of all young women in London were prostitutes, with an average age of sixteen. Alcoholism was more rampant by far than any substance abuse problem in first-world societies today.[144]

There exists a mountain of evidence on the benefits to society that advancements in technology have provided, in areas such as food, sanitation, life expectancy, the reduction of violence, improvements in literacy, freedom, and equality. According to this view, progress and technology are working, and will continue to work, if humans will only grapple with their fear of change and learn to adapt or even shed outdated beliefs, including Christian beliefs, which hold us back from benefitting from technological improvement. Advocates insist that as long as society adheres to Enlightenment ideals, the march forward is inexorable.

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[142] Norberg, 78.

[143] Pinker, 61.

[144] Eric Metaxas, *Seven Men: And the Secret of Their Greatness* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 42.

Economic

Another implication is the rise of the power of money. The American experiment and progress couple well with the capitalist economic theories of Keynes and Mill. As economic historian Joel Mokyr notes, "There are two models for economic history. One is the cycle and the other is a linear progression… The Protestant work ethic emerged with the shift from cycle to slope."[145] Indeed, modern corporate business cycles are dependent on shareholder return, which is not just an ever onward and upward progression of wealth, but one that returns profit every quarter. In fact, the need to generate quarterly shareholder return may be the most dominant manifestation of progress in America today.[146]

To be sure, a bifurcated view of American society that divides everyone into a left or right bucket, with the left side aligned under an orthodoxy of progressive social ideals while the conservative side aligns under capitalistic economic ideals, is an over-generalized view of America. But the persistence of this narrative is itself evidence of the power and influence of progress. Consider the labels for the two dominant political positions. The word "progressive" literally means to engage in an incremental forward motion, to change, to move forward, while the word "conservative" means to proceed with caution or stop altogether, to hold on to the status quo, to resist what is new. If movement is life and stasis is death, then the words themselves carry a bias. Our language itself is beholden to progress. That the nature of our language dictates the

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[145] Joel Mokyr, *A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 23.

[146] Forrest Pool, interview by author, Plano, TX, April 2, 2018.

superiority of the ideology of progress reveals how deeply codified the metaphor is. America, and the West in general, loves progress. As both metaphor and ideal, progress is so deeply ingrained in culture that many do not even recognize its presence or influence.

The Meaning of Making

It is perhaps inevitable that the ideology of progress has had epistemic implications, as well. As not only a method but a philosophy, the Enlightenment found its canon in the work of Charles Darwin, who in *The Origin of Species* provided a text worthy of offering a new meta-narrative to replace the Christian Scriptures. One Pulitzer-winning historian credits Darwin for "'the proofs of the theory on which we today base the progress of the world" which is also notably a view that is "decidedly anthropocentric".[147]

Darwin claimed at least an intellectual commitment to orthodox Christian faith,[148] but his work was scientific and reasoned and ended with a naturalistic hope for the future. Darwin's theory of evolution formed a new image, as the philosophical conversation of 19th century England began to expand empirical analysis to life itself, formerly the exclusive realm of theology. While not directly assigning agency to humankind, Darwin's theories provided alternatives to theism, which apologists including Herbert Spencer and Richard Dawkins then used to position evolution as a secularization of the

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[147] Edward J. Larson, *Summer of the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 23-24.

[148] A. N. Wilson, *Charles Darwin: Victorian Mythmaker* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2017), loc.1120.

Christian eschaton. Spencer famously reshaped Darwin's work with the aphorism, "survival of the fittest"[149] (the phrase never appeared in Darwin's work). In this Neo-Darwinian view, human agency replaced God's work and was achievable via innovation and its resultant technology. Darwin's work provided, for the first time, a secular alternative to a theological understanding of the historiographical variables of linearity, uniqueness, and finality.

The juxtaposition between Enlightenment ideals and classic Christian virtues is strong. Science offered a new basis for understanding the Scriptures, reason for faith, progress for hope, and secular humanism for love. Through industrialization, mechanization and modern efficiency, a secularized version of the Jewish-Christian worldview emerged, fueled by mechanization, arranged by republicanism, funded by capitalism, resulting in technology, and given existential meaning by evolution.

Thus, nineteenth-century Europe gradually lost its religion, such that by the end of the century, G.K. Chesterton commented that atheism had become the "religion of the suburbs."[150] Neo-Darwinism became such a dominant deep metaphor of the age that for the first time, it became possible to be an "intellectually fulfilled atheist."[151] Neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory became a defining text for the seemingly irrefutable truth

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[149] Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology, volume 1* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), 444.

[150] As quoted in Wilson, loc. 526.

[151] Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design* (New York: Norton, 1986), 6.

of progress and seemed to endorse the unlimited potential of human agency,[152] while Christianity and other established religions came to be seen as not only "groundless but culturally dangerous because they usually obstructed the progress of science".[153]

Perhaps given this epochal, epistemological shift, the emphasis on human agency in achieving the eschaton became obvious. America's philosophical founders not only wove progress into the fabric of the United States Constitution, they imbued the culture with a mandate to make a better future. The dominant ideology of American political life, and the shaping force behind its current political iteration, became a "manifest destiny," an ideal future that demanded human agency.

The American ideology of progress even survived the First World War, which mortally wounded progress in Europe. The majority disagreement that has divided America in the postwar period has not been a fundamentally different view of the world as much as a difference in opinion over public policies regarding how best to achieve progress. In the 1960s, as U.S. President Lyndon Baines Johnson audaciously promised a "great society," intellectuals debated the "death of God."[154]

Even today, many on each side of the aisle would agree that, while, yes, bad things happen, we continue to get incrementally better and with each passing generation enjoy better standards of living. Societal advancement through science and technology

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[152] Daniel Gelernter, "Giving Up Darwin," *Claremont Review of Books, Vol XIX, No 2* (Spring 2019): 104-109, https://www.claremont.org/crb/article/giving-up-darwin/.

[153] Meliade, 39.

[154] John T. Elson, "Toward a Hidden God," *Time*, April 8, 1966.

has become an alternative religious system. We are a "runaway species,"[155] "makers,"[156] and "innovators"[157]—the self-help, self-making, "self-made man" syndrome streams along, driven by the pursuit of knowledge and "positive psychology."[158] We now live in a culture that has kept the concept of the eschaton but which has replaced Christ with technology, and the Rapture with the Singularity[159], the prophesied moment when technological improvement develops beyond human control. Taken to a logical end, both sides of the political aisle might even agree that we are slowly moving toward cultural completion, a utopianism described by some in the language of technology, equality, and self-divination[160]—but that the utopian future is only possible if humankind makes it. We must merely draw the line ourselves or create the future we so desire.

In spite of such optimism, culture has yet to achieve anything resembling its promised future. In fact, it might appear that the incline has turned to decline. What happens when progress fails to deliver? It is to this topic that we will turn in the next chapter.

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[155] Brandt and Eagleman.

[156] Chris Anderson, *Makers: The New Industrial Revolution* (New York: Crown Business, 2012).

[157] Isaacson.

[158] Barbara L. Fredrickson, *Positivity: Top-Notch Research Reveals The Upward Spiral That Will Change Your Life* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009). Fredrickson, a self-proclaimed "world's leading voice on emotional positivity," promises that happy thoughts will help the reader "build their best future." This book appeared in my daughter's high school reading list.

[159] For more on the relationship of progress and transhumanism, see Robert M Geraci, "A Tale of Two Futures: Techno-Eschatology in the US and India," *Social Compass* 63, no. 3 (September 2016): 319–334, http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0037768616652332.

[160] Yuval N. Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2017), 21.

CHAPTER 5: THE END OF THE LINE

The benefits of progress are not as irrefutable as they may seem at first glance. To be a blanket proponent of inexorable, incremental advancement would require a thinking person to set aside a host of complications. Events of the past decade alone suggest that culture is not gradually rising to heaven. While progress has fostered social and economic good, in many ways the human condition has worsened. In fact, declines in facets of culture reflect historical trends and reveal that progress is a paradox, in that it both benefits and limits human endeavor.

Counter to the happy vibes of the previous chapter, a defining theme of the still young century is the imminent demise of Western civilization. The public polling firm Rasmussen has weekly monitored the question if America is "headed in the right direction" since 2009. In no single week of ten years of polling have the majority of Americans answered this question in the affirmative.[161]

Prior to the 2016 presidential election, New York Times columnist David Brooks commented that pessimism was "just en vogue."[162] Political theorist Matthew Slaboch notes that "Obama ran on a traditional message that America is progressing and pushed

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[161] "Right Direction or Wrong Track", Rasmussen Reports, April 1, 2019, http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/top_stories/right_direction_wrong_track_apr01

[162] PBS NewsHour, "Shields and Brooks on Obama's NewsHour interview, presidential legacy," June 1, 2016, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/shields-and-brooks-on-obamas-newshour-interview-presidential-legacy.

that it isn't in decline."[163] On the eve of the election, Obama told a crowd in Michigan that "tomorrow, you will choose whether we continue this journey of progress, or whether it all goes out the window."[164] Clearly, this message did not resonate, and in electing Trump, American voters seemed to repudiate progress—or at least Obama's vision of it. Slaboch writes, "America … is a country founded at the height of the Enlightenment and imbued with a faith in progress. Now that the vast majority of its citizens are discontented and have a pessimistic view of the future, this presents a striking state of affairs."[165]

Existential angst is rising, with the threat of climate change, the rise in global population, ongoing frustrations about equality, and other seemingly intractable problems facing Western society. The data is grim, with "two diverging trend lines: one upward-sloping, for people, and one sloping downward, for everything else."[166] Signs of nihilism and even anti-natalism are emerging. A *New York Times* editorial suggests that human extinction might not be such a bad thing.[167] Business periodical *Fast Company* published the thoughts of Paola Antonelli, a curator at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, who suggests that the "human species is hurtling toward extinction" and the best we can

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[163] Matthew W. Slaboch, *A Road to Nowhere: The Idea of Progress and Its Critics* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 2.

[164] Slaboch.

[165] Slaboch, 111.

[166] Elizabeth Kolbert, "Climate Change and the New Age of Extinction," New Yorker, May 13, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/05/20/climate-change-and-the-new-age-of-extinction.

[167] Todd May, "Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?" New York Times, December 17, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/opinion/human-extinction-climate-change.html

do at this point is "design an elegant ending."[168] A movement called "Birthstrike" advocates that women not have children because of the dangers of climate change.[169] Others suggest that not only is it preferable to not bring new humans into the world, it is better to not even be alive.[170] Such death wishes might seem like the ravings of the emotionally unstable, yet they even come from United States congressional representatives.[171] When American politicians swap from championing great societies to inferring the end of society within a half century, it would seem we have removed some proverbial finger in the dike keeping culture from collapse.

Progress, along with Pinker's other three pillars of Enlightenment philosophy—reason, science, and humanism—all seem to be under attack. For example, even sacrosanct evolutionary theory is no longer a distinct ontology according to journalist A.W. Wilson, who suggests that Darwinism is "not in fact scientific at all, but expressions of opinion. Metaphysical opinion at that."[172] Beyond a renewed controversy over Darwinism, however, what does this "rhetoric of collapse" in public discourse signify? Does it represent a repudiation of progress, or perhaps specific political, social,

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[168] Suzanne Labarre, "MoMA curator: '[Humanity] will become extinct. We need to design an elegant ending'", Fast Company, January 8, 2019, https://www.fastcompany.com/90280777/moma-curator-we-will-become-extinct-we-need-to-design-an-elegant-ending.

[169] Adele Peters, "Meet the women deciding not to have kids because of climate change," Fast Company, March 7, 2019, https://www.fastcompany.com/90315700/meet-the-women-deciding-not-to-have-kids-because-of-climate-change.

[170] Joshua Rothman, "The Case for Not Being Born." New Yorker, November 27, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-case-for-not-being-born.

[171] Jack Crowe, "AOC: 'Is It Still Okay to Have Children' in the Age of Climate Change," National Review, February 25, 2019, https://www.nationalreview.com/news/aoc-is-it-still-ok-to-have-children-in-the-age-of-climate-change/.

[172] A. N. Wilson, *Charles Darwin: Victorian Mythmaker* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2017), loc. 577.

or economic versions of it? Is progress at the end of the line? Let us look at the state of progress today.

The Paradox of Progress

Political

A simple answer for the cracks appearing in progress and in the larger closed dome of Enlightenment thought is that not everyone has benefitted. For many groups, the shape of history as an incline has not sufficiently alleviated suffering. Some scholars insist that what we call progress is merely justification for "cultural hegemony,"[173] a term for the dissemination of the dominant ideology of ruling nation(s). Millions of contemporary Americans, for example, because of race, gender, class, or simple ill-fortune, do not participate in or benefit from the seemingly inexorable advancement of progress.

This is true historically, as well. In the last 200 years of data cited by progress proponents, many groups have failed to enjoy the benefits of social-technological improvement. For example, as Lord Byron noted in his defense of the legendary Ned Ludd, an early nineteenth century weaver who was put out of work by mechanized production and who gave us the anti-technology axiom "luddite"[174], with every technological advancement in society, jobs emerge and jobs fade away. Lives improve and lives suffer; some unwillingly sacrifice in order that others would benefit. The data of

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[173] Lempert.

[174] Walter Isaacson, *The Innovators: How a Group of Hackers, Geniuses, and Geeks Created the Digital Revolution*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 9.

societal advancement cited by progress proponents advocate, such as the increase in literacy, life expectancy and standard of living, are clean in aggregate but complicated in detail.

Progress had been a teleological force behind many of the waves of Enlightenment political revolution. Kant wrote that republican governments will bring about perpetual peace and progress humankind "toward the better."[175] Since war is the greatest obstacle to morality, political progress would thus lead to moral progress. But this view has proven problematic, to say the least, specifically as Slaboch notes "with regard to the cosmopolitan aim of universal history." For example, consider the "evolution" of a philosophy of progress: while Kant championed that all people would eventually participate in progress, he saw European state powers as having a stronger role than other cultures and groups. Kant's euro-centric view of progress had some effect on Fichte, who believed humankind is progressing through five epochs, from instinct to complete self-organization through the development of reason.[176] He saw the German people as leading these advancements. Fichte in turn influenced Hegel, for whom progress was not shared by all humanity but gave authority to certain superior groups, such as Nazi Germany. Slaboch writes,

> Kant, Fichte, and Hegel each offered optimistic philosophies of history. Having provided visions of a better future, these philosophers—or their popularizers—naturally desired some entity to bring about that earthy Elysium; almost

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[175] Slaboch, 15.

[176] Slaboch, 16.

> inevitably, the deity to which the worshippers of progress prostrated themselves to was the state.[177]

A state-driven ideal promised equality for all but was to be administered by a ruling party, according to a ruling party's rules. As Lenin famously summarized (and prophesied) regarding the progressive political ideal, "who? whom?"[178]—in other words, who overtakes whom in order to achieve "equality for all"?

Christians should be cautious about breezy support of authoritarian, utilitarian approaches to societal advancement, in which benefits to the majority outweigh losses to a sometimes significant minority, or one in which we use the levers of politics to remove power from some and give to others in a zero-sum attempt to engineer a more humane, "kingdom" society. James C. Scott critiques "the imperialism of high modernist, planned social order"[179] which seeks to organize society according to scientific principles and ignores local, contextualized knowledge and relationships. Centrally managed social planning fails, Scott argues, when it imposes inadequate schematic visions that do violence to complex local and relational dependencies that cannot be fully understood.[180] As French political philosopher Margaret Majumdar writes, "even those who believed in the generally progressive march of history, such as Karl Marx, had been forced to concede that there could be losers as well as winners in the actual processes involved in

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[177] Slaboch, 17.

[178] Leon Trotsky, "Towards Capitalism or Towards Socialism?" *The Labour Monthly* 7 no. 11 (November 1925): 659-666. https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1925/11/towards.htm.

[179] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 6.

[180] Scott, 310.

economic and social change."[181] The case studies of 20th-century national politics have obviously demonstrated that the ability to engineer a more perfect solution, as we are still prone to do in society and in church, is vastly overstated.

Social and Technological

Or consider the state of education in America, both public and private. Mobile devices are easily one of the most invasive new technological innovations of 21st century Western culture.[182] The predominant age when children receive a smartphone with a service plan is now age 10,[183] which is old news to anyone with school-aged children. The result has been a battle in the classroom over use of devices, and the teachers are losing. While advocates may make arguments that mobile technology is improving society in the aggregate, what is it doing to those students for whom the additional distraction in the classroom is harming their ability to receive the education they will need later in life? The connected world is living out a real-time experiment, and the returns are not looking favorable, as a growing body of research suggests that

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[181] Scott., 603.

[182] Computer Business Review lists the iPhone as one of the top 5, along with Facebook, Skype, Bluetooth, and IBM Watson. I would have made it a top two list. Tom Ball, "Top 5 Technological Advances of the 21st Century," *Computer Business Review*, February 8, 2018, accessed April 21, 2018, https://www.cbronline.com/list/top-5-technological-advances-21st-century.

[183] "Mobile Kids: The Parent, The Child, and The Smartphone," Nielsen, February 28, 2017, accessed April 21, 2018, http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2017/mobile-kids--the-parent-the-child-and-the-smartphone.html

"smartphones are causing real damage to our minds and relationships."[184] 1990s concern over the rise of a "digital divide" giving privileged groups unfair access to the Internet has inverted:

> The real digital divide in this country is not between children who have access to the internet and those who don't. It's between children whose parents know that they have to restrict screen time and those whose parents have been sold a bill of goods by schools and politicians that more screens are a key to success.[185]

Issues of race also render an ideology of progress problematic. In 2008, as the economy of the United States was about to collapse, a sermon by Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ damaged the candidacy of Barack Obama for its willingness to question the "American Dream," a Depression-era phrase that sought to hold on to the ideal of progress in light of the worst economic circumstances in American history. As pastor, African American scholar, and Wright protégé Frank Thomas observes, the American Dream has largely been "a ritual of benefit for a certain class of people,"[186] a class that has largely excluded people of color. Wright's prophetic sermon generated controversy for both its rhetoric and for the realization from both the political left and right that segments of the population dared to question the ideal of progress.

Further, while many like to correlate the Enlightenment with abolitionism and a rise in the autonomy of all persons, the majority of all African slaves shipped to the New

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[184] Eric Andrew-Gee, "Your Smartphone is Making You Stupid, Antisocial and Unhealthy. So Why Can't You Put It Down?" The Globe and Mail, January 6, 2018, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/your-smartphone-is-making-you-stupid/article37511900/.

[185] Naomi Schaefer Riley, "America's Real Digital Divide", New York Times, February 11, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/11/opinion/america-digital-divide.html.

[186] Frank A. Thomas, *American Dream 2.0: A Christian Way Out of the Great Recession* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), xii.

World were transported during the period now recognized as the height of the Enlightenment.[187] As cultural historian David Brion Davis writes, "enslavement has usually been seen by the enslavers as a form of human progress."[188] This has created deep ambivalence for people of color, as well as a variety of responses. Some people of color re-appropriated progress in light of justice. For example, Martin Luther King Jr., famously paraphrased nineteenth century abolitionist Theodore Parker, who had preached

> You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.[189]

While Obama followed King's lead, his mentor Jeremiah Wright did not share his optimism. Neither does next generation Democratic congressperson Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who "depicts American history less as an arc of progress than as a circle, in which America repeats—rather than rises above—its past."[190] This profound shift in rhetoric, from incline to circle, is both recent and notable.

Even the reams of statistics which defenders of Enlightenment philosophy employ are worth further examination. For example, while it is true that standards of living have dramatically increased since the beginning of the nineteenth century, any analysis of the

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[187] David Brion Davis, "Slavery and the Idea of Progress," *The Journal of Southern Religion* 14 (2012): 9, accessed April 5, 2018, http://jsr.fsu.edu/issues/vol14/davis.pdf.

[188] Davis.

[189] Theodore Parker, *Ten Sermons of Religion* (Boston MA: Crosby, Nichols and Company, 1853), 84.

[190] Peter Beinart, "The Left and the Right Have Abandoned American Exceptionalism," The Atlantic, July 4, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/07/the-left-and-the-right-have-abandoned-american-exceptionalism/564425/.

past 150 years is remiss to ignore the introduction of "total war" with the Guns of August in 1914, a level of warfare unmatched in human history. By any measure, the wars of the twentieth century, in aggregate, are the deadliest catastrophes in human history. By the end of The Great War in 1918, so crushed was the nineteenth century romantic ideal that an entire generation became known as "lost" for the profound epistemological disconnection between the ideals of their Enlightenment education and their first-hand experience of war. Further, it may be argued that the wars of the twentieth century ruined the progress ideal entirely where the scars of bombs are deepest, such as in western Europe, and that the version of progress that survived adopted American emphases on technology and material gain.

In light of war and other atrocities, what remains is both a love of technological progress and fear regarding a loss of control of technological progress. Since the early twentieth century, millions of people have flocked to epic displays of new technology, and have appropriated them *en masse* into daily living, while at the same time artists imagine dystopian futures which ask deep, epistemic questions about the dangers of technology serving evil masters.

Equal and Opposite

Consider this anecdotal chart, compiled by two of my teenaged children, on their perceptions of things that are better and things that are worse, on aggregate, in the past one hundred years:

Since 100 Years Ago	
Better	**Worse**
Education	Environment
Health Care	Civility
Safety	Music
Life Expectancy	Language
Standard of Living	Culture

Of course, one could argue some of these choices, but the point remains. Some things improve; others worsen. As sociologist Robert Wright notes,

> Pinker attributes too much of our past progress to Enlightenment thought (giving short shrift, for example, to the role of Christian thinkers and activists in ending slavery); his faith in science and reason is naive, given how often they've been misused; his assumption that scientifically powered progress will bring happiness betrays a misunderstanding of our deepest needs; his apparent belief that secular humanism can fill the spiritual void left by rationalism's erosion of religion only underscores that misunderstanding.[191]

Most importantly, as Gregory notes, progress tends to be self-fulfilling. Long-term historical narratives "presuppose a supersessionist model of historical change … [in which] mere temporal succession … is insufficiently distinguished from historical explanation, as if *chronos* automatically produced Zeitgeist."[192] Leaning on the promises of progress seems naive at best and more likely dangerous when it ignores history, displaces people, engenders violence, and endangers children. Progress increases

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[191] Robert Wright, "Why Pure Reason Won't End American Tribalism," *Wired*, April 9, 2018, accessed April 22, 2018, https://www.wired.com/story/why-pure-reason-wont-end-american-tribalism/.

[192] Gregory, 11.

knowledge with little thought of wisdom. It empowers individuals with little thought to community.

As philosopher John Gray writes, "Nothing is more commonplace than to lament that moral progress has failed to keep pace with scientific knowledge."[193] In response, social commentary blog Farnam Street writes that Gray's real problem with the idea of moral progress, technical progress, and scientific progress is that, even were they real, they would be unending: "In the modern conception of the world, unlike the ancient past where everything was seen as cyclical, growth has no natural stop-point. It's just an infinite path to the heavens."[194]

Progress, of course, does not just suggest technological advancement, but concomitant humanism, or increasing individual autonomy, in all of our diversity. But policies and ethics that celebrate individual autonomy sometimes create unexpected collisions, for example in the tension between sexual freedom and rape culture. In our eagerness to expand the umbrella of progress, we forget Newton's Third Law. We strive for "equal" but get "equal and opposite." Contrary to the ideal of progress, if technology has done anything for us, it has magnified human tendencies, for better or for worse. As Ronald Wright observes, we become victims of our own success, and every time history repeats itself, the cost increases.[195]

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[193] John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 15.

[194] Farnam Street (blog), "John Gray: Is Human Progress an Illusion?" Farnam Street (blog), February 2017, https://fs.blog/2017/02/human-progress-illusion/.

[195] Ronald Wright, 74.

Even medicine, which as noted improved radically through the application of empiricism, is not immune to the tendency to be equal and opposite. In our sanitizer culture, increases in standards of living through decline in bacterial disease[196] are offset with an alarming rise in new, infectious diseases.[197]

If only we were more intelligent or more moral, we might use technology for purely benign ends. As has been oft noted, when it comes to technological advancement, the fault is not in our tools, but ourselves. In one sense, this is true. Progress leaves only one problem unsolved: the frailty of human nature. Unfortunately, this problem appears to be scientifically intractable.

The Sine Wave

Perhaps we should not be surprised at the turns of Western culture in the second decade of the 21st century. Enlightenment ideals notwithstanding, a long look back belies any facile sense of onward and upward historical or deterministic development. For example, recounting the history of Christianity in Cambridge, Ian Cooper notes periods of rising and waning Christian influence over 1,600 years of British history, juxtaposed in varying degrees with periods of waxing and waning cultural flourishing.[198] Or consider

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[196] Juliana Jaramillo-Echeverri, Adolfo Meisel-Roca, and María Ramírez-Giraldo, "More than 100 Years of Improvements in Living Standards: The Case of Colombia," *Cliometrica* 13, no. 3 (2019): 323.

[197] World Health Organization, "The World Health Report 2007: A Safer Future: Global Public Health Security in the 21st Century" (Geneva: World Health, 2007), https://www.who.int/whr/2007/whr07_en.pdf.

[198] Ian Cooper, *The Cambridge Story: The Impact of Christianity in England* (Cambridge, UK: Christian Heritage, 2014), 4.

the silk road, which carried both valuable trade and deadly bubonic plague.[199] It is hard to read any Christian or cultural history and retain confidence in a grand ascension to heaven. Indeed, the current pessimistic *zeitgeist* seems to be dragging down the ascendancy of progress, as well as the entire Enlightenment experiment.[200] Majumdar writes,

> Faith in progress as an unstoppable historical certainty has been shattered by real historical developments such as the growth of fascism and Nazism, the two world wars and the barbarity associated with them. There has been a recognition that history can go backwards as well as forwards, that there can be regressive as well as progressive phases.[201]

Of particular interest in understanding progress in relationship to the American church is Henry Adams, grandson of president John Quincy Adams. Considering his social standing and intellectual heritage, if anyone should have believed in progress, it would have been such a figure. Yet the younger Adams had seen enough corruption form in Washington, D.C. over the course of his lifetime to adopt a different view.[202] Whereas Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, two others who were cognizant of democracy's shortcomings, thought the deficiencies of the political system in America were ameliorable, Adams did not share their optimism. Late in his life, Adams wrote *A*

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[199] Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 206.

[200] David Brooks, "The Enlightenment Project," New York Times, February 28, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/28/opinion/the-enlightenment-project.html.

[201] Margaret A. Majumdar and Tony Chafer, "Progress: Its Visionaries and Its Malcontents," *Interventions* 19, no. 5 (July 4, 2017): 599–608, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369801X.2017.1336459.

[202] Slaboch, 77.

History of the United States, a nine-volume study of early nineteenth century America commonly regarded as one of the great written histories. In it he drew from philosophers such as Hegel and Schopenhauer and wrote that, even when evidence showed the contrary, most published histories tended to stress an ideology of progress, which was characteristic of the late-19th century intellectual environment in which Adams lived. Yet as Slaboch writes, "In the eyes of Henry Adams, immutable laws degraded every sphere of human existence, the political realm not excepted."[203] In an age when his contemporaries saw upward progress, Adams saw the downward turn of an epochal circle, a declining societal wheel, which must reach a bottom before an eventual rebirth could occur.

Considering the limitations of the circle, straight line, and upward slope, the one historiographical shape that seems most evident is a sine wave, a repeating pattern of ups and downs, in which periods of rise are followed by periods of fall, with human events invariably triggering a societal regression toward the mean. Is the true shape of history a sine wave, a synthesis of the circle with the straight line and a secularization of a meaningful understanding of history coupled with a rejection of any sort of eschaton or transformative end?

Cultural embrace of a sine wave—and, perhaps, our current spot on the downhill slope—may be contributing to the rhetoric of collapse, of a loss of teleology and even human agency in relationship to the future end of history. This is not new. Even at the

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[203] Slaboch, 89.

height of the Enlightenment, some struggled to reconcile belief in linear history with disbelief in a transformed end.

In his study of select thinkers who rejected the Enlightenment ideal of progress, political historian Slaboch identified some who understood history as a downward slope to disintegration and collapse; others who saw some form of cycle, with hills and dales; and still others who saw nothing but chaos and randomness.[204] Among philosophers and writers who viewed history as a "bumpy but straight road to nowhere" include Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, Adams, Solzhenitsyn and Lasch. Schopenhauer argued that "constructive histories, guided by a shallow optimism, always ultimately end in a comfortable fat, substantial State" and that "almost inevitably, the deity to which the worshippers of progress prostrated themselves to was the state."[205] In *War and Peace*, published over 400 years after the emergence of the printing press, Tolstoy writes that "the most powerful of ignorance's weapons" is "the dissemination of printed matter."[206] To Adams, "immutable laws degraded every sphere of human existence, the political realm not excepted."[207] Addressing the virtues of progress, Solzhenitsyn said, ""we all have lived through the twentieth-century, a century of terror, the chilling culmination of that progress about which so many dreamed in the eighteenth century."[208] Lasch suggests

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[204] Slaboch, 111.

[205] Slaboch.

[206] Mitchell Stephens, *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 43.

[207] Slaboch, 89.

[208] Slaboch.

that we have reached "the exhaustion of the progressive tradition," but carry it forward for lack of a better alternative.[209] Perhaps these philosophers were just grumpy. Yet, their positions seem prescient today.

Generations

Generational theory constitutes a more recent attempt to contextualize the seemingly random rises and falls of culture. The seminal work on a philosophy of history as seen through the lens of generational sociology comes from a Karl Mannheim essay on generations, in 1923. Picking up on Augustine's metaphor of the development of a single human life to describe the course of history, but with no evidence he knew this, Mannheim notes that the Positivists "all were anxious to find a general law to express the rhythm of historical development" and that

> the aim was to understand the changing patterns of intellectual and social currents directly in biological terms, to construct the curve of progress of the human species in terms of its vital substructure. In the process, everything, so far as possible, was simplified: a schematic psychology provided that the parents should always be the conservative force. Presented in this light, the history of ideas appears reduced to a chronological table.[210]

Despite praise for Mannheim's essay, sociologist Jane Pilcher notes that "scant attention" of the impact of autonomous generational cohorts on society remained largely underdeveloped for decades, "despite the notion of generation being widespread in

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[209] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics (*New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 532.

[210] Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge: Collected Works, Volume 5*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (New York, NY: Routledge, 1952), 278.

everyday language as a way of understanding differences between age groups and as a means of locating individuals and groups within historical time."[211] Generational theory began to gain traction in the popular press by the 1990s, driven in part by corporate demographic studies. Schlesinger, Jr., noted the relationship between these cycles of history and the influence of generational cohorts: "there is no mystery about the periodicity" of cycles of negative and affirmative government - they happen at roughly the span of a generation, and "the generational succession has been the mainspring of the cycle."[212] Strauss and Howe combine generational sociological theory with cyclical historical theory and claim that, rather than a progressive upward slope, a better metaphor for history is that of a repeating cycle of "systole and diastole," with each cycle spanning roughly 80 years, or one human life.[213] The sine wave embraces Augustine's view of history as human development but includes the rest of the metaphor of a human life: decline and death. (Here, the follower of Jesus may see a glimpse at a possible post-progress view of the future. We will return to this image later.)

In their 1991 book, *Generations*, contemporary pop philosophers Strauss and Howe suggest that American culture and even all of Western culture can be understood as

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[211] Jane Pilcher, "Mannheim's Sociology of Generations: An Undervalued Legacy," *British Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 3 (1994), 481.

[212] Albert M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Cycles of American History* (Wilmington, MA: Mariner, 1999), vii.

[213] Brett McKay, What the Generational Cycle Theory Can Tell Us About Our Present Age, MP3, The Art of Manliness, September 20, 2016, Accessed October 27, 2017, http://www.artofmanliness.com/2016/09/20/podcast-236-generational-cycle-theory-can-tell-us-present-age/.

a series of repeating, 80-year cycles.[214] Their book became controversial for its appearance in the hands of President Donald Trump's advisor Steve Bannon shortly after Trump's election in 2016.[215] Between the book's publication and its popularity spike, Strauss and Howe established market credibility for their demographic analysis of audiences, and are credited with coining the term "Millennial" to refer to the cohort of people in the American market born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s. Strauss and Howe advocate a circular view of history built around an 80-year cycle, as well, which they describe using the term, "*saeculum*," (Latin for a single, long human life, and also metaphysical term in early Christian thought for the secular, pre-kingdom age). They suggest that history repeats itself in definable 80 year cycles, which may be broken down into 20-year segments: a "High," an outer world period of peak structure and order, which is akin to spring; an "Awakening," a period of cultural flourishing, akin to summer; an "Unraveling," a period, akin to fall, in which we retreat from the outer world to the inner world; collapse, and finally a "Crisis," akin to winter, in which we collectively emerge from our inner worlds and rebuild a new outer world.[216] Howe claims we are currently living through a "crisis" period—which is of course good for book sales.

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[214] William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York, NY: Quill), 1992.

[215] Linette Lopez, "Steve Bannon's obsession with a dark theory of history should be worrisome," *Business Insider*, February 2, 2017, https://www.businessinsider.com/book-steve-bannon-is-obsessed-with-the-fourth-turning-2017-2.

[216] Strauss and Howe.

Others have employed scientific approaches to support claims of cyclical patterns in history. Data scientist Peter Turchin applied algorithms developed to track predator–prey cycles in forest ecosystems to the understanding of human history and came up with what he calls "cliodynamics," a pattern of cyclical patterns occurring every 50 years—which as with Strauss and Howe, means the next ominous reset is immanent.[217]

Notably, each of the modern theorists listed has used cyclical theory to call for a form of political nationalism to emerge in order to forestall inevitable decline and disintegration.[218]

A Material World

Perhaps profit remains the one irresistible proof of progress in America. The material desire and need to generate quarterly shareholder return may be the most dominant iteration of the ideology of progress in America today. "Progress is now often defined solely in terms of quantifiable economic growth, linked to the global extension of a particular economic system,"[219] best captured by the image of the Dow Jones index, which rises and falls over time, but with an aggregate upward slope. It is hard to argue against the value of progress when standards of living increase and people continue to immigrate to the United States from around the world for the potential of economic betterment.

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[217] Laura Spinney, "Human Cycles: History as Science." *Nature*, August 1, 2012, https://www.nature.com/news/human-cycles-history-as-science-1.11078

[218] Slaboch, 112.

[219] Majumdar, 599.

Earlier, I outlined the influence of Frederick Winslow Taylor as the first corporate efficiency specialist, and the benefits of a focus on improving production. However, the emphasis on efficiency, manifested by an increasing focus on quarterly shareholder return, has proven problematic. Immediate gain narrows the focus of "improvement"; values efficiency over risk, much less over what is good; paints a false picture of growth that can mask long term atrophy; and turns business into a game of survival, based on fear of loss over joy of gain. Economist Daniel Kahneman won a Nobel Prize in 2002 for naming and drawing attention to this fear: Prospect Theory, in which people tend to fear losses disproportionately more than they value equivalent gains.[220] When we are forced to return a profit every three months, there is no room for error. As a society, we have tried to remove risk-taking. Quarterly profit models favor "failure prevention", yet "the more comfortable you are with looseness and uncertainty, the less fragile your environment is … complex systems are weakened, even killed, when deprived of stressors."[221]

It is a myth to believe we can manage the error out of complex systems, whether in corporate settings or in personal relationships. When the highest value is failure prevention, one little problem can ruin everything, as noted in Malcolm Gladwell's story of the O-ring failure that caused the space shuttle Challenger to explode.[222]

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[220] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk" (1979) *Econometrica:* 47 (2): 263–291. doi:10.2307/1914185.

[221] Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012), 5.

[222] Malcolm Gladwell, "Blow Up," *New Yorker,* January 22, 1996, 32.

The focus on efficiency and resulting fear of failure is indicative of a loss in creative thinking. Risk is a prerequisite for creativity, which is a prerequisite for true growth. "Economic growth and innovation rely on the emergence of new startups and entrepreneurs with disruptive ideas," yet "when the gale of creative destruction stops blowing, industries stagnate."[223] In other words, our modern economic system's demand for growth without uncertainty is self-defeating.

Evidence is bearing this out. For the first time in 60 years of comparison, Americans younger than 35 now have less economic optimism for the future than Americans 55 and older.[224] People are less enamored with things, and long for experiences.[225] The lie is that economic gain is sustainable, anyway, as cultures around the world have known for generations.

An old Scottish proverb states, "The father buys, the son builds, the grandson sells, and his son begs." Japanese culture's version: "rice paddy to rice paddy in three generations." Modern American data's discovery: somewhere between 70%[226] and 90%[227] of rich families lose their wealth by the third generation. We are addicted to

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[223] "Winner Takes It All: How Markets Favor the Few at the Expense of the Many," Farnam Street (blog), September 2018, https://fs.blog/2018/09/mental-model-winner-take-all/

[224] Quentin Fottrell, "For The First Time, Young Americans Have Less Optimism Than Those Aged 55 and Older," Market Watch, April 3, 2018, https://www.marketwatch.com/story/for-the-first-time-ever-young-americans-are-less-optimistic-than-their-parents-2018-04-02

[225] James Hamblin, "Buy Experiences, Not Things," The Atlantic, October 7, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/10/buy-experiences/381132/

[226] Chris Taylor, "70% of Rich Families Lose Their Wealth by the Second Generation," Money, June 17, 2015, http://money.com/money/3925308/rich-families-lose-wealth/

[227] Missy Sullivan, "Lost Inheritance," Wall Street Journal, March 8, 2013, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324662404578334663271139552

growth and need "economies that make us thrive whether or not they grow."[228] Other cultures have similar sayings for the tendency of history to repeat itself in the rising and falling fortunes of family wealth. We apply a linear view of time to our economic models, but the reality is not perpetual upward progress—data shows that is more like a circle that draws back on itself, over and over.

The focus on material gain through shared self-interest echoes the work of Ayn Rand. Material growth reframes progress as profit and minimizes human relationships at the expense of gain. We have played nice in the shared sands of self-gain, as long as we see quarterly shareholder returns, but the epistemologies of efficient production are weakening.

With an increasing realization that we cannot strip the planet of resources indefinitely, the result is an increasing call by some to abandon economic and material growth,[229] and by others to redefine economic growth according to slower, more sustainable models.[230] Of course the hard part is convincing every nation to go along.

If material growth is no longer viable, what viable models are left? At each stage, meaning has been stripped from philosophies of history. Is it not possible to rise to heaven? In lieu of ultimate meaning, political purpose, or material gain, does history have

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[228] Eillie Anzilotti, "It's Time To Abandon Economic Growth As The Only Indicator Of Success," Fast Company, April 12, 2018, https://amp.fastcompany.com/40557739/its-time-for-countries-to-abandon-economic-growth-as-the-only-indicator-of-success

[229] Anzilotti.

[230] Noah Smith (@noahpinion), "1/OK, here's a thread about economic growth, technological progress, environmental sustainability, and political unrest!" Twitter, July 28, 2019, 9:28a.m., https://twitter.com/Noahpinion/status/1155515380120449025

any reason at all? Or is history a perpetual cycle of wandering in the wilderness, searching in vain for a lost land of milk and honey?

Nihilism and Power

For some contemporary philosophers, the answer is nothingness. In rejecting the philosophy of progress, John Gray reduces humankind to the state of animals.[231] Since progress is a delusion, humanity is actually "on a road to nowhere," to quote lyricist David Byrne.[232] "Indeed, "no" + "place" is the original etymology of "utopia" (*ou-topos*), a word invented by English humanist Sir Thomas More[233] and the term used in much contemporary technology advertising to describe our shared future destination.

To the biblically informed reader, such aimlessness may sound familiar. The book of Ecclesiastes is famous for its laments about meaning: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." (Ecclesiastes 1:2) Such desperation, then, is nothing new.

The Psalmist captures the seeming randomness of both gain and loss: "They sowed fields and planted vineyards that yielded a fruitful harvest; he blessed them, and their numbers greatly increased, and he did not let their herds diminish. Then their numbers decreased, and they were humbled by oppression, calamity and sorrow; he who pours contempt on nobles made them wander in a trackless waste." (Psalm 107:37-40)

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[231] Gray, 5.

[232] Talking Heads, "Road to Nowhere," by David Byrne, recorded October 1984, on Little Creatures, Sire, 33 ⅓ rpm.

[233] Sir Thomas More, *Libellus Vere Aureus, Nec Minus Salutaris Quam Festivus, de Optimo Rei Publicae Statu Deque Nova Insula Utopia*, 1516.

Into this nihilistic vacuum steps human will to power. Power is the one immutable truth of George R. R. Martin's epic tale, "Game of Thrones," one of the dominant cultural phenomena of the 2010s, which presents a world in which there is no good or bad, only an ever-changing sequence of alliances and conquests. Without the common cause and purpose provided by science and progress, humankind quickly devolves into an endless struggle for power.

Because of his rejection of an ontological historical structure, yet inability to completely reject a straight-line view of history, Schopenhauer reverted to the human will as the only guiding force of history. In spite of all of the upsets and upheavals historians have recorded, he wrote, "we yet always have before us only the same, identical, unchangeable essence"[234]: the human will, which is the guiding force of the world (as opposed to the will of any sort of deity). He compared life's ups and downs to the thread of a needle running through an embroidery, guided by a proverbial single, human hand: "Life could be compared to an embroidery, of which we see the right side during the first side of life, but the back during the latter half. The backside is less scintillating but more instructive; it reveals the interpatterning of threads."[235] Ironically, though he distrusted the state, Schopenhauer's orientation toward sole authority residing in the human will was a significant contributing factor in the late 19th century rise of nationalism through

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[234] Slaboch, 18.

[235] As quoted by Austrian neurologist Franz Seitelbeger (1915-2007), "Lebensstadien des Gehirns" in *Die Menschlichen Lebensalter*, ed. Leopold Rosenmayr (Munich, 1978), 215.

Europe,[236] which in turn motivated the consummate progress-denying event, World War I.

If we are not rising to heaven through political and social development, and material gain is not only meaningless but unsustainable, we are left with one end: that human will to power is the logical conclusion of the ideology of progress.

Part Two Summary

The story of the ironically named country of Liberia illustrates the end conclusion of human will to power.

Liberia was founded in the mid-19th century by former African American slaves, in a coming home emigration. Tragically, rather than establish an alternative republic based on the virtues to which the American experiment aspired, they instead established a plantation style system of domination and subjugation of the native people of the region, based on the actual values they had experienced first-hand in America. Their life and worldview had been shaped by power, so when they acquired their own freedom, they used that power to in turn subjugate others.

Today, Liberia is one of the least developed countries in the world. It was ground zero for the biggest global health scare to date of the 21st century, the Ebola virus. That such a virus would come from such a country is not a theological surprise. Liberia epitomizes the broken human condition, and the zero-sum limitation of a worldview, no matter how well-intentioned, based in power.

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[236] Slaboch.

Power is zero-sum because it assumes that there needs to be winners and losers. For all of the good that theologies of progress have done to draw awareness and improve social conditions of oppressed peoples, it has taught its adherents to consider human agency according to rules of power.

Like so many military leaders before and after him, Roman governor Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “what is truth?”. He knew no other way. At least Pilate was honest in his assessment and question. A broken world knows no other answer than the drive for ever-increasing power as a ward for death, which in the end comes anyway.

PART THREE: WHOSE LINE IS IT, ANYWAY? - THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

The incline has proven to be a persistent, attractive image for the church, and the church has developed a variety of theologies and methodologies in response to it. In Part Three, I examine the conflation of progress with the mission of the church, which I dub an "ecclesiology of improvement."

Our ecclesiologies of improvement have proven problematic, because through them we have given too much agency to humankind. We are collectively committing the same sin that God's people have been committing since the story of the Israelites in the Old Testament. Through our works, and sometimes our rhetoric, we have implied that we are the ones creating the Kingdom of God.

Ultimately, improvement proves to be an insufficient metaphor to understanding the gospel and the practice of ministry. Any attempt to redefine growth, whether church growth or Christian growth, will fail without breaking this persistent image.

CHAPTER 6: WALKING THE LINE

The USAmerican church has had several responses to the hegemony of progress, including a "primitive gospel," a "cultural gospel," and a "material gospel." These three responses categorize dominant images of ministry today, which continues to be rooted in a version of an ideology of progress and play out as "ecclesiologies of improvement"—even as larger Western culture abandons progress as an ideal.

The ideology of progress has had profound effects on the church.

As established, the basis for scientific research is Cartesian doubt, which motivates the development of propositions with supporting evidence. If a proof is not falsifiable, it can be scientifically verified, and from this verification we form theories about what is true. Thus, the meta-proposition of empiricism is that doubt drives meaning.

Further, the application of scientific thinking results in technological advancement. Technology is the mechanism of progress, and progress, it is believed by many, improves the world. Therefore, according to Enlightenment thought, doubt improves the world—as well as reducing the need for faith. In this way, science is perceived by many to be a counter to and a cure for religion.

The power of doubt and the dominant cultural milieu of Enlightenment thought has forced the church to reconcile new theologies about God, the role of Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the relationship of the church to the world. At least three distinct Christian responses have codified in response to the rise of the ideology of progress. Each

of these positions are worthy of entire bodies of research, but for the sake of brevity let us consider each according to the deep metaphor of improvement.

A Primitive Gospel

The first response has been for the church to reject the Enlightenment altogether. Perhaps the first image that comes to mind of someone holding an anti-scientific religious worldview is a sandwich-board, street corner fundamentalist preacher, predicting the end of the world on a specific date derived from a literalist reading of the Bible. Fundamentalism formed as an ostensible rejection of not only progress, but science and humanism as well. It famously solidified with the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial, in which the arrest of Tennessee teacher John Scopes for teaching "an evolutionary view of human origins"[237] became a pretense for a long-standing cultural showdown between scientific and Christian worldviews.[238]

Fundamentalism holds to a theology of the kingdom of heaven that is separate from culture and in another realm. It believes knowledge is fixed and revealed, not growing and discovered, and the work of the church is to proclaim the arrival of God's kingdom and invite people to reject the world in order to direct their attention to the spiritual realm. Implicit in this view is a belief that not only are things not getting better, they are getting worse, that the state of humankind is irreparable, and humanity's task is

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[237] Edward J. Larson, *Summer of the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 91.

[238] Larson, 14.

to preserve what is left while waiting for Jesus' return. Some adherents of this position are essentially pre-critical and reactionary while others are anti-intellectual.

However, to characterize those who reject Enlightenment theory as willfully ignorant is to apply current filters to a more historically nuanced argument. From the first emergence of scientific thought, theologians, pastors, and the Christian scientific community have struggled to reconcile faith with seemingly unchristian ideals.

Ministering at the height of the Enlightenment, Methodist founder John Wesley acknowledged the value of "eternal reason, or the nature of things."[239] Yet he denied the ability of reason to overcome the "chasm" between the natural and spiritual realms. He said that this could only be bridged through divine revelation.[240] Wesley famously advocated for a return to "primitive Christianity",[241] by which he was not employing a flowery adjective but a specific reference to a school of thought.

Primitivism emphasized the chronological and cultural superiority of the past,[242] for example in Rosseau's theory of the noble savage. Though presumably not fond of the nobility of natural man, it is clear through his writings that Wesley sided with the Ancients over the Moderns in the aforementioned quarrel. In his poem "Primitive Christianity", Wesley extols the virtues of the earliest believers in an "age of golden

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[239] John Wesley, *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1831), 11.

[240] Wesley, 13.

[241] Wesley, 33.

[242] Philip P. Wiener, ed. "Primitivism." *Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Volume 4* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 577.

days," yearns to find the diminished faithful successors, emphasizes Jesus as the one who builds the church, and encourages believers to "behold how Christians lived in days of old."[243]

Wesley was not alone in his struggle to reconcile empirical thought. The emergence of Darwin's theory of evolution in the mid-nineteenth century intensified the clash of the two worldviews. Devout scientist Georges Cuvier is credited with being the first naturalist to acknowledge the difference between the evidence of the geological record and the conventional interpretation of history as beginning in the year 4004 BC.[244] But this did not lead immediately to a rejection of Christian view of creation. In fact by the first decade of the twentieth century, Darwinism had largely been discredited in the biological world, but its historiographical usefulness was in part perpetuated by the theological community.[245] Believing that they had defeated Darwinism's rejection of the biblical creation narrative, some church leaders adopted a conciliatory tone, acknowledging that Christians could accept evolution as the means of "divine intelligence" in creation.[246] Even the earliest writings that helped define the core tenets of fundamentalism as a distinct belief system from liberalism were conciliatory toward the theory of evolution. In one essay, Presbyterian theologian James Orr claimed harmony

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[243] Wesley, 34. Based on Wesley's advocacy of primitive Christianity and rejection of progress, those today who claim to be both "progressive" and "Wesleyan" must reconcile two contradictory worldviews.

[244] Larson, 15.

[245] Larson, 18.

[246] Larson, 20.

between science and religion by writing that “evolution” was coming to be recognized as a new word for “creation.”[247]

These writings appeared in a series of pamphlets written in the 1910s, outlining “fundamentals” of the Christian faith. Though the pamphlets offered the codifying term, they were not “fundamentalist” in the way we think of the word today, which I roughly define as a rejection of empiricism. The anti-scientific understanding of fundamentalism formed not from theologians or scientists but from secular historians, scholars, and philosophers writing about science and religion in the 1910s and 1920s.[248] The latter group used Darwinian theory as a tool with which to hammer Christianity.

As battle lines hardened, Christian opposition to Darwinian theory extended beyond debates over creation. Historian Edward Larson writes, “many Americans associated Darwinism natural selection, as it applied to people, with a survival-of-the-fittest mentality that justified laissez-faire capitalism, imperialism, and militarism.”[249] For example, Darwinism was the primary theoretical foundation for eugenics, the “science” of human breeding, which for a period enjoyed widespread support. By the mid-1930s, thirty-five states had enacted laws to compel sexual segregation and sterilization of people viewed as “eugenically unfit.”[250]

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[247] James Orr, “Science and the Christian Faith,” in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth 7* (Chicago: Testimony, [1905-1915]), 102-103, as quoted in Larson, 21.

[248] Larson, 21.

[249] Larson, 27.

[250] Larson. Eugenics also provided the philosophical basis for Nazi extermination of Jewish people.

By the mid-1920s, a "warfare model" of science and religion had become the conventional wisdom of American public life.[251] Educational textbooks increasingly adopted Darwinism while theologians such as J. Gresham Machen described liberal Christianity as a different religion altogether (and one, he noted, that is truly "liberal only by its friends").[252]

What we now consider fundamentalism coalesced as the culmination of four distinct strands of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century theological thought, including dispensational premillennialism, which divided history into distinct periods and anticipated Christ's second coming as the end of the current fallen age; biblical inerrancy, which emphasized literal interpretation of Scripture; the holiness movement, which stressed personal piety and Christian service over the life of the mind; and Pentecostalism, which emphasized the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit.[253] All four strands shared a common enemy: liberalism, which had become the dominant worldview among traditional "mainline" seminaries.

Whereas a primitive gospel originally struggled to reconcile Enlightenment thought with orthodox Christian theology, the coalition of fundamentalism eventually became codification. Fundamentalism is surprisingly resilient: 46% of Americans still

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[251] Larson, 23.

[252] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1923), 2.

[253] Larson, 33.

believe in a literal, 4004 BC date for the beginning of creation, in which "God created humans in their present form."[254] The Gallup survey that monitors this question notes,

> Most scientists who study humans agree that the species evolved over millions of years, and that relatively few scientists believe that humans began in their current form only 10,000 years ago without the benefit of evolution. Thus, almost half of Americans today hold a belief, at least as measured by this question wording, that is at odds with the preponderance of the scientific literature.[255]

Today, primitivism has largely been lost and fundamentalism has come to represent anti-intellectualism, or a closing of the Christian mind. In this view, history is in a perpetual state of atrophy and decline interrupted by occasional bursts of new energy and life, and our task as followers of Jesus is to hold on to or conserve what we can while we wait for God to intervene. The inability of the church to grow in the last fifty years is surely related to a version of the gospel that refuses to engage the life of the mind.

Ecclesiologies of Improvement

The second and third positions emerged as attempts to reconcile, or "walk the line" of, the ideology of progress with Christian faith. These are variations on what I describe as "ecclesiologies of improvement."

For generations these have seemed like distinctive theologies, but perhaps they are more surface than we realized, in that both employ versions of human agency. An ecclesiology of improvement is perhaps best understood in relationship to a theology of

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[254] Frank Newport, "In U.S., 46% Hold Creationist View of Human Origins," Gallup, June 1, 2012, https://news.gallup.com/poll/155003/hold-creationist-view-human-origins.aspx.

[255] Newport.

work. The traditional Protestant theology of work, unchanged since Luther, teaches that the new creation only applies to the heart, and not to our hands and our minds. It separates the "inner man" and the "outer man" and believes the Holy Spirit renews our inner state but leaves the outer self unchanged in this life.[256] According to Yale theologian Miroslav Volf, Luther's theology of work led to an anthropomorphic, or human-centered, approach to creation and eventually to ministry—if the Holy Spirit is divorced from the work of human hands and the material world, then any improvements to these things must come as a result of human effort. Volf summarizes, "first, the activity of the Spirit was limited to the sphere of salvation, and second, the locus of the present realization of salvation was limited to the human spirit."[257] Each of these two responses to progress are best understood in the context of this theology of work. A primary difference between the two is where to assign the results of improvement.

A Social Gospel

The second position is a theology of the "social gospel", which formed among traditional mainline seminaries as a response to the rise of political theories of liberalism and emerged at the turn of the twentieth century as a Christianized marriage between Enlightenment ideals and American optimism and pragmatism. This position believes knowledge is discovered, not revealed. Instead of abandoning culture, it seeks to engage

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[256] Miroslav Volf, "Work, Spirit, and New Creation," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 41, no. 1 (January 2017): 69.

[257] Volf, 67.

culture and through this engagement "build" or "advance" the kingdom of God through societal reform.

It is impossible to separate the social gospel from Western and particularly American exceptionalism. The culture in which the social gospel emerged, pre-World War I, was infatuated with the idea of incremental, inexorable improvement. The concept of evolution was at its peak at the beginning of the 20th century. It was a period of rapid technological innovation, including the invention of home electrical power, indoor plumbing, the automobile, and the telephone, to name a few. This infatuation with improvement lasted up to the point at which young men started dying in trenches in western Europe.

It was in this environment, when the word "evolution" was being applied in all sorts of ways,[258] that New York Baptist minister Walter Rauschenbusch re-fashioned the Christian narrative around a new social interpretation[259] of the gospel which claimed that Christians can build God's kingdom through the good works we do for our fellow human. In hubris characteristic of his time, Rauschenbusch wrote, "the religious, political, and intellectual revolutions of the past five centuries, which together created the modern world, necessarily had to culminate in an economic and social revolution such as is now upon us."[260] Comparative literature scholar A. Owen Aldridge writes,

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[258] See for example American philosopher John Fiske's "cosmic evolution" in *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1902).

[259] Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: MacMillan, 1913), 45.

[260] Rauschenbusch, xi.

> Following the lead of such nineteenth-century theologians as Samuel Harris and Horace Bushnell, who believed that America had a special destiny and mission in realizing the kingdom of Christ on earth, the advocates of the social gospel undertook the application of the "social principles of Jesus" to American urban and industrial society, de-emphasizing personal justification and religious experience of a traditional kind.[261]

Adherents of the social gospel tried to merge an ideology of progress and incremental improvement of society with the traditional view of the church's role in the kingdom of God. Countering what he saw as an increasingly privatized religion that refused to engage the massive societal needs of a industrialized society, Rauschenbusch repurposed primitivistic ecclesiology under the banner of social reform: "Primitive Christianity cherished an ardent hope of a radically new era, and within its limits sought to realize a social life on a new moral basis."[262] He summarized his philosophy of history thus: "The essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God."[263] (His use of the past tense "was" is notable; he also defines the church as "the organized expression of the religious life of the past."[264])

Rauschenbusch described the kingdom of God as something to be manufactured by humans. As with all knowledge in the modern worldview, God's kingdom was something to be progressively discovered, not revealed. He wrote, "ascetic Christianity

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[261] Philip P. Wiener, ed. "Ancients and Moderns in the Eighteenth Century," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Volume 5* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 69.

[262] Rauschenbusch, 143.

[263] Rauschenbusch, xiii.

[264] Rauschenbusch, xii.

called the world evil and left it. Humanity is waiting on a revolutionary Christianity which will call the world evil and change it. We do not want to blow all of our existing institutions to atoms, but we do want to remold every one of them… We need a combination between the faith of Jesus in the need and the possibility of the kingdom of God, and the modern comprehension of the organic development of human society."[265] Note that his orientation is toward human agency: while faith plays some vague part, our calling is to develop society in the hopes of completing the rising line of history. By re-fashioning the kingdom of God as a product of social reform, Rauschenbusch suggests a different kind of Christianity than that practiced by the ancients, and one, unlike primitive Christianity, that is no longer bound by "limits"; thus, humans have authority in whether or not the completion of the incline comes to pass, stays flat or descends into hell.

In Rauschenbusch's work is an optimism of the age about the potential symbiosis of the church with politicized human agency. The social gospel took "social evolution" as gospel and re-applied it to the work of the church. The ideal of progress emerged as a secularized version of the Christian narrative, where God's work had been replaced by natural selection and human ingenuity. As support for this position, he noted that leaders of the Constantinian church gradually learned to be courtiers in order to further their interests, because a church supported by the state is beholden to the interests of the state.[266]

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[265] Rauschenbusch, 91.

[266] Rauschenbusch, 187-188.

To champion the potential of human ingenuity through political means perhaps sounds quite normal to today's reader. Rauschenbusch spawned a century of increased social engagement, with its myriad of causes, which continues to this day. Historian and theologian Leonard Sweet characterizes the social gospel movement this way: "To a church that was operating on the principle 'change hearts, change world,' the social gospel countered 'change world, change hearts.'"[267]

But activism was not the default position of the church prior to the Roman emperor Constantine. Before Constantine, the church was not acquainted with power; as historian Alan Krieder writes, the dominant ethic of the church was patience. Constantine's decision to bring the Christian faith into the palace changed everything. Constantine called his approach a sort of "righteous manipulation",[268] an activism in which he as emperor encouraged the church to use the tools of power to righteous ends and replace the traditional patient stance toward culture with urgency and speed.[269]

Social gospel theology believes the world is getting indeed better through the work of disciples and others pursuing the common good, and humanity's task is to help things along by loving others. In this view, church and society become controllable, which turns Christians into activists who tend toward thinking of their faith instrumentally, manipulating outcomes for righteous ends. Rauschenbusch envisioned a church that could keep the instrumental nature of power without the corrupting influence

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[267] Leonard I. Sweet, *Me and We: God's New Social Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), Kindle location 170.

[268] Alan Krieder, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire (*Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 275.

[269] Krieder, 277.

of state power: thus, a church that could wield political advocacy for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Alas, the relationship of the church to power changes the church, which of course is a story that repeatedly plays out throughout the Scriptures. The irony of the "social gospel" vision is that it has become an *Inception*-like folding of reality back on itself in a near identical match, but without the Christ-center. While Rauschenbusch mixed what we now define as differing views of personal and systemic sin in his writing, many progressives now ignore sin altogether in favor of a progressively improving society; when pressed, they downplay sin in favor of the "sacred worth" in every person. As Sweet notes, "its naive view of sin and optimistic outlook on the betterment of human nature failed to look up close and see that evil is real and personal. Evil is not just impersonal systemic forces but hurting people hurting people."[270]

Reducing the Christian faith to an instrument of social reform has reduced its witness. As religion sociologist James Davison Hunter writes, "it is not an exaggeration to say that the dominant public witness of the Christian churches in America since the early 1980s has been a political witness."[271] The potential of social improvement to realize the kingdom of God is debatable at best, because the benefits of human power are limited at best. English baron John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton famously wrote, "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."[272]

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[270] Sweet, *Me and We*, loc. 182.

[271] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

[272] John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, *Historical Essays and Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1907), 504.

In this view, our task as followers of Jesus is to embrace the change as good and to learn how to assimilate them into our suddenly outdated Christian theology in order to be on the "right side" of history's progressive rise upward. The inability of the church to grow is surely related to the hubris and imperfection of a social gospel which, while well intentioned, has created an expectation of the application of human agency to create incremental improvement toward social perfection, and in so doing has replaced God's omniscient power with humanity's limited power.

A Material Gospel

This third position, like the second, is an ecclesiology of improvement. As with the social gospel, in the material gospel the role of the Jesus follower is to "advance" or "build" the kingdom of God on Earth. The primary difference is that while the means of the social gospel is to work through society, the means of the material gospel is to work through the church.

The material gospel has perhaps become the most common understanding of Christianity in American society today. In the material gospel, Christians fundamentally agree with the belief that things are getting better, and in fact see progress as an easy fit with belief in both the eschaton, the coming kingdom of God, and with the United States of America's unique role in the kingdom.

As with the social gospel, the rise of the material gospel is inextricably connected to both Enlightenment philosophy and the American story, which are themselves intertwined. Historian Diarmaid MacCulloch writes that Descartes "was the decisive influence in encouraging his contemporaries and successors to think of a human being as dual in nature: material and immaterial. The problem which has haunted Cartesian views

of personality thereafter has been to show how in any sense the two natures might be united."[273] Raised a devoted French Catholic, Descartes certainly would have understood orthodox theology on the dual nature of Christ, divine and human, as well as arguments about the human soul. Yet, "while Chalcedonian Christianity has sought to settle that difficulty by insistent formulae of balance, Cartesian dualism, combined with Thomas Hobbes' relentless materialism and Isaac Newton's demonstration of the mechanical operation of the universe, has tended to resolve the difficulty by privileging the material over the spiritual."[274] After all, observable phenomenon are easier to deal with.

Along with an emphasis on observable experience, the material world grew in importance. While social reformers such as Rauschenbusch sought to improve society, early American evangelicals applied material sensibilities to the improvement of the church. Journalist Michael Gerson observes that evangelicals "were an optimistic lot who thought that human effort could help hasten the arrival of [God's kingdom]… Evangelicals generally regarded almost any sort of progress as evidence of the advance of the kingdom."[275]

Another primary difference between a social gospel and a material gospel has been a question about the use of political power. According to a material gospel, in order to properly wield power, the church must be in a position of power; thus, it is necessary to maintain the influence the church has held over Western culture since the time of

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[273] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years, 1st American ed* (New York: Viking, 2010), 790.

[274] MacCullough, 791.

[275] Michael Gerson, "The Last Temptation," The Atlantic, April 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/04/the-last-temptation/.

Constantine in the early 4th century. This means the church must reconcile itself to the interests of the state. Whereas the social gospel focuses on humanism and the social good, the material gospel attempts to re-frame improvement according to a divinely appointed form of human power, also known as theocracy.

The dominant model of Jewish-Christian theocracy, of course, comes from the stories of the Israelite kings of the Old Testament, with its accompanying understanding of God's kingdom as land and power. In this framework, one can see a motivation to the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency in 2016. Trump has even been compared to King Saul,[276] the tragic appointment by God following the Israelites' rejection of God as king of the Promised Land (1 Samuel 8:7-9). The desire to build the kingdom by building the power of the church, and the willingness to use political machinery if necessary, is a reflection of a materialist view.

In an odd twist, Rauschenbusch's social gospel premise has recently reemerged in the evangelical world as a descendant of a material gospel for a new, "woke" generation. For example, non-profit mission agency World Vision CEO Richard Stearns claims that God's kingdom lies unfinished and will remain that way until we do "that thing that Jesus left us to accomplish … [which is] establishing and building the kingdom of God on earth."[277] Andy Crouch, the former editor of evangelical flagship *Christianity Today*, both

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[276] Eliza Griswold, "Franklin Graham's Uneasy Alliance with Donald Trump," New Yorker, September 11, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/franklin-grahams-uneasy-alliance-with-donald-trump.

[277] Richard Stearns, *Unfinished: Believing Is Only the Beginning* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 37. Contrast Stearn's title with the words of Jesus, who said "it is finished."

advocates for our ability to "change the world" while acknowledging the common, unspoken assumption among Christians that we are changing it "for the better."[278]

While the lofty evolutionary rhetoric of 100 years ago perhaps provided sufficient rationale for theocratic visions, 21st century American culture has largely reduced visions of progress to material gain. One variation of the material gospel has done likewise, increasingly overlapping with the interests of the American citizen, including individualism and consumerism. Out of this, a distinct subset of a material gospel has become a prosperity gospel, which offers a message that "God desires to bless you."[279]

The rise of the aforementioned "church leadership" can be viewed under the guise of a material gospel, as well. Today, tens of thousands of pastors and church leaders attend "leadership" conferences to receive business advice from famous executives. I once attended such a conference to hear corporate celebrities Jim Collins, Guy Kawasaki, and others extol the virtues of "best practices" which could be applied to the church. The goal was "church growth" and the means to get there was to model the techniques of modern business and its focus on short term return on investment.

Meanwhile, while reporting on the Facebook corporate scandal, *Vanity Fair* proclaims, "Harvard Business School invented the 'leadership' industry—and produced a generation of corporate monsters."[280] Of course, this is countered by the influence of

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[278] Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), 200.

[279] Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

[280] Duff McDonald, "When You Get That Wealthy, You Start to Buy Your Own Bullshit: The Miseducation of Sheryl Sandberg", Vanity Fair, November 27, 2018, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/11/sheryl-sandberg-harvard-business-school-leadership.

Robert Greenleaf's famous "servant leadership", which appropriates Jesus ethics for the boardroom. Instead of exploring the words of Jesus, church leaders re-appropriate the secularized language of "servant leadership" back into the church. Now, when you hear a growing church talk about "service" or "growth," they are frequently referring to ideas and trends that have been filtered through corporate American life, which itself is a secularized version of an idea of growth in which the Christ-center of the church has been replaced with human-centered, righteous manipulation.

Further, allegiance to business "best practices" re-orients our teleology. While better than the alternative, the highest aspirations of "conscious" corporate social values eventually become subservient to the primary motive of profit, as the evangelical community learned with Chick-Fil-A's decision to cease charitable contributions to religious institutions.[281]

Leadership may improve our production efficiency and therefore our material condition, but it has nothing to do with the state of our soul. The problem with the material gospel is that it conflates material progress with spiritual progress. Jesus repeatedly warns, and the early church understood, that material affluence has an inverse correlation to the well-being of one's soul. In both the material gospel and the social gospel, we tend to believe what we can see and act out of our own strength. The problem is the "inclination of the human heart" (Genesis 6:5), which cannot be improved, only

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[281] Amelia Lucas, "Chick-fil-A no longer donates to controversial Christian charities after LGBTQ protests", CNBC.com, November 18, 2019, https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/18/chick-fil-a-drops-donations-to-christian-charities-after-lgbt-protests.html.

surrendered to Jesus. As he reminds Peter, Jesus is the one who builds the church (Matthew 16:18).

The inability of the church to grow is surely related to the hubris and naiveté of a material gospel which has attempted to marry the Christian story with the power structures of political institutions.

Summary of Christian responses to progress

The influence of our language

Our models of church on the left and the right are based on rapidly fading Enlightenment worldviews. While society is moving away from the Enlightenment, we remain hyper-focused on reason as the predominant means of faith, on humanism that lacks transcendence, on technological advancement as our instrument, and on progress as a vision of incremental improvement in society—all pillars of the Enlightenment.

When, as Christians, we accept Enlightenment ideals as our primary philosophical framework, we acquiesce to the meta-proposition that doubt, not faith, improves the world, our language re-forms around its hegemony, and the words we use end up framing our theological choices. For example, when a church aims for incremental improvement in a set of quantifiable measures as a definition for growth, it implicitly shares the culture's deep metaphor of progress. Because progress is a consequence of the doubt of empiricism, the church suffers from a constant state of existential crisis, amplified with every new technological innovation.

The problem of pride and power

The insidiousness of the ideology of progress is that perfectibility invariably leads to pride, the first and chief of all sins. This is the same mistake the Israelites made in the wilderness, thinking they were the ones who got them to the promised land, and it is the same mistake the Constantinian church adopted, and it is the same mistake we make today when we attempt to acquire and use money or hang on to political office for noble ends. All three confuse human agency as the governing force, which leads to the exercise of power. We must come to grips with the insufficiency of this worldview.

The first temptation of any power, no matter how noble, is to view problems as external and separate from the problem of the human heart.[282] If we are to consider "Christian progress," we must consider the question of control—namely, under whose agency does the end of history, whether characterized in Christian terms as God's kingdom or in secular terms as a "great society," emerge? Does it emerge as the result of the work of a sovereign deity or the work of human agency? Dias writes, "one of the differences between the idea of Progress and Augustine's view of providence ultimately depends on whether or not the psychical and social elements of humanity are the sovereign factors in history."[283] We are full of hubris and think we are making the kingdom happen. Our methods are tied to force of human personality rather than a movement of God's Spirit. Perhaps we have become syncretic, merging orthodox Christian belief with an entirely different worldview.

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[282] James Goggin and Kyle Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb: Searching for Jesus' Path of Power in a Church That Has Abandoned It* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 4.

[283] Dias, 94.

Questions of human agency and will to power are appropriate for our current predicament. If the perfectibility of materials and structures is implicit in our deep metaphor of improvement, then malpractice, however defined by those in power, becomes the enemy, and with it an ever expanding definition of malfeasance, which must be dug up and extricated from public life. Perhaps this is the most rational explanation we can find for the actions of the public square today. We are obsessed with collapse because we have been obsessed with growth.

It is clear that the deep metaphor of improvement is problematic and weakening in contemporary thought. What is needed are new metaphors for growth that are not tied to scientific or technological advancement, utopian social and political conditions, or short-term shareholder return. What is needed is a new metaphor for growth that is not tied to our current understanding of growth as progress.

It is to this topic that we will turn next.

CHAPTER 7: LINE BREAK

Ecclesiologies of improvement, signified as a rising line to heaven, ultimately prove insufficient and even destructive. Creating a new definition of church growth requires breaking the image of the incline. This begins with a fresh exegesis of the Great Commission and our use of the word "make." In light of the semiotics of "making", current interpretations of the Great Commission place undue emphasis on human agency and leads to ecclesiologies that are focused on "advancing" or improving the kingdom of God in earth. We have been trying to draw a line to heaven ourselves. In the biblical narrative, God warns humankind of the dangers of human agency, which elevates humankind's and minimizes God's restorative work.

Princeton theologian Geerhardus Vos wrote what is the seminal understanding of the kingdom of God as a paradoxical "already/not yet" reality. Vos argues that the Kingdom and the church are one and the same.[284] Peter's confession forms the foundation, Jesus builds the house, and at the end of his ministry Jesus hands over the keys to Peter to receive and occupy.[285] Thus, any view that separates God's Kingdom and the church are not a reflection of Jesus' teaching on the subject.[286] Since the church is the Kingdom and the church is made up of disciples, the question of church growth—as well as God's Kingdom—is actually a question of discipleship.

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[284] Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (New York: American Tract Society, 1903), 159.

[285] Vos, 143-144.

[286] Vos, 158.

In this view, the way to grow the kingdom/church is not to focus on "church growth," per se, but to focus on discipling. The first step to moving beyond our current framework of church growth is to rediscover a biblical understanding of discipleship. How do we do this?

This exploration begins at the Ascension, when Jesus gave the surviving disciples what we now call the Great Commission.

"(You) Make Disciples"

As it is commonly translated and understood, Jesus tells the earliest followers, "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'" (Matthew 28:18-20)

The linchpin for our question is the phrase "make disciples." Pastors in congregational ministry in the church in USAmerica in the last two generations are certainly familiar with this phrase, "make disciples." Across denominational traditions, it has become a ubiquitous way to describe the work of the church. In 2008, it even formally became part of the mission statement for the United Methodist Church: "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."[287]

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[287] Bishop Scott Jones, email message to author, Frisco, TX, January 25, 2018. A group gathered to write the current mission statement for the United Methodist Church in 1994. The first draft was to "spread scriptural holiness across the land", which was perceived as too esoteric by some. Final phrasing was in part designed for accessibility; it also served as a counter to a congregational emphasis on "making members."

The influence of this phrase cannot be overstated. In chapter 1, I made the claim that two fundamental truths of congregational ministry today are the need to make disciples and the need to grow local churches. These are related; the result of disciple-making, done well, is that the church will grow. The entire 50-year history of the United Methodist Church—left right, and center—is built on the assumption that the goal of ministry is to "make disciples"; the differences and divisions in the church, as deep as they have become, are strategic and tactical, in that they are disagreements in regard to this shared mission.

As ubiquitous and assumed as this phrase is, it is poorly translated, improperly understood, semiotically problematic, and a significant contributing factor to the problem of growth. To understand problems with this phrase, "(you) make disciples," let us reconsider the Great Commission by examining each word:

- one, the use of the understood "you" as the subject of the sentence.
- two, the use of the word "make" as the verb of the sentence.
- three, the use of the word "disciple" as the object of the sentence.

The Understood You

First is the use of the understood you.

The imperative "make disciples" requires a subject. Who is doing the making? The conventional understanding is the we as the church are being called and commissioned by Jesus to do the work of making disciples. As established, however, the presence of a deep metaphor of improvement and the rise of individual autonomy places undue emphasis on the role of humankind in the work of "making."

In Matthew's text, however, the previous verse is clear in assigning authority not to humankind, but to Jesus. When Jesus says that all authority has been given to him, he is defining himself as the basis for the commissioning that is to come. The Great Commission happens because of and through the authority of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one making disciples, not us. In the progress paradigm, authority belongs to humans. In the Scriptures, authority belongs to Christ.

When we divorce the phrase "make disciples" from this authoritative basis, we introduce a new subject for the two word sentence we are left with. An understood "you" becomes the subject of Jesus' imperative. The truncated phrase "go and make disciples" introduces a prooftexting error which removes Jesus as the basis for authority and assigns humankind sole privilege and responsibility. While Jesus' command may be understood as passing authority to us as active agents of Christ's authority on earth, the reduced phrasing we focus on—"making disciples"—invariably places humankind in authoritative control of a process, with onus and responsibility, minimizes Christ's authority, and suggests that the task of "making disciples" is accomplished primarily through human agency.

The Word Make

Second is the word "make." This word is a clear English addition to the Greek text. The Greek word that is the basis for the English word "make" does not exist in Matthew 28:19.

There is another Greek word commonly translated to the English "make", which is *poiēo*. *Poieó* is a complex word with many meanings. It appears over 500 times in the New Testament, and 69 times in Matthew. According to Strong's dictionary, the first and

most common meaning of *poiēo* is to produce something and is used in conjunction with the thing or object created. For example, on the mount of transfiguration, Peter suggests to Jesus, “I will make three shelters.” (Matthew 17:4) It is also the word used to describe God’s creative acts, such as when Jesus affirms that the Creator “made” them male and female (Matthew 19:4).

The verb *poieó* is forceful. More than simply a word for labor or work, it connotes a sense of ownership or agency. *Poieó* suggests both authority and authorship over the thing that is made. In addition to making, *poieó* also denotes keeping, such as when the disciples “celebrate” or “keep” the Passover together on their last night with Jesus (Matthew 26:18). It is also the basis for *poiēma*, something made, or a work, such as in Ephesians 2:10, when we are described as God’s masterpiece. Last, it is the root for the English word “poem.” Notably, it is not a prosaic word of function or utility, but a word for creativity. *Poieó* designates a creator. It is a word that connotes the one doing the creating, the creative process itself, and the work that has been created.

Jesus uses this word when he tells the fishermen in Matthew 4:19, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” It is also used to designate production, such as the “fruit” of good works, when Jesus tells the Pharisees to make fruit. (Matthew 3:8) Whereas Jesus uses the word *poieó* when calling the disciples in Matthew 4, clearly indicating that he is the one doing the making, Jesus does not use this word in Matthew 28, at the other end of his ministry. The lack of the use of the word in Matthew 28 suggests that he does not transfer creative authority to the disciples but retains this authority for himself.

The Word Disciple

Finally, the original Greek word for the most common English translation "make disciples" in Matthew 28:19 is *mathēteúō*. It refers to someone who is following Jesus, the Rabbi / Teacher, and is over time learning the truth of scripture and the lifestyle changes it causes.

In older English translations, including the King James Version, the translated word is given as "teach." The key phrase "make disciples", as best as I can discover, first appeared in the ASV translation in 1900. It has become the standard of English translations since. Whereas the common English translation tells us to "make disciples," with the verb "make" and the object or thing made "disciples," the original text places the word "disciple" as the verb of the sentence. Thus, it is properly transliterated "disciple all the nations," not "make disciples of all nations."

Based on the translation "make disciples," a common interpretation of this text has been that the implied directive is to "proselytize," which is to make converts by teaching. But "conversion" had a negative meaning for Jesus. Earlier in Matthew, 23:15, Jesus denounces the teachers of the day by saying, "How terrible it will be for you, legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You travel over sea and land to make one convert. But when they've been converted, they become twice the child of hell you are." In this earlier text from Matthew's gospel, a "convert" means a proselyte, or literally "one who has arrived." It suggests a finality, where having been converted, the formative spiritual work is finished. Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees was based on the attitudes of the teachers toward their students. As "converts," Jesus suggests that teachers saw students as projects to be completed (or, to use our modern sensibilities, widgets to be produced). The

implication of "child of hell" is that the convert did not convert much. Jesus was not impressed with such a teaching model or approach to ministry. When combined with his earlier criticism of the Pharisees, the object "disciple" in this sentence becomes a task to complete. It suggests that we as makers can objectify disciples as righteous projects, and that the teacher can be finished with making a disciple just as a person can be finished with making a widget. Scripture does not suggest discipleship is a program to complete or a certificate to obtain, yet in our churches we organize our discipleship efforts into journeys to travel, paths to follow, and programs to process. When discipleship is a path what do we find at the end? A golden pot?

Let us return to Matthew 4. When Jesus calls the first disciples ("Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people"), he describes who (Jesus), how (following), and what (fishers) he will make. Thus, having modeled the discipleship process for three years with the twelve, it stands to reason that Jesus would be consistent in his directive at the Ascension. The improper English translation of Matthew 28:19 loses the consistency of Jesus' established model and significantly alters the meaning and implications of the Great Commission. It changes the meaning of the directive by suggesting that we are the authors or creators of disciples, and therefore the authors of the church, which we are not.

Even worse, in light of the deep metaphor of improvement and the hegemony of mechanization and industrialization, the addition of the word "make" implies a model, even a methodology. It is a word of industrialization, where we fit everything into a deep metaphor of mechanization, with gears, pulleys, and levers. It encourages us to find a strategy or program or system of some kind in order to put people through, where they'll come out on the other side a disciple. The sentence structure fits our hubris—we are

encouraged to do the making and thus we want to find some system by which we can manufacture disciples as we manufacture widgets—and do it efficiently.

The same thinking is at the root of our problems with public education today, according to creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson, who points out that the modern education system is built on a deep metaphor of mechanization. An RSA Animate version of Robinson's famous TED talk[288] illustrates little students with caps and tassels, coming off an assembly line.[289]

As discussed, the problem is found in the semiotics of the "making": in addition to progress, the Enlightenment also gave Western culture reason, science, and humanism. Together, these pillars of thought have secularized the church and society by placing emphasis on human agency in the role of making culture and history. We have come to believe it is our responsibility as the church to "make" disciples of Jesus Christ and therefore "advance" or improve the kingdom of God in earth.

When we see ourselves as makers, as described in chapter 7 and repeated in our translation of the Great Commission here, we are repeating the same pattern of pride that has been present throughout history. Ezekiel recounts Pharaoh's pride: "Speak and say, The LORD God proclaims: I'm against you, Pharaoh, Egypt's king, great crocodile lurking in the Nile's canals, who says, 'The Nile is all mine; I made it for myself!'" (Ezekiel 29:3)

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[288] Sir Ken Robinson, "Do Schools Kill Creativity?" TED, February 2006, https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.

[289] "RSA ANIMATE: Changing Education Paradigms," The RSA, October 14, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U.

The Futility of Improvement

This same prideful assertion of authority is present throughout scripture. Right before God's people take possession of the Promised Land, Moses, who does not enter with the Israelites, has a parting warning. He says, “Don't think you've done this work. Don't forget how you got here.” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

Moses repeats the warning not to forget for several more chapters to come, for example when God says: “Don’t think to yourself, my own strength and abilities have produced all this prosperity for me.” (Deuteronomy 8:17) He tries to tell them that the kingdom the Israelites are about to inherit is there because of God, not them. Not only did they not make it happen, they did not even want to keep journeying toward it, once they encountered wilderness adversity in Exodus 16:2-3. Moses knew that if the Israelites started to think they were responsible for the blessings in their lives, they’d forget about God.

Of course, the forgetting is exactly what happened, and continues to happen with every good gift we receive. It is a paradox. When we acknowledge our own moral futility and become dependent on God’s grace and gifts, we receive God’s grace and life flourishes. The flourishing that comes leads to the illusion of self-sufficiency. We begin to think we were somehow participants or even the creators of our own good works. Pride emerges; things fall apart. The cycle begins again. If there is a cycle to history, it is this: not predetermined by the rising and setting of the sun, but an artifact of the sinful nature in us. The sine wave of history is actually a sine wave of systemic sin that cycles between the valleys of our sin and the peaks of God’s grace.

The Scriptures repeatedly tell us that God owns the earth and everything in it. Any good thing comes from God, not from us. To believe or act in any other way, or to think we did some good thing by our own hands, is an act of pride, in which we replace God's authority with our own. Even the idea that we can improve ourselves, others, and culture through faith and/or works is an act of pride when it is equated with something we do or make. As the Episcopal blog Mockingbird observes, "Just as we cannot make ourselves to live, neither do we make ourselves better persons. An improved corpse is still a corpse. … when it comes to spiritual matters, the language of improvement is the language of measurement is the language of control is the language of faithlessness."[290]

But are not Christians called to sanctifying grace as well as justifying grace? Yes—but the paradox created by the deep metaphor of improvement is that we hear these words as a spiritual improvement project. They lead to law, which leads to death. Episcopal friar Stephen Freeman writes,

> the track of salvation is not, by and large, one of moral improvement… The moral life, if rightly understood, cannot be measured by outward actions. The Pharisees in the New Testament were morally pure, in an outward sense, but, inwardly, were "full of dead men's bones." When morality is measured by dead bones, it is still nothing more than death. However, the path that marks the authentic Christian life should be nothing less than "new life," a "new creation." This is a work of grace that is the result of Christ "working within us to will and to do of His good pleasure.[291]

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[290] David Zahl, "The Difference Between Despair and Dependence," Mockingbird (blog), November 8, 2018, "http://www.mbird.com/2018/11/the-difference-between-despair-and-dependence-freeman-strikes-again/.

[291] Stephen Freeman, "Existential Despair and Moral Futility," Ancient Faith Ministries (blog), October 24, 2018, https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/glory2godforallthings/2018/10/24/existential-despair-and-moral-futility/.

The call to "sin no more" is a call to repentance, not good works. It is not something we accomplish on our own power, but only through the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The fundamental flaw of the thinking that we are somehow making ourselves better or improving the word around us extends to the thinking that, in church work, we are somehow "making disciples."

Thus, the United Methodist Church mission statement has led to ruin: while good intentioned, it has become a church-y, sanctified version of self-help, another model from the same factory of our industrialized times, with which we assume we can make good Christians the same way we make good widgets. Every good and perfect gift, including the gift of a good idea, comes from God, not us. Our primary work in this life is to receive God's blessing, tend and till the kingdom God provides,[292] share this good news with others through acts of witness, mercy and justice, and invite others to do the same.

Jesus Builds the Church

Let us return to the first verse of the text in question. Jesus begins the Great Commission with a statement of authority. Instead of authority residing in an eternal past, as ancients thought, or with an engineered future, as moderns think, all authority resides with Jesus. There is no authoritative, understood "you," as the English translation suggests. Jesus builds the church and the church is the community of disciples. Therefore, Jesus is the one making disciples.

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[292] "Tending and tilling" is God's instruction to Adam in the garden and a great beginning to a theology of work. See Leonard Sweet, *Me and We: God's New Social Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), loc 2504. See chapter 9 for more on this.

Much of the debate in contemporary Christian thought ignores Jesus' preeminence in building the kingdom and instead argues about what group in the Christian community is more materially involved in building the kingdom. We are like James and John, each vying to be the greatest disciple (Matthew 18:1-3). We assume we are leading in a vast construction project, and with every plank and board, we get closer to finishing a home so that Jesus can move in. Embedded in this theology is a deep metaphor of progress.

The biblical witness suggests that a focus on human agency removes the work of the Holy Spirit, which leads to spiritual and cultural atrophy. It is not the making per se. Creativity and the subsequent innovations and technologies we create is part of how God designed us. But Jesus calls us to bear fruit, not "make" people. The problem is that we put ourselves in charge instead of joining in God's work. Just like "advancing the kingdom" gives us the glory, adding the word "make" gives us the glory. We do not make disciples; therefore, we do not make the church, and we do not build God's kingdom. Jesus is doing these things.

Yet Jesus never tells us to build the kingdom and there is no biblical basis for the belief that today is closer to the kingdom than yesterday. As Leonard Sweet observed, "Every age is equidistant from eternity."[293] The paradox of progress is that things are getting better, and things are getting worse, all at the same time. While the apparent lack of cultural progress may lead the unbeliever to nihilism, Jesus' last words before his

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[293] Sweet, *Rings of Fire*, 7.

crucifixion offer us good news: it is finished. Through the crucifixion and resurrection, God's kingdom has already been built.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing in the ashes of visions of progress in Nazi Germany, comments on the idea of pastor as visionary organizational executive, building a future through piety and/or justice:

> God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren. He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.[294]

In his study on a pneumatological, or Holy Spirit driven, theology of work, Yale theologian Miroslav Volf notes that "the Spirit of God is not only *spiritus redemptor* but also *spiritus creator*."[295] In order to grow, we need to cease our Enlightenment obsession with manufacturing growth and relearn how to allow God's Spirit to move in us. Volf writes, "When the ascended Christ gave the Spirit, he 'released the power of God into history, power which will not abate until God has made all things new.' … Because the whole creation is the Spirit's sphere of operation, the Spirit is not only the Spirit of religious experience but also the Spirit of worldly engagement."[296] What we need is to break the image of humans as the agents of disciple making. With a pneumatological

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[294] Deitrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian in Community* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 27-28.

[295] Volf, 67.

[296] Volf, 70.

understanding of ministry, the work of "disciple making" ceases being the locus of ministry, at least as we have understood it.

Having considered the damage of our self-image of improvement, and the ways in which we have interfered with the Holy Spirit in the work of restoring creation, how do we begin to learn to undo the mess we have made? To what work should our attention shift?

In the final task of this study I want to (re)introduce a new image for growth.

CHAPTER 8: LIFELINE

If we conclude that images of growth rooted in an ideology of progress are broken, where can we begin to find a more helpful image of what it means for the church to grow? This chapter explores one option: the image of growing up in the household of God, which invites personal, corporate, and cultural comparison. Specifically, the semiotics of human development offers new insight on the Great Commission.

When asked about his personal religious experience on the campaign trail in 2015, USAmerican presidential candidate Donald Trump replied that he had never asked God for forgiveness for his sins, but instead said he tries "to do a better job."

[297] Trump's response reflects a very American way of thinking: a progress-infused, God-is-my-copilot understanding of faith in which the primary virtues are self-improvement and society-improvement. While "doing a better job" fits an American ethos of incremental social and economic growth, it does not reflect the biblical nature of *metanoia*, Jesus' preferred word for repentance. Jesus did not call his disciples to get slightly better, but to change everything.

The Need for a New Image

The essence of this work is semiotic. The power of images seen and spoken is their ability to shape our understanding. As I describe in the Appendix, linguistic and

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[297] Eugene Scott, "Trump Believes in God, But Hasn't Sought Forgiveness," cnn.com, July 18, 2015, https://www.cnn.com/2015/07/18/politics/trump-has-never-sought-forgiveness/index.html.

visual metaphors serve as a means to compare our embodied, sensory experience to other experiences and through these comparisons to establish meaning and define reality.

This power has long caused controversy in the church. While a millennium earlier, Pope Gregory had described images as the "Bible for the illiterate,"[298] images in many medieval sanctuaries, the reformers claimed, had ceased being icons ornamenting faith and had instead become idols obviating faith. They smashed images of the Christian faith hanging in cathedrals,[299] or in some case re-imagined the tradition of imaged worship with a new, "consciously curtailed" scholastic ethos.[300]

Yet image is the indigenous language of the mind. It is impossible to detach or remove images from understanding. For the descendants of the Reformers, new mental images emerged to replace icons hanging in sanctuaries. A dominant image of history and eventually of the church became a rising line—an artifact of empiricism and the new ideology of progress. It has been pervasive to the point of reshaping our theology, including our understanding of the mandate to "make disciples." It has led to an ecclesiology of social and material improvement. The dominant Christian image of growth today is indistinguishable from an Enlightenment understanding of "growth" as inexorable, incremental, and increasingly immediate social and personal growth, driven by continual advancements science and technology.

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[298] Len Wilson, *The Wired Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), 18.

[299] Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 52.

[300] Koerner, 28.

But we are not rising to heaven. Like Reformation-era icons, the rising line has become hinderance to our ability to follow Jesus. As the iconoclasts broke icons that hindered rather than helped people come to and sustain faith, our challenge today is to break images, including images of the mind, that hinder us from following Jesus. In light of current threats to ecclesiastical and social order stemming from the inability of the ideology of progress to achieve its promised aims, the church today has a rare opportunity to break old images, shed the syncretic conflation of Enlightenment ideals with Christian faith, and recover a biblical image of human flourishing.

The challenge is that the image of the incline is stubborn. Whether because of cultural hegemony or propaganda, it has been difficult for many Christian groups, regardless of their affinity, to view history using any other image than the incline. At least in America, the carnage of the twentieth century has not been sufficient to dismiss the conviction that culture is ascending. The Anglican blog Mockingbird notes, "The technology that made the Great War's bloodbath possible may seem comically antiquated now, but narratives of progress are as prevalent and vociferous as they've ever been. If you've been told you're on the wrong side of history or have taken someone to task with that phrase, you are already acquainted with one contemporary version."[301] Seminal progress critic Christopher Lasch noted 30 years ago that despite the ongoing policy debates between right and left, each continues to assume the inexorability and desirability

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[301] Ian, "The Straight Road Out of a Buried World," Mockingbird (blog), November 26, 2018, https://www.mbird.com/2018/11/the-straight-road-out-of-a-buried-world/.

of continued material development,[302] although "it ought to be clear by now that neither fascism nor socialism represents the wave of the future".[303] As progress historian Ronald Wright questions, "where are we going?"[304] In other words, if we abandon progress, how do we understand history? How do we reshape our theology and ecclesiology?

But the perception that we as the church can continually, incrementally improve the world until we reach the point of realizing the kingdom of God is not grounded in the Scriptures. Trump's comment reveals a fundamental difference between the Enlightenment and the Christian story and summarizes the insufficiency of theologies and ecclesiologies rooted in an ideology of progress. If the church rejects an upwardly rising line of incremental growth and improvement, what is the alternative? Certainly, legitimizing a downward slope or decline does not reflect a spirit of hope we are given as followers of Christ. How then are pastors and leaders in Christian ministry to respond?

One recent temptation has been to return to the circle of ancient thought as a perpetual "Groundhog Day" or as a cycle of renewal.[305] The anthropologist Mary Douglas observes,

> There is no saying whether a closed ring serves a philosophy of closure and fixed endings, or whether the circle is seen as one of a cyclic series that always returns to the same place. The myth of eternal return can be taken to be comforting and stabilizing, or it can be seen as a frustratingly sinister trap. Alternatively, it is

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[302] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 23.

[303] Lasch, 224.

[304] Ronald Wright, 4.

[305] In addition to the 1992 film starring Bill Murray, other films have explored cyclical philosophies of history, such as the Coen Brothers' 2013 Inside Llewyn Davis.

> equally possible for every ending to be an opening on a new ring, a philosophy of renewal and regeneration.[306]

The paradigm of the circle does not necessarily denote sameness, though that is one possibility, but simply that the pattern of history is to return to the beginning, just as circle is shaped. Proponents of both optimistic and nihilistic historiography, whether articulated or merely intuited, can each find supporting arguments in the seemingly repetitive pattern of human life, from birth to death. Yet, the circle is essentially pagan in its seasonal cycle of decline and renewal. God is a God of history and Christianity is a story of new life, change and finality. The call is not to reject history altogether but to seek new forms of incarnation in the time and space in which we live.

While the primary goal of this work has been iconoclastic and an attempt at offering an alternative way of thinking must necessarily be brief and in need of further research, I will end with one possible new image to consider. Because images serve as metaphors for reality, and no single image or metaphor is a complete representation of reality, I do not offer a new image as a complete or systematic new model for the church or for congregational growth, but rather as a first step toward an alternate way of thinking.

The alternative image of growth to consider is that of a single human life, growing up in the household of God. While this begs further research, let us briefly consider this image, beginning with the nature of first-century households.

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[306] Douglas, 73.

The Greco-Roman Household

To the modern, Western reader, a "household" perhaps connotes the image of a nuclear family in a McMansion. This image is a recent and increasingly problematic Western phenomenon. As cultural critic David Brooks observes, until 1850, three-quarters of American households were multi-generational. While "big, interconnected, and extended families… helped protect the most vulnerable people in society from the shocks of life," the rise of a more individualistic married couple with children gave "the most privileged people in society room to maximize their talents and expand their options. The shift from bigger and interconnected extended families to smaller and detached nuclear families ultimately led to a familial system that liberates the rich and ravages the working-class and the poor." Now, after the rise and fall of the nuclear household, only 18% of American homes are multi-generational, though due to the economics of the current USAmerican housing market the percentage of hew home buyers seeking multi-generational living arrangements is rising.[307]

Though the first-century Greco-Roman household often contained a nuclear family, it was much more expansive than that.

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[307] David Brooks, "The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake," The Atlantic, March 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-nuclear-family-was-a-mistake/605536/.

Characteristics of the Household

In his landmark study of the social environment of the earlier Christians, New Testament scholar Wayne Meeks notes that the household (*oikos*) was the "basic unit of society."[308] A typical first-century Greco-Roman household was usually headed by a patriarch and contained a varied group of persons including "immediate relatives, slaves, freedmen," tenants, *tektons* and other craftsmen, some of whom may have been non-Christian.[309]

The members of the household were "kin"—sometimes immediate or extended relatives and sometimes brought together by a common need. Ancient historian Walter Scheidel characterizes the core values of the household as "coresidence [situations in which children, especially adult children, live with parents], kinship, commensality [situations in which one party derives benefit and another is harmed], and economic cooperation."[310] The first three characteristics are unsurprising given our current understanding of the relative roles of gender and age in ancient society, and the last characteristic reflects the social structure of society, in which the household was the basic unit of both "production as well as consumption,"[311] much in the same way the company

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[308] Meeks.

[309] Acts 16:31.

[310] Brackets are my own. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris, and Richard P. Saller, *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 90.

[311] Scheidel, 87.

is the social and economic structure of our contemporary capitalist society. Indeed, *oikos* is the etymological basis of our English word "economy."

Basic Cell of the Church

The church appropriated this "basic unit of society" as the organizational unit of the Body of Christ. While diaspora synagogues and associations offered the "nearest and most natural" initial organizational models for the early church,[312] early churches consciously avoided perpetuating the established Jewish model. As New Testament scholar Wayne Meeks observes, given the similarities and connections between the early church and the Jewish communities in Greco-Roman cities, the lack of mention of imitation of Jewish associations or assemblies in the early church is surprising.[313] Instead, the dominant organizational image became the household,[314] or *oikos*, which was the primary meeting place of the first believers. This established a pattern which lasted for the first three hundred years of the church's existence until Constantine authorized the construction of basilicas for the gathering of Christians in corporate worship in the fourth century.[315]

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[312] Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul, Second Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 80.

[313] Meeks, 81.

[314] Meeks, 75.

[315] Bradley Blue, "Acts and the House Church," *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting. Volume Two: Graeco-Roman Setting,* ed. David W.J. Gill and Conrad Gempf. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 120. The introduction of the basilica began the slow fade of the semiotics of the household of God, as Christians retained the language of "God's house" but lost the immediacy of family dynamics, replacing it with a new dichotomy of sacred and secular spaces.

The *oikos* was more than a just a place to meet. Paul did not simply refer to a church that met at someone's house; instead, he referred to churches as "households." The *oikos* was the basic organizational cell of the Christian movement.[316] Groups of believers met in sponsor households. While often, the members of the households were themselves believers, this was not always the case. In some situations the head of the households were not believers. A city's church, such as the one Paul wrote in Corinth, constituted a collection of households,[317] which itself was distinguished from the entire Christian movement as a single Church. Meeks notes that Paul gives special consideration in the city of Corinth to the household of Stephanas, Acts mentions not only Aquila and Prisca but Titius Justus and Crispus,[318] and his instructions on divisions in the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 3 may have been written to competing households in the city.[319] Thus the organizational structure of the early church existed on three levels: a single movement (*ekklesia*), divided into a single city (*polis*) church, each divided by household (*oikos*).

Semiotics of the Household of God

Perhaps due to the ongoing comparative dynamics of the Christian movement and the Greco-Roman household among the earliest believers, the image of the household

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[316] Meeks.

[317] 1 Cor 14:23, Rom 16:23, 1 Cor 11:20, as noted by Meeks.

[318] Meeks, 76.

[319] Meeks.

emerged as more than just an instrument of administration. It took on symbolic meaning, as well[320], notably in the theology of 1 Timothy as "the household of God, which is the church of the living God."[321] Understanding this semiotic environment is critical to interpreting the experience of the early church and to formulating more appropriate images of church growth and Christian growth.[322]

The image of the believer as a child growing up in a household of God offers comparisons in an individual sense, a corporate sense, and in a cultural sense. When we refer to "church growth" as an entity unto itself, employing quantifiable measurements of aggregate growth, we play into an institutionalism that seeks to build up a structural entity as opposed to building up of a group of individuals who together form a movement. Simply, church growth is people growth. Growth happens in and to individuals. In the habits of faith, the simple daily life of faithfulness is what forms and shapes virtue in us. In this way, to refer to "church growth" is perhaps best understood as the individual development of personhood[323] through virtue. The act of following Jesus sends each of us as individuals on a new journey—not an onward and upward, rising journey to heaven—but a journey of new life that includes periods of birth, growth,

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[320] James W. Aageson, *Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Early Church (Library of Pauline Studies)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 25.

[321] 1 Tim 3:15.

[322] An exploration into the semiotics of the household of God is not without its pitfalls, not the least of which is the danger of subordination of women and children. This does not negate the need to consider the household as the image of a congregation. Even the conventional understanding of the role of the patriarch needs reevaluation, as "women and children were in some cases substantial property owners. See Scheidel.

[323] John 10:10.

maturity, decline, and death. Of course, the life of Jesus ends with resurrection—a postlude to death unknown to a secular world.

In the corporate sense, we as the church are brothers and sisters in God's household. A human life lives among other human lives; in the same way, church growth must be understood not as an individual endeavor or even an individualistic congregational endeavor, but as part of the historical witness of the church across time and space. Such a view recontextualizes growth not as the goal, per se, but one part of the range of human experience. "Church growth" is a chart penciled on a door frame, showing siblings growing in the faith together.

In a cultural / historiographical sense, Augustine advocates for a philosophy of history using an image of a single human life.[324] One of the strongest biblical images of a philosophy of history appears in Jesus' use of the "birth pangs."[325] Matthew 24 is a difficult read for advocates of progress. Jesus foretells not an increase in goodness, mercy, and the flourishing of human life, but an increase in wickedness which will culminate with the destruction of civilization, at least as his Hebrew readers understood it. Yet Jesus' words offer a couple of hints which we might extrapolate from the cultural confines of Matthew's gospel. The first association this image brings is that the pain of cultural tumult in both Matthew's time and in ours is perhaps a pre-requisite to a greater good that is yet to come. That pain of great cultural suffering and even war would

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[324] de Benoist, 10.

[325] Matthew 24:8.

precede peace was not a new idea, historically; what made it different was that Jesus makes a distinction between a unique eschatological sequence of events (an "end times") and the realization that "these sorts of events characterize all of life until the end; history until the final time is only the *beginning* of birth pangs" [ital. original].[326]

Through Jesus' death and resurrection, the kingdom of God is not just begun— "it is finished", as Jesus declared (John 19:30). The paradox of Vos' famous "now and not yet" kingdom,[327] when viewed through the semiotics of birth pains, suggest that a distinctly new heaven and new earth (not just an individual human life, but an entire physical space and culture) has been conceived and has been growing, out of sight, away from human intervention for good or ill. The future has been gestating and that in order to be born, it must go through a period of great danger. Further, if the kingdom is gestating, then we are not building the kingdom after all. It is growing on its own, out of sight.

As followers of Jesus, who have been reconciled to God and called to join with God in fulfilling this grand purpose, then what are we to do? Stand around and wait? In Matthew's gospel, Jesus provides the answer by shifting the conversation from what it going to happen to what the disciples should do: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."[328] Cultural upheaval is not an invitation to separate from the world, nor to create the

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[326] Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press), 162.

[327] Vos.

[328] Matt 24:14

kingdom; it is simply the state of the world, and the context in which disciples must share the story of Christ. Social stability is the outlier, not the norm.

Authority

Let us return to the image of growing up in the household of God.

Growth happens in the context of an aspiration or purpose. To what end do we grow? In the Greco-Roman household, the male child grew to become like his father.[329] The patriarch was the authority and responsible party for the economic and social health of the persons in the home, many of home were not immediate relatives. For the Christian movement, this assuredly aligned with the well-established image of God as father, a distinguishing feature of the Jewish and Christian tradition.[330]

The image of a father of course implies children, which is an image the Scriptures consistently use to describe humankind. The compelling dynamics of familial relationships is central to the story of Israel, beginning with God changing Abram's name, as a father would to a child who is adopted.[331] The adoptive father to child relationship frames the story of Abraham's great grandchildren, who later constitute the

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[329] Paul consciously expanded the use of this image to include daughters as well as sons, such as when he cites 2 Samuel and adds "daughters." See 2 Cor 6:18.

[330] Philip P. Wiener, ed. "Alienation in Christian Theology," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Volume 1* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 34.

[331] Gen 17:5.

twelve tribes of Israel,[332] whom God chooses.[333] The fate of the chosen, adopted sons and their descendants is the story of the entire Old Testament and the backstory to Jesus. No other ancient religious tradition compares with this divine domestic drama. The pagan philosophical traditions are experiments of the intellect, and "even in Islam, Allah appears as judge and sustainer of order only; man is created to fulfill the *amr*, the divine commandment."[334]

Birth

Jesus says that those who enter the kingdom of God are born anew of water and Spirit[335], and Paul adds that when we are born again, we embody the new creation.[336] After decades of use and abuse as an image of the church, it is difficult to truly hear the semiotics of being born again, as Nicodemus surely did when he exclaimed, "How can someone be born when they are old!?"[337] To be born again denotes the opposite of progress. It is a return to the start. We go backwards before we can go forward. We are a new creation, and must learn how to grow up "the right way." This is the biblical theology of change and growth. It starts with a journey backward to the beginning of life.

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[332] Gen 49:1-27.

[333] Is 44:1.

[334] Weiner.

[335] John 3:5.

[336] 2 Cor 5:17.

[337] John 3:4.

We are born again and from this place of new birth, we begin to develop as a new creation, transformed and not conformed.[338]

Personhood

As beautiful as the ideal image of a family is, the biblical record consistently tells the story of families marred by sin. Jesus retains and expands the image of a broken family established in the Old Testament, teaching that when we sin, we become alienated from our God our father. Jesus compares this alienation to an angry son who demands his inheritance and leaves.[339] But the brokenness is deeper than our modern interpretation of this story as a selfish adolescent. Rather, we are like orphans who have become estranged from our parents and are left to die.

The image of orphaned children was not foreign to Jesus' listeners. Rather, it was a common occurrence in Roman society. Birth control existed in antiquity, but not the kind that came in a pill. If people had an undesired child, they were known to abandon their children to die, a practice called "infant exposure", or *expositio*. With effective contraception unavailable and abortion potentially fatal for the mother as well as the fetus, infant exposure served as a primary means for ancient and medieval families to manage the size and shape of their household.[340] The practice was the subject of

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[338] Rom 12:2.

[339] Luke 15:11-32.

[340] John Eastburn Boswell, "Expositio and Oblatio: The Abandonment of Children and the Ancient and Medieval Family," *The American Historical Review*, 89, no. 1 (February 1984): 13. http://doi.org/10.2307/1855916.

extensive moral debate, akin to abortion in the United States today, though it wasn't officially banned until 374 CE.[341] Some cities had specific locations set up for such activity, an unofficial exchange location. Other babies were left at the trash dump.

The practice perhaps sounds horrific to modern ears, but premodern families saw it differently. Ancient historian John Boswell writes, "parents intended to offer the child up—to the kindness of strangers, to the mercy of the gods, to public welfare, to a better fate (than the natal parent could offer), or simply to his chances. *Expositio* provided a means of removing a child from the family's responsibility, not from life. Parents gave the child to the world; if the world rejected him, he died, but the family did not kill him. *Expositio* was an alternative to infanticide."[342]

Surprisingly, death was not the most common result of infants left exposed to the elements. In some cases, city officials specifically forbade saving such children, but people did anyway, for a variety of reasons. Some adopted abandoned children as a solution to infertility or the loss of a child to death. "Roman satirists implied that wealthy women picked up abandoned children because they could not be bothered with the nuisance of pregnancy."[343] Others wanted to add to the family clan for social, familial or economic reasons. There was even a name in Greek for a child who'd been saved from the trash heap – *anairetoi*, or "picked-up ones."

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[341] Maureen Carroll, *Infancy and Earliest Childhood in the Roman World: 'A Fragment of Time'* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018), 175.

[342] Boswell.

[343] Boswell, 14.

Households in antiquity were defined according to the patriarch. Each person's relationship to the patriarch defined their status in the household and in society as a whole. An infant was only given legal status as a person when the father officially recognized the infant.[344] Thus an *expositus* could be a free child, with full rights to the father, or an *expositus* could be a slave. It all depended on the father, who was the arbiter of the child's status. A typical large household in antiquity with two types of children would thus have its own microcosm of a class system: Free children, whether by biology or through adoption, were the rightful heirs to the father's estate. Slave children had no rights to the father's estate.

Most *anairetoi* were saved for the slave trade. Abandoned children raised by slave traders for the specific purpose of selling later was the most common result of an abandoned baby and infant exposure was the primary source for the slave trade.[345] A slave trader would retrieve a baby and give the infant to a wet nurse on the payroll. After five or six years the child could begin to repay the cost of rearing by running errands and doing light chores.[346] The women of the sex industry were primarily supplied by the female infants retrieved through *expositio*.[347]

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[344] Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 553.

[345] Judith Evans Grubbs, "Church, State, and Children: Christian and Imperial Attitudes Toward Infant Exposure in Late Antiquity," Andrew Cain, ed. *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 119-120.

[346] Ibid.

[347] Keener, 472.

The presence of infant exposure contextualizes and integrates recurring New Testament semiotics of slaves, children, and heirs in a household. One of the more popular verses in the gospels comes in John 8, when Jesus tells a group of Jews that "the truth will set them free."[348] The group protested, saying, "We are Abraham's children; we've never been anyone's slaves. How can you say that we will be set free?"[349] By saying this, they are referencing the image of *expositio* as a metaphor and positioning themselves against it, insisting they have already been made free through their status as Abraham's children.

In response, Jesus employs a linguistic trick common to his repartee with Jewish leaders: he keeps their metaphor of infant exposure yet redefines their thinking by saying they are indeed slaves, because "anyone who sins is slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever." Jesus clarifies that a person's status as free or slave isn't determined by blood relationship to the father, as the Romans did, nor by blood relationship to Abraham, as the Jews did, but by faith. Jesus concludes by saying, "Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you really will be free.[350]

The Jewish leaders continue to push, declaring their citizenship because Abraham is their father. When Jesus responds, they switch to describing God as their father. At each turn, Jesus responds to their focus on blood affiliation. As the one true Son and the

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[348] John 8:32.

[349] John 8:33.

[350] John 8:34-36.

only rightful heir to the father, Jesus speaks on behalf of the Father. He alone has power to decide who is a slave and who is free.

The biblical concept of “child of God” references and redeems the tragic practice of infant exposure and is necessary to understand familial images of God as Father, humankind as children, alienation, reconciliation and adoption. To be a “child of God” in Greco-Roman society meant that even if a person was not a biological child, through the Son he or she is no longer a slave but reconciled: adopted, free, with granted status and citizenship, and bonded with one other as full member and sibling in God the father’s household.

Jesus uses the imagery of birth, childhood, alienation, and adoption throughout his ministry, such as when he promises the disciples he won’t leave them as orphans.[351] Later, Paul extends the image of a slave child who has been purchased, providing perhaps some of the strongest biblical imagery for a soteriology of substitutionary atonement, when he writes to the church at Galatia that with Christ we are transformed from slave children to heir children.[352] Baptist theologian John Yeats describes this as “forensic language, indicating a price has been paid to change the identity of the believer from slave to heir.”[353]

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[351] John 14:18.

[352] Gal 4:3-5.

[353] John M. Yeats, “The Biblical Model of Adoption,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 49, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 65-79. https://swbts.edu/sites/default/files/images/content/docs/journal/49_1/49.1_Yeats.pdf.

Paul employs this language when he writes to the church at Ephesus that they "are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord."[354]

Development

In the Great Commission, Jesus offers two simple words to describe the purpose of the church: baptize and disciple. Implicit in this commission is to think of people as children, at least in their relationship to God. Baptism is a rebirth, a new beginning to life, except this time a life characterized by faith. We are born again, but babies don't stay small for long. As a child begins to grow, he or she begins a process of learning. As I often joked with my wife when we were in this stage of life, babies come preloaded with nothing! Everything must be downloaded. A child learns everything it needs for life, and does so quickly.

Here we may begin to explore alternate images for Christian growth and for church growth. Growth as we understand it today is best understood as a version of childhood development: part of a full human life. It is at this stage when we are ready to become disciples. Distinguishing natural images of human development from mechanistic images of perpetual growth is crucial. As de Benoist writes,

> This idea of a collective organism becoming perpetually "more adult" gave rise to the contemporary idea of "development" understood as indefinite growth. In the eighteenth century, a certain contempt for childhood took hold, which went hand

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[354] Eph 2:19-21.

> in hand with contempt for origins and beginnings, which are always regarded as inferior. The concept of progress implies an idolatry of the novum: every innovation is a priori better simply because it is new. This thirst for novelty—systematically equated with the better—quickly became one of modernity's obsessions.[355]

While an ideology of progress worships infinite growth (perhaps this offers some insight into American obsession with youth), Jesus compares the one who believes as one who adopts the spirit of a child.[356] The image of a growing child is rich with comparison. For one, child development takes time, in both the actual sense and in the metaphorical sense of faith formation. Even the apostle Paul, who was among the leading Jewish authorities of his day,[357] had to leave the public eye and spend three years as an infant in Christ.[358]

Also, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of child development, which of course has become its own discipline in psychology and education. In today's educational system, learning is closely associated with knowledge acquisition. This has proven problematic, as noted by leading education research and creativity advocate Ken Robinson, who co-opts the imagery of "born again" to describe the revolution he seeks in the modern educational system.[359] Of course, to recognize the limitations of our current models for education is not to advocate for a return to a pre-scientific or pre-literate age.

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[355] de Benoist.

[356] Matt 19:14.

[357] Phil 3:4-6.

[358] Gal. 1:17.

[359]See Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative* (Westford: Capstone, 2011).

Certainly, science has helped civilization; the pre-scientific age was a much more brutish place. But as Robinson and others have observed, science threatens to subsume the humanities, including theology.[360] While we do not abandon science and reason, what we need is a new images and understandings of human development that move beyond the limitations of knowledge acquired by rationalism.[361]

The need to re-evaluate the role of knowledge acquisition in child development hints at the roots of our problem with growth. In order to experience church growth, we need to start with Christian growth, and to start with Christian growth, we need to reconsider Jesus' Great Commission. In order to do this, though, we need to reclaim and reimagine the core language we use to describe what we hope to achieve by helping someone to grow. If we seek to grow the church, we need to begin by ceasing limiting growth to either intellectual or moral improvement and rediscover growth as a more holistic "discipling" (the verb).

Maturity

This sort of following leads not just to imitation, but what Leonard Sweet points out is a more complete understanding of incarnation, or "personating"—not impersonating, or duplicating, but allowing Jesus to inhabit us through the Holy Spirit, so

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[360] McGilchrist.

[361] While theology has suffered as a discipline, theologians are beginning to explore what it means to go beyond our present, limiting categories without rejecting the last 400 years altogether. One example is in the emergence of a new field of "analytic theology," which seeks to bridge the chasms that have emerged between biblical studies, theology, and philosophy.

that our personhood begins to take on the personhood of Jesus. As Sweet says, "replication is never duplication. Replication is always personalized personation, as Christ becomes who he is in every one of us, and he is so immensely, immeasurably complex and multi-faceted that it takes all the human species to reflect the beauty and glory and holiness of Christ."[362] Sweet alternately describes this relationship as such: "Discipleship is not assenting to a belief system, operating out of some ethical norms, or subscribing to a political agenda. Discipleship is recognizing, receiving, releasing, and reproducing Jesus."[363]

Thus, church growth is disciple growth, and disciple growth is a process of Jesus followers not only Doing What Jesus Would (WWJD) or acting like Jesus would act, but learning to "personate" Jesus—and in so doing becoming a fully unique person.[364] To personate Jesus, then, is to be a mature follower. The apostle Paul describes this sort of person as one who has grown up into the fullness of faith, and is eating the "solid food" of a grown up, as opposed to the "milk" of a child.[365]

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[362] Leonard Sweet, "Absolute Relative," Napkin Scribbles, March 7, 2019, https://anchor.fm/napkinscribbles/episodes/Absolute-Relative-e2sggs/a-a8ehg0.

[363] Leonard Sweet and Mark Chironna, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Culture* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2019), 183.

[364] John 10:10.

[365] 1 Cor 3:2.

Aging, Death, and Resurrection

As de Benoist notes, writing as a secular historian, the image of a human life and the concept of infinite growth eventually diverge,[366] and it is in this moment when the promises of the ideology of progress cease to apply to the church. Beyond maturity, we age and eventually enter a period of decline that leads to death.

In a culture obsessed with perpetual pubescence, perhaps the image the church most needs right now is one of decline and death, for each is part of the story of every human life. This life is a life of loss and suffering. As Jesus says, in this world we will have trouble.[367] Ironically, sometimes it is decline and suffering that we may experience life. When we experience loss, viscerally, actually, through our own story and through the stories of others, we engage in the fellowship of the saints, in the community of suffering known as the human race.

The life of discipleship is the gain of loss. The majority of the apostles were eventually martyred for their faith; this was actually a common expectation of the cost of discipleship among early believers.[368] Even in the comfort of 21st century USAmerican discipleship, we find the highest meaning not in the fulfillment of self, but in sacrifice. Every parent knows that raising a child is a process of constant grief, a smile through tears. We lose our life to find life, which is profoundly counter-cultural in a Randian

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[366] de Benoist, 10.

[367] John 16:33.

[368] Sean McDowell, *The Fate of the Apostles: Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest Followers of Jesus* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 37.

world of self-propagation. When we have Christ, and the power of his resurrection, we participate in something much greater than the actualization of self. In our suffering we know Christ's suffering, and we learn to die to self. We become changed by the one who has overcome the world. We cannot know resurrection without death. We must die to truly live.

This decline and death is perhaps not only the result of sin and suffering, but the heart of a kenotic God, whose Son chose to lay down his life so that others could live. Ultimately, growth continues beyond the insatiable desire for more and lays down life, adopting the form of Jesus, which includes a willingness to decline, suffer, and even die.

CHAPTER 9: IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

The conclusion considers areas of comparison for the semiotics of church growth as the development of a single human life in the household of God and offers a few thoughts for further exploration.

To Disciple

A better understanding of Matthew 28:19 is crucial to changing our understanding of growth. The Greek word for our English "disciple" (*mathétés*) appears 267 times in the New Testament. It is everywhere, as a label or a description to the people who followed Jesus. In 263 occasions, its usage is as a noun. Matthew 28:19 is one of only four times it appears in the New Testament as a verb.

In each of the four cases in which *mathétés* is used as a verb, it refers to a process of training or instruction. It is either passive—to be discipled—or active—to disciple another. Three of the four times it is passive tense: once in a parable by Jesus in Matthew 13, once in a reference to Joseph of Arimathea, as one who was discipled by Jesus, and once in Acts as a reference to the discipleship received by the twelve. The use of the word *mathétés* as an active tense verb in Matthew 28:19, one of the most important phrases of the entire New Testament, is the only such use in the entire New Testament. In the case of Jesus' commandment, it is an imperative—Jesus is issuing a commandment. It is also aorist. Aorist is a rare verb form in Greek. It indicates a simple, present tense action, not a one-time action but a perpetual state of being. There is no easy English translation. Think of it like this: "I want to go walking," versus, "I want to walk." I want to walk is aorist. It is like a person who has been bed bound or injured in an accident, and

they have not been able to walk. One week before graduating from seminary, a friend was involved in a major car accident. He was in a coma for two months. When he finally woke up, he had to reconstruct much of his life, including how to walk and how to remember. When you go to visit a friend who has been in a coma for months, and he is ready to begin life again, he does not simply say, "I want to go for a walk." He says, "I want to walk!" This is aorist. It is the simple, perpetual present—a state of being, not a single action in time. Jesus uses an active, aorist tense of the verb disciple in the Great Commission. Of the 267 times some form of the word "disciple" appears in the New Testament, this aorist, active tense, imperative verb is unique.

Thus, "to disciple" is a command for active teaching engagement, not a passive state of being, and it is perpetual, not limited or for a specific duration. When applied to the image of a child in faith, it suggests that learning is a mode for living.

[369] Clearly, Jesus' use of "disciple" as an aorist verb made sense to the apostles. But this meaning has been lost. We need to relearn what it means to disciple one another. What does it look like if we are to *mathété* someone?

It is certainly more than a simple act of conversion. One of the implications of the "convert" language Jesus used against the Pharisees in Matthew 23, which is exasperated by our semiotic understanding of the word "make," is an assumed value of efficiency we bring to the task. Just like Frederick Winslow Taylor, the corporate consultant who introduced efficiency to accelerate profit, our tendency is to employ the most efficient

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[369] Echoes of this are visible in psychologist Carol Dweck's well-known "growth mindset," which has provided both educators and corporate consultants with a framework for encouraging an attitude of lifelong learning. See Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006).

and scalable methods of ministry in order to achieve the greatest return on our investment of time and money. With efficiency in mind, we look for "best practices" to implement in order to maximize our ministry "return." (Indeed, in the aforementioned list of 25 growing United Methodist churches I published annually on my blog, my regrettable adjective of choice has been "fastest.")

While concerns for efficiency and good systems are certainly an artifact of our mechanized age, church historian David Krieder describes the emergence of similar thinking due to the influence of Constantine's conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century.[370] Krieder claims that while the defining characteristic of the early church was a patient *habitus*, or "reflexive bodily behavior", Constantine offered Christian leaders access to several changes in the way they made decisions, including the introduction of control, the power of the state, religious coercion, speed, and conversion. None of these attributes were previously characteristic of the life of the church.

> Before Constantine, as we have seen, the church was growing steadily, but its leaders gave little thought to the means of numerical growth. They worshiped God, God changed the worshipers and their communities, and outsiders were attracted to Christians whose lives and communities reflected God's character. Growth was a mystery, the product of God's "invisible power." The Christians' approach to growth was to be patient collaborators with God. With Constantine we move from mystery to method.[371]

If we want to understand how to "disciple," the best thing we can do is to understand how Jesus discipled. Let us look to first century Jewish education culture to

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[370] Krieder, 247.

[371] Krieder, 267.

better understand what Jesus would have been referring to when he commanded the twelve to disciple.

The Jewish Educational System

In America today and for the last two centuries, learning is critical and compulsory. I have already established the ways in which our Western modes of knowledge and learning are empirical, critical and rooted in doubt. As for compulsory, a child is by law required to participate in education beginning at age six.[372] The concept of Sunday School emerged in the early 1800s as a Sunday equivalent to the new weekday instructional system. Our modern system has several stages, including elementary school, middle or junior high school, and high school, at which point students presumably graduate with a diploma around the age of age eighteen. Beyond this point, compulsory education ceases and young adults may choose to further pursue their education at a college or university, where they can acquire additional degrees.

Jesus' disciples received a different pedagogy than what most disciples receive today. For one, education was restricted to males only. All male children began their education at the age of six by entering the first of several potential stages of education. The first was called Bet Sefer, or the House of Book. All Jewish boys from age six until ten spent their days memorizing the Torah, as much as possible. For four years

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[372] Whether or not this is good has been long assumed and is now being questioned, or at least the methodologies by which we educate are young are being questioned. For more on this see Ken Robinson's aforementioned TED talk.

in the House of Book, boys were given one directive from their teachers: to fully master of the words of the Torah. They are not told to think about them or analyze them, but simply internalize them. There is no expectation of understanding or comprehension at this stage of development—just memorization.[373]

Of course, as with any education system, students respond differently, and some perform better than others according to their teachers' expectations. Some of the boys that performed well moved on to a second stage. The rest permanently left school to return to their families and learn the family business. Those that made it to this next stage, Bet Talmud, or the House of Learning, began another intensive program. In this program, students focused on the major and minor prophets. As students focused on the prophets, their rabbis began to challenge them with questions about the Torah, in order to ascertain their interpretive abilities. Students were trained in the most common style of antiquity, which was rhetorical debate. Both rabbis and students were expected to answer questions with questions.[374]

This perspective clarifies the only story we have of a young Jesus. Rather than a contemporary view of Jesus as a precocious, rebellious teenager who left his family one Passover without telling them where he was going, we can assume as a bright young student, Jesus was part of the local House of Learning, in which everyone was amazed at

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[373] Leonard I. Sweet, lecture, Portland, OR, February 12, 2018. I am indebted to Sweet for his extensive introduction to first-century Jewish education.

[374] Steve Corn, "Jewish Educational System," stevecorn.com (blog), November 1, 2010, http://www.stevecorn.com/2010/11/jewish-educational-system/.

his wisdom.[375] Clearly, in order to enter the Temple and enter conversation with the Teachers, Jesus had an existing relationship with them.

This period at the House of Learning was completed by age fourteen, which was the age of adulthood in first century near east culture. Completing the House of Learning was akin to graduating high school in USAmerica. At this point most boys returned home, joined or assumed leadership of the family business, took on economic responsibilities, and began to support their families. By age fourteen, first-century young men were functionally adults. They were in an arranged marriage and ready to assume the responsibilities of adulthood. For a few young men, however—the best of the class—a decision loomed instead: they could choose to devote their lives to continued study at the Bet Midrash, or House of Study.[376] To have the opportunity to continue to study was the highest, more prestigious path. In order to pursue this path, a student would have to seek out a rabbi and convince the rabbi to continue to invest in his learning. The problem was a student would have to convince the rabbi to take him on. The best rabbis had a lot of requests. When a top rabbi decided to take on a new student, in order to filter out the best among many applicants, the rabbi would engage in a process of intellectual elimination. Students would submit themselves to this process, and rabbis would grill young men to find the premier students of the day.[377]

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[375] This begs the question, who taught Jesus? Knowing Jesus' rabbi remains a source of such much intrigue and interest.

[376] Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg, *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus: How the Jewishness of Jesus Can Transform Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 30.

[377] Spangler.

The Hebrew "rabbi" translates to "master." For a young man to be selected by a rabbi for this third stage of education was one of the highest honors in society. Jesus ministered at a time in which the word "rabbi" was understood informally (this term did not become a formal designation for a Jewish teacher until the fall of the second Temple 40 years later).[378] Decades prior to the formal designation of teachers as Rabbis, and centuries before Western students began to receive pieces of paper designating them as "masters" of a discipline, followers of a Hebrew teacher informally called their teacher "master" to signify the teacher's status.[379]

Whereas today students "master" ideas, first-century Jewish students mastered a person. To "master" a rabbi meant a student would imitate the master: do what rabbi did, walk like he walked, and talk like he talked. The student would leave home permanently and adopt a new lifestyle in which he lived in the rabbi's house. The student would adopt a mode of learning by imitation—he would literally follow the rabbi around, with the goal of not only mastering the rabbi's teachings, but the rabbi's very life. He would attempt to physically adopt the rabbi's idiosyncrasies, mannerisms and ticks. It was a "whole person" pedagogy.[380] During this long period of life, the student continued to position himself as a learner—not a teacher.

At age 30—certainly mature if not "middle-aged", in recognition that each person's developmental journey is unique and such designations may be narrow and

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[378] Spangler, 27.

[379] Spangler, 31.

[380] Spangler, 66.

limiting [381]—the student was finally allowed to offer his own interpretation of the Law and the Scriptures. In a culture in which the average life span was 40, not 80, a 30-year old had graduated to the level of a wise sage with decades of understanding and expertise. At this point, the student is finally finished mimicking his old master, and is ready to take on his disciples. We do not know whom Jesus may have learned under, or at what point Jesus completed his education. We only know that disciples and other teachers alike referred to him as a rabbi, and he began his ministry at age 30, which was according to the custom.

Unusual Disciples

It is unlikely that the twelve men whom Jesus called were participants in the House of Study. Simon Peter, for example, was working as a fisherman. In other words, they had finished either one or two houses, had not been given an opportunity to "master" a rabbi, and had instead returned to the family business. In this context, Jesus calls Simon, and says to him that he is to become a "fisher of people."[382]

Notice who does the choosing. Whereas usually students picked their teachers in the conventional Jewish educational system, in Jesus' case it was the teacher who picked his students. They were not typical students, either. Rabbi Jesus, whom we may speculate was already known throughout the region as a really good student, was beginning his own school. But instead of picking the best and brightest young 14-year old minds to

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[381] Kathleen Stassen Berger, *The Developing Person Through the Life Span, 9th Edition* (New York: Worth, 2014), 462.

[382] Luke 5:10.

follow him, Jesus chose a group of older rejects and dropouts. From the beginning, Jesus was making it clear that he was doing something different.

When the disciples followed him, if they behaved as was the custom of the age, that meant that they literally followed him: learning to walk like Jesus, or follow Jesus, was not just a metaphor, it was literal. If the rabbi had a limp, the student walked behind him with a limp too. When Jesus invited disciples to follow him, it was a literal invitation. He invited Peter and the others to live as his students in the same way. Spangler notes, "the task of the disciple was to become as much like the rabbi as possible."[383]

Of course, the circumstances were different. For example, Peter was married with a family and a mother-in-law and could not simply go live with Jesus. But in spite of the unorthodox methodology, Jesus was a rabbi to the twelve in much the same way as a rabbi would be to his disciples in the period in which they lived.

Because a man was committing his life to living with and following a rabbi around, and doing so with other young learners, an intense personal relationship is assumed. Their learning was lived out in daily, embodied, embedded relationship, not in the detached, sterile laboratory environment of making and proving arguments with evidence. Jewish historian Shmuel Safrai writes that a disciple "did not grasp the full significance of his teacher's learning in all its nuances except through prolonged intimacy with his teacher, through close association with his rich and profound mind."[384]

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[383] Spangler, 55.

[384] Shmuel Safrai and Menahem Stern, eds, *The Jewish People in the First Century. 2 vols* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 964, as quoted in Spangler, 261.

The image of growing up in the household of God implies education, and this is the mode of education for households in Galilee and the surrounding communities. As such, it became part of the model for the early church. For example, Paul references this model in his language to the church at Corinth.[385] Let us hold this model under consideration as we look at several applications for ministry today.

Applications

Patience

Adults who are newborns in faith need time to grow. Often, congregations place infants in the faith onto leadership committees and other very adult, dangerous environments. Such new converts may be corporate vice presidents and "successful" in the ways of the world, but are helpless as newborns in the life of the faith and the church. They need milk and nurturing before they can eat solid food. Even the apostle Paul, a leading figure in the Jewish religious environment, spent three years after his conversion before beginning Christian ministry.[386]

Even those raised in the church may need to adopt new ways of thinking. As we have established, modern Western education has taught empirical, critical thinking. While the legacy of Descartes and the values of the Enlightenment begins with doubt and invites people to approach the search for truth with values of skepticism and individual autonomy, the way of the disciple begins with opposite values of surrender and

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[385] 1 Cor 4:16.

[386] Gal 1:17.

community. Whereas the Enlightenment tradition teaches students to doubt and criticize, the Jewish tradition teaches students to submit and imitate.

Certainly, very few students today demonstrate the mastery of biblical text that would serve as a prerequisite to the privilege of interpretation. The vast majority of Christians are mere apprentices in faith. As such, the way to grow is to mimic and memorize. As Sweet observes, “the real mission of the church was originally catechesis, to disciple people in the way of Jesus… During the Medieval period, this whole apprenticeship model moved from catechesis from confirmation, which was all about doctrine… it moved [from personating Jesus] to learning the teachings of Jesus.”[387]

This suggests that the church needs to shift from a pedagogy of critical thinking to a pedagogy of surrender and imitation. If we are to follow as the original disciples of Jesus followed, we must begin by memorizing, long before we begin to interpret. We must submit and learn in order to know. In the first-century Jewish tradition, students earned the privilege of doubt, which is preceded for years with seeking to understand.

This has profound implications for our understanding of “discipleship.” It is difficult for us to think about discipling apart from the epistemic influences which bear upon us. For example, one of our biggest semiotic influences in the church today is industrialization, from which we have learned scalability, a business term for the employment of manufacturing models that can satisfy exponentially increasing need (and thus create “progress.”) Particularly as we observe such great need, the temptation is to turn to methodologies that can satisfy the need and grow the church, quickly. But speed

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[387] Leonard I. Sweet, lecture, Portland, OR, April 8, 2019.

may not be desirable. As noted, historian Alan Krieder attributes speed as a specific variable to the work of ministry, introduced by Constantine and with influence on the church, and was not characteristic of the earliest discipleship methodologies.[388] As much as on occasion I have wished it has not taken eighteen years for my children to "grow up", I can certainly testify that speed is not a primary virtue of parenthood. Whether added through the influence of Constantine, the industrial age, or some combination, efficiency was clearly not a value for Jesus, who focused on twelve people for three years.

What if we were to explore a much longer period of whole-life catechism in the church?

Finding Purpose in Presence

Another implication of this shift is a move from eschatological activity to teleological activity, or a shift from achieving a specific end (creating God's kingdom) to living with purpose (inhabiting God's kingdom).

In the Creation story, humankind is a keeper of nature,[389] but in the Cartesian worldview, humankind is possessor of nature. Nature becomes mute; it has no meaning, in and of itself, but it is merely a resource or something to be manipulated.[390] The world becomes object to the human subject. When we see the world, and all that is in it, as something to manipulate to a certain outcome, whether good or evil, our job then

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[388] Krieder, 277.

[389] Gen 2:15.

[390] de Benoist, 9.

becomes to do something to nature. From here, it is a single step the idea that we are not only responsible, but left alone to accomplish this righteous manipulation. In this shift, the garden cosmology of the ancients becomes the mechanistic cosmology of the moderns, and the job of the church becomes eschatological. Our focus is to manipulate the world to achieve a righteous end.

In the Cartesian worldview, which is our dominant worldview, knowledge is material. It comes from our five senses. We experience, and from that we make propositions about how the world works. To many people, understanding stops here. But in the biblical worldview, there is an entirely different realm of understanding that only comes through revelation of God's spirit. This second realm does not negate knowledge but supersedes it. Human knowledge is not bad. Our problem is that we inevitably take credit, when it does not come from our own making. In God's pedagogy, we do not achieve wisdom, we receive wisdom. When we become a new creation, we have to unlearn our dependence on our own understanding. We become like children again, in order to grow up the right way. And the way that happens is through the Holy Spirit in our lives, shaping us and molding us.[391] It is in the daily habits and rhythms of following Jesus that we become a new creation.

In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul writes, "don't be conformed to the patterns of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."[392] In the Greek, these two verbs—be conformed or be transformed—are both passive tense. They

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[391] 1 Cor 2:6.

[392] Rom 12:2.

both happen to us. We think we are masters of our own world, but we are not. Something is shaping and forming us. Either the world, or the Holy Spirit. In life, we are not just acquiring knowledge. We are being conformed to patterns of power. On our own, we cannot unlearn these patterns of the world. When we become new creations, the Holy Spirit makes us new. It is not us; it is Christ in us, reshaping in reforming us. Transforming us through the Holy Spirit's power.[393] When we become *mathetes*, the Holy Spirit is the one doing the forming.

This also means that when we become a new creation, the first direction we go is actually backwards, not forwards. Not to evolve, but to devolve in the ways of the world. Our lives have become so marred by the problems with human knowledge and the habits of power that we have adopted that it becomes very difficult to unlearn. The first thing that happens when we become new is that we have to go back and become like children.[394] We have to relearn the basics of life. We have to begin acquiring spiritual knowledge, or understanding, which begins with trust. This is why the Scriptures say, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart; don't rely on your own intelligence."[395]

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[393] Phil 3:15

[394] Explore the relationship of creativity, childhood and faith in Len Wilson, *Think Like a Five Year Old: Reclaim Your Wonder and Create Great Things* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2015).

[395] Prov 3:5.

Mentors and Protégés

Part of growing to maturity in the household of God involves intergenerational engagement: learning from the generation that came before and teaching the generation to come. As with education, ancient trade apprenticeship was based on imitation.

In the story of Jesus healing a boy with an impure spirit, the disciples had failed to drive the spirit out of the boy, forcing Jesus to intervene. Afterward, Jesus tells them, "This kind can come out only by prayer."[396] The story implies that the method of learning for a disciple was through imitation. The disciples imitated the master, which as they grew in stature meant beginning to do things on their own that he had been doing.

Classically, the four steps of apprenticeship are a) a novice stage in which the apprentice observes the master, b) an "associate" stage in which the apprentice helps the master, c) an "expert" stage in which the apprentice leads and the master helps, and finally d) graduation to a mentor stage in which the one taught becomes a teacher in his or her own right.[397] In this story the disciples are beyond novices—they are associates, at least. The story implies the disciples had been doing some healing already.

In Mark's story, Perhaps Jesus is telling the disciples something specific about prayer. He coaches them in private, which means he did not want to shame them in public for their unsuccessful effort. Theologian Craig Keener observes, "Few rabbis were seen as miracle workers, and few who were expected their disciples to be able to emulate their

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[396] Mark 9:29.

[397] Christopher Perrin, "The Apprenticeship Model: A Journey toward Mastery," ClassicalU: Classical Academic Press, January 12, 2017, https://www.classicalu.com/the-apprenticeship-model-three-levels-to-mastery/.

power (though Elisha carried on Elijah's work), certainly not on the same level, and certainly not in the rabbi's name (v. 39). Exorcists' methods normally focused on their own power or, more precisely, their ability to manipulate other powers; Jesus here emphasizes prayer instead (9:29)."[398] Jesus is very clear to the disciples about what is required in their specific circumstance.

Two considerations regarding mentors and protégés are worth further analysis. One, who is doing the teaching? the earliest Christians were known as the Way. The lifestyle of discipling is one reason; they followed the Rabbi Jesus. But the significant post-resurrection difference was that the Rabbi Jesus was gone. Instead, the disciples received a counselor, the Holy Spirit. In his final teaching to the disciples, Jesus described the Holy Spirit as a rabbi who would come, teach them, and guide them into all truth.[399] What does "discipling" look like when, instead of placing ourselves in a position of authority as teacher, we mutually submit as fellow students to the authority of the Holy Spirit?

First century Jewish scholar Ann Spangler writes, "[Rabbis] often took disciples who would study under their direction for years, traveling with them everywhere they went. Study sessions were often conducted outdoors in vineyards, marketplaces, beside a road, or in an open field. Disciples would then go out on their own, holding classes in

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[398] Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 151.

[399] John 14:16, 26. This is one example of the vital importance, and the theological loss, when the church fails to give adequate attention to the Trinity. When we choose to follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit becomes our rabbi.

homes or in the synagogue."[400] Paul leaves the metaphors of both the education system and the household when he designates that we should follow Christ, not Apollos or other household leaders.[401] The earliest teachers, following the tradition of the rabbis, were not paid. Their reputation was built on their knowledge and constant study and disciples followed because of their demonstrated authority, not their positional authority. This echoes what was said of Jesus after the Sermon on the Mount as "one who had authority, not the teachers of the law." If we give authority to the Holy Spirit as our Rabbi, and thus remove ourselves from this position of authority, we must revisit much of what we currently understand as the role of the pastor.[402]

If praise of the Roman centurion is any indication, the thing that impressed Jesus was faith. We always want to do something; it is hard to trust and let Jesus lead. We want to "make" disciples. Rabbis have disciples, but as established, the Holy Spirit is the one who serves as the lead teacher in the church. In a church culture obsessed with leadership, this means we need to learn to follow. Learning to follow the Holy Spirit is so foreign to our contemporary leadership culture that we don't even know what this looks like.

The first response may be to defend our works. Letting the Holy Spirit lead does not mean we are passive. But as the disciple Martha learned, our creative work begins

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[400] Spangler, 31-32.

[401] 1 Cor 3:4.

[402] The dominant model for the Protestant pastor originates with Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor* (1656). This is visible in congregations today when the pastor appoints himself/herself as the "resident theologian" of the flock.

with presence, not activity.[403] Jesus said that the best thing we can do is seek the kingdom—i.e., seek relationships in the community of God. Jesus is already at work restoring the world. Our goal is to lift people up as we join in the work. When Jesus is lifted up, he will draw all people to him. What if we were to explore what it means to learn from the Holy Spirit?

Two, the work of mentorship needs a setting. In a traditional trade environment such as blacksmithing, this work happens in a shop. But what does mentorship look like in the life of faith? The small group model has been at least in part based on the idea of the household church as the basic cell of the church, but it has been limited by a peer orientation. While clearly learning and growth happens for many, studies show that the best learning environments are vertical not horizontal. Studies now suggest that the primary reason an entire generation of adult children have left the church is because of church programming that emphasized peer orientation.[404] As psychologists Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté write, "the secret of parenting is not in what a parent does but rather who the parent is to a child."[405]

The Psalmist writes, "Praise the Lord! Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments! His offspring will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed."[406] The promise of God is generational. Perhaps

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[403] Luke 10:38-42.

[404] See Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

[405] Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté, *Hold on to Your Kids: Why Parents Matter* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2004), 6.

[406] Psalms 112:1-2.

discipleship, then, should be generational. Many books on Christian growth today, come in two types: church growth and personal spiritual growth. This is a false dichotomy. Personal, spiritual growth is designed to generational, community growth. Our orientation toward growth needs to become communal and vertical, not individual and horizontal.

Or consider mentorship in the boardroom. Business literature recommends having a lead person among many in an almost completely flat environment. The group is neither hierarchical nor egalitarian, but structured according to a single mentor with several equal protégés.[407] The difference between traditional mentorship and business leadership literature and the household of God is the position of the mentor, who is not a mentor so much as a big brother or sister. If starting small groups or creating new small groups for people in your church, consider having a big brother or sister for each group. This person should consider themselves more of an oldest sibling than a mentor, parent, or "expert" in a modern sense. If retrofitting existing groups, consider offering an advanced training or development course for one person in the group, who could then disciple others.

What if churches were to reconsider discipleship according to models of mentorship and apprenticeship rooted in older members sharing their gifts with younger members?

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[407] Warren Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman, *Organizing Genius: The Secrets of Creative Collaboration* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 198.

Entrepreneurial

If the household (*oikos*) was not only the basic social unit of Greco-Roman society, but also the basic economic unit, this suggests that churches may consider a more entrepreneurial way of functioning. Households were self-sufficient economic operations. According to one source, about 25,000 congregations in the United States have some sort of income stream aside from donations.[408] Some suggest that to do so diverts attention from the work of ministry and turns the church into a company operating a business, but a church that makes money actually has a strong biblical basis: the earliest churches did the same. They weren't non-profits; they operated out of households and were self-sufficient, because they had to be. Prior to the Constantinian transformation of the church, its members were not professional clergypersons, but tradespeople and business owners.

When the apostle Paul visited the church in Corinth, he stayed in the household of Aquila. Aquila was a tentmaker, and since Paul also had the skill, he "stayed and worked with them" and restricted his ministry activity to Sabbath synagogue visits.[409] This arrangement lasted for a period, until Silas and Timothy arrived, at which time Paul ceased tentmaking and devoted him exclusively" to preaching—until an interpersonal conflict arose, at which time Paul left Aquila's house and went to the household of Titius

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[408]Frank Sommerville, personal conversation, April 10, 2019. Sommerville has been recognized by one survey as one of the most influential Christians in the United States, and is the only attorney on the list. "50 Most Influential Christians In America," http://7culturalmountains.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=39896

[409] Acts 18:1-4.

Justus, who lived next to the synagogue.[410] Of these two households that were part of the city church of Corinth, Paul worked in one and was supported by another, suggesting that each are valid forms means of economic support for the work of ministry.

Congregations are deep wells of untapped talent and potential. What if congregations adopted a more entrepreneurial way of thinking and being, where the talents and gifts of its members were unleashed to support the work of ministry?

Theology of Work

To reject the idea that the church is somehow building the kingdom of God is not a suggestion diminish work. The image of growing up in the household of God offers a new way to think about work. After all, every house has house rules, chores, and projects; things to make and things to preserve. When I grew up, my mother and father led up the work and we children joined in. This shift begs consideration of a new theology of work.

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf has become recognized for his efforts to move the church away from the limitations of Luther's theology of work, which still drives much of mission activity today:

> To use traditional formulations: first, the activity of the Spirit was limited to the sphere of salvation, and second, the locus of the present realization of salvation was limited to the human spirit. [Elsewhere, I have tried] to show that the Spirit of God is not only *spiritus redemptor* but also *spiritus creator*. Thus when the Spirit comes into the world as Redeemer he does not come to a foreign territory, but 'to

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[410] Acts 18:5-7.

> his own home' (Jn 1:12)—the world's lying in the power of evil notwithstanding.[411]

Are the "set of good things"[412] God designed for us to do with our lives best understood as our calling and vocation, as developed by Reformation theologian Martin Luther? Or should we consider a theology of work that is rooted instead in the Holy Spirit and the ongoing work of being made a new creation? Volf's main premise is to develop a theological reflection on the Pauline notion of *charisms* and apply it to a Christian understanding of work, which Volf calls a pneumatological theology of work:

> Because the whole creation is the Spirit's sphere of operation, the Spirit is not only the Spirit of religious experience but also the Spirit of worldly engagement. For this reason it is not at all strange to connect the Spirit of God with mundane work. In fact, an adequate understanding of human work will be hardly possible without recourse to pneumatology.[413]

To work is to create, and this creativity activity is cooperation with God. *Charisma* is not just a call by which God bids us to perform a particular task, but is also an inspiration and a gifting to accomplish the task. Paul clarifies to the church of Galatia,[414] "I work, and the Spirit of the resurrected Christ works through me."[415]

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[411] Miroslav Volf, "Work, Spirit, and New Creation." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 41, no. 1 (January 2017): 67. This article is a more recent incarnation of his seminal study *Work in the Spirit*.

[412] Eph 2:10.

[413] Volf, 69-70.

[414] Gal 2:20.

[415] Volf, 75.

The result of our creativity (which education researcher Ken Robinson defines as new ideas that bring value[416]) is innovation. Innovation isn't a solo endeavor, and we do not change the world through our own efforts. Rather, it is the Holy Spirit at work through us *as we work* that changes the world. The Holy Spirit calls, endows, and empowers all brothers and sisters in Christ to join in the joyful work of the emerging, abundant new creation. Volf writes,

> Elevating work to cooperation with God in the pneumatological understanding of work implies an obligation to overcome alienation because the individual gifts of the person need to be taken seriously. The point is not simply to interpret work religiously as cooperation with God and thereby glorify it ideologically, but to transform work into a charismatic cooperation with God on the 'project' of the new creation.[417]

All work—and especially the work of the church—should change over time in response to changing needs of people. In other words, to do kingdom work is to cooperate with God. God wants us to be entrepreneurs and gives us the means to dream and develop new solutions to problems in the ongoing completion of God's new creation. Volf states, "As Christians do their mundane work, the Spirit enables them to cooperate with God in the kingdom of God that completes creation and renews heaven and earth."[418] What if the church began to leverage the gifts (charisms) of its people in response to the changing needs of its community?

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[416] For an introduction to Robinson's work, see his famous TED Talk, which is one of the most viewed of all time. Ken Robinson, "Do Schools Kill Creativity?", TED.com, February 2006, http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity#t-795003.

[417] Volf, 80.

[418] Volf.

Fruit

Finally, it must be noted that Jesus gives us the true, practical measure of growth. It is not "budgets, butts, and buildings." Instead, the way we know faith is increasing is when we see increasing fruit of the Spirit.[419] Is it possible to measure this? Look for creative and alternative metrics to measure your church by, such as the number of meals shared in your small groups and Sunday Schools; the longitudinal divorce rate of your congregation, especially compared to your primary zip code; the number of pints of blood given;[420] the number of days taken off of work by members in order to serve in mission; the number of new ministries begun; or the number of people outside the church who by result of these ministries have had a meaningful conversation with a Christ follower for the first time.

When others in the community recognize and benefit from our innovation, the result is flourishing—i.e., growth. When we work together in God's Spirit, we are guaranteed to flourish, or bear fruit. Since the Spirit who imparts and activates our gifts is a guarantee[421] of the realization of the new creation, to work with God is to participate in the promise of God's emerging kingdom. In this way, church growth is not the goal but simply the outcome of the joyful cooperation of the Holy Spirit working through and increasing faith in the sons and daughters of God, thereby growing the household of God.

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[419] Gal 5:16-26.

[420] This one comes from Katie Langston, "10 Metrics Instead of Butts and Bucks," the faith+leader (blog), February 20, 2020, https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/10-metrics-instead-of-butts-and-bucks/.

[421] 2 Cor 1:22; Rom 8:23.

EPILOGUE

I come to the topic of congregational "growth" as both analyst and participant. I currently work in a full-time capacity on the staff of one of the 250 largest United Methodist congregations researched in this work's opening survey. But the connection goes deeper than my current ministry assignment.

This work comes from a deep concern about the health of the local church. As noted, senior pastors remain extremely interested in growing their congregations, and the primary variable they use for measuring growth is average weekly worship attendance.[1] But, using this variable, the clear majority of pastors are not succeeding in their work, as most churches are declining in quantifiable metrics such as worship attendance. In other words, there is a chasm of massive proportions between the unspoken assumptions of pastors in ministry today regarding what denotes success in local church ministry, and their ongoing experience in ministry.

When I joined the staff of a large church in Ohio as a young minister following seminary graduation in 1995, the church growth movement was in full swing, and the congregation I served was quickly becoming a highly visible success story—as it turned out, one of the foremost examples of growing churches in United Methodism in the latter part of the 20th century. Building on the more measured growth of the previous fifteen years, from 1995 through 1998 our congregation, Ginghamsburg United Methodist Church, tripled from approximately 1000 in worship on an average weekend to over 3300

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[1] The rest of the top five specific measures cited in a survey to the pastors of the largest 200 United Methodist congregations are attendance and/or involvement in groups; annual giving; number of baptisms; and missions / service, attendance and/or involvement. These are also the only five variables cites by a majority of respondents.

in worship. Our congregational growth, as measured by average weekly worship attendance, was so remarkable that we began to attract thousands of pastors per year from across the United States, Canada, Australia, and western Europe to the numerous conferences we held on site and at various remote locations.

The impetus for our attendance explosion was a new worship venue, which according to conventional church growth theory is a primary catalyst. Our new venue increased those we could seat in worship at one time from 450 to approximately 1400. Prior to the transition to the new facility, Ginghamsburg averaged about 1200 a weekend in worship. After a brief period of decline following the transition (again, an observation of conventional church growth theory: sudden changes lead to small decreases before big increases, just like an "s" curve in the cycle of business development[2]), we began to see dozens of new faces each week. Within two years, we had tripled attendance to 3000 people on the campus in worship each weekend, not including students, children or infants (most churches count the latter, which if applied to our records would have resulted in worship well over 4000 a weekend), Further, because the Internet was in its infancy, we did not employ live streaming, multi-site, video venue or any church growth technique that was to emerge in the years following. As our Senior Pastor Mike Slaughter liked to point out, we were a church hidden in a cornfield twenty miles north of the dying rust belt city of Dayton, Ohio. By any of Lyle Schaller's analytics-based insights, Ginghamsburg should not have grown. Slaughter would tell visitors, if we were in Chicago or Los Angeles, we would average 10,000 a weekend.

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[2] Michael Miles, "The Lesson of the Sigmoid Curve", Dumb Little Man (blog), October 7, 2008, https://www.dumblittleman.com/lesson-of-sigmoid-curve/.

To some degree, I thought what happened in my first three years of professional ministry life was normal. Prior to attending seminary in Ohio, I had grown up as a preacher's kid in rural parishes in western Kentucky, and had spent my student days in large, established congregations in Texas. I had experienced a variety of contexts for what local church life looked like, but not the age or professional wisdom to appreciate the overwhelming growth we managed during this time. Perhaps the fact that thousands of pastors from around the world visited our campus to experience and learn from what was happening should have been a clue that it was not, in fact, normal. Curiously, by the age of 26 I was teaching pastors a set of new best practices on how to do their work more effectively and efficiently.

Three years later, in the year 2000 I decided that the best way to use my gifts in ministry was to spend my full energy coaching and teaching other pastors what I had learned about growing churches. I had already published one work on church growth through Abingdon. I decided to leave the staff of Ginghamsburg to do the work of congregational consulting full-time. Over the decade of the Aughts, I published several more titles, focused on communication theory and the use of media and technology in worship and ministry. I was a full member of the church growth industry. But a problem emerged. After several years consulting with congregations around North America, I began to notice that other churches were not experiencing the sort of growth that we had experienced at our country church in western Ohio. Further, like Willow Creek's REVEAL study, beyond the weekly marker of worship attendance, it was not always obvious that Ginghamsburg's ministry was actually discipling people as followers of Jesus Christ.

In 2006 I began tracking growth and decline patterns of United Methodist congregations, as measured by average weekly worship attendance, in order to look for new Ginghamsburg stories and to understand and contextualize what I had experienced as a young church professional. This research eventually turned into a well-trafficked list of the 25 fastest growing large United Methodist churches in USAmerica.

From this ongoing research, I eventually discovered that no United Methodist congregation has since approached the level of in-venue growth we had experienced during that three-year period from 1995-8. The difficulty and challenge of growing a congregation as we had grown caused me to question not only the tactics, but the very nature of what we were doing in ministry. I began to ask deeper questions about the nature of growth itself. Why, in spite of all the attention given to this topic, do we continue to fail to achieve our stated goal? Is it really this hard to grow a church today? Or could it be that we are going about it all wrong? This research grew out of these questions.

It is my hope that the Holy Spirit uses this work to help pastors and church leaders consider new ways for us to live out our Great Commission and disciple one another as followers of Jesus Christ.

APPENDIX: LINE OF THOUGHT - SEMIOTIC FOUNDATIONS

In order to address problems with our dominant understanding of church growth, we must analyze assumptions we bring to our definition of Christian growth, some of which come not from the Scriptures or the Christian tradition but from cultural assumptions about growth.

The ongoing problem of church decline is not strategic, but semiotic: in other words, the basis for continued congregational decline prevalent in United Methodist congregations in the United States is found not in a wrong approach or strategy to growing churches, but in a faulty definition of growth itself. What linguistic limitations might exist in our current understanding of growth?

In the Appendix, I establish a semiotic basis for how a word like "growth" comes to acquire a common definition. In order to change our definition of growth, we must do more than change our strategies or tactics. Instead, we must reconsider the very language we use, which both reflects and shapes the hidden, root metaphors of our hearts that motivate us. In order to redefine a word as fundamental as growth, it is necessary to understand how words come to have meaning. Our language is not as fixed as we would like to think. Instead, words have a comparative, dynamic relationship with images.

To talk about the limitations of language can be disconcerting. As children of the Enlightenment, we like to think we are entirely rational beings who act out of our understanding of the world in detached, analytical form. But we are fooling ourselves. In reality, we are less often rational beings who feel, than we are emotional beings who sometimes think. As Pascal famously said, refuting detached Cartesian rationalism, "the

heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."[1] *This is not to argue for an irrational approach to a definition of congregational growth, but to acknowledge that there is more to our understanding than our mere application of words that carry assumed, fixed meanings.*

In this appendix, I argue that in order to change our definition of growth, we need to become iconoclastic; we must break longstanding, shared cultural images for growth. We need to reconsider assumptions that drive the language we use and adopt the same stance as the reformers did. Rather than literally breaking images that hang on church walls, we need to break a set of shared images in our minds.

Let us begin by considering how we come to attach meaning to words.

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[1] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (London: Penguin, 1966), 423.

APPENDIX A: LINE OF SIGHT

How does a word like growth come to reference a common definition among large groups of people? To explore new definitions, we need to understand this question. The Appendix, structured in three parts, explores how definitions emerge. Words begin with what is "in sight"—our direct, embodied, sensory experiences, from which come labels or references. But to suggest that labels affix experiences is a simplistic, dyadic model for human communication. Words are not passive; rather, they dynamically interact with sensory experiences—ours and those with whom we communicate. Further, this relationship is triadic; it involves metaphors.

Recent brain research has affirmed what linguists have long known, that all words have their etymological root in embodied, sensory human experience.[2] We experience life initially through our five senses. Linguist James Geary writes,

> The Indo-European root **weid*, meaning "to see" became **oida* (to know) in Greek, **fios* (knowledge) in Irish, and words like "wit," "witness," "wise," and "idea" in English, all of which originally connoted some sense of understanding as vision. In Aristotle's metaphorical mathematics, the equation is written: Seeing = knowing.[3]

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[2] McGilchrist, 49.

[3] James Geary, *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), loc. 428.

Before words, and beyond words, there are images: image is the indigenous language of the mind. Language emerges as communities create words to categorize and reference common experiences.[4]

Some may have an image of prehistoric "cavemen" uttering guttural sounds when thinking of humans forming words, but the process of forming references for bodily actions is a never-ending dynamic of human culture.[5] Through these references, we make sense of what lies beyond our direct sensory ability. This formation of language is a shift from "sense to semantics."[6] Perhaps the dependency of meaning on sight is why faith is so impressive to Jesus, who told Thomas, "blessed are those who don't see and yet believe." (John 20:29)

Brain research sheds new light on the process of sense to semantics with a fresh look at once-discredited understandings of "left" and "right" hemispheres of the brain. Psychiatrist, brain researcher, and former Oxford literary scholar Iain McGilchrist affirms how the left and right hemispheres of our brain each distinctly contribute to the formation of meaning. But, counter to the conventional wisdom, McGilchrist rejects axiomatic "left-brain" (analytical) versus "right-brain" (experiential) ways of understanding how we form meaning. Instead, he insists that, crucially, there is one brain, with two very

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[4] McGilchrist, 80.

[5] Oxford English Dictionary regularly posts new entries to their database of words, such as this entry from June, 2019. Often, new words are scatological. As with all innovation, words start "down and out" on the fringes of culture, and over time move "up and in." "New words list June 2019", n.d. https://public.oed.com/updates/new-words-list-june-2019/

[6] H. Colleen Butcher, "Worship as Playground: living the song-story of God," D.Min., George Fox University, 2013, 90.

different hemispheres connected at the base.[7] The differences between hemispheres are true phenomenological differences and not just convenient tropes for people who lack creative confidence.

Here is a quick summary chart of some of the differences between the left and right hemispheres of the human brain, according to McGilchrist:

Left Hemisphere	**Right Hemisphere**
Analysis	Experience
Abstract	Affect
Detached	Embodied
Parts	Whole

Meaning emerges from the ongoing, symbiotic process in our minds in which our immediate, holistic, embodied human experiences—the products of our five senses, which first appear through the right hemisphere—travel across the *corpus callosum*, from the right to the left hemisphere. The left hemisphere breaks down our experiences into parts, categorizes what we experience into references that we can label, and contextualizes them so we can understand what has happened.[8]

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[7] Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 20. He writes, "Phenomenologically speaking, there is here both a unity, a 'single entity', and the most profound disparity… There may be just one whatness, but it has more than one howness."

[8] McGilchrist, 46-47.

It is in this parts-making process of applying references, labels and context to our embodied experience that we form *signs* that represent our reality. To the linguist, the means by which this occurs is known as "sign-making," and is part of a larger system in which we group signs together until we form language, or a *langue* (Fr.), literally a system of signs.[9]

Everywhere Signs

The power of a word is in its ability to serve as a sign, pointing us toward concrete, common human experience. According to Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, a sign is a dyadic combination of sound pattern (a *signifier*) and a concept (a *signified*)[10], or between the sounds we call "words" and their respective "meanings." Saussure calls such an individual act of speech, with its sign correlation between image and meaning, a *parole*, which is not a reference to a freed convict, at least for our purposes, but to an archaic French word for a "formal promise." We make daily promises to others through our choice of words.

Anyone who prays looks for a sign from God, seeking an embodied, sensory experience that communicates ultimate meaning. In the story of Hezekiah's illness, the prophet Isaiah promises King Hezekiah he will live, and to prove his prediction, he gives him a "sign": the shadow will shorten across the palace steps (2 Kings 20:8-11).[11] Most

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[9] Chandler.

[10] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics, Second Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 8.

[11] Also recounted in Isaiah 38:7-8.

of us would love to live life with such obvious signs of what will and will not happen in the future, actual faith notwithstanding.

When we make signs in response to specific experiences, we create shorthand references to embodied experiences. We do not experience "grace", the theological concept; we experience someone giving us unmerited favor or unreciprocated harm. Over time, people employed the word "grace" to connote a shared understanding of "unmerited favor." Communities and eventually cultures develop collections of signs and categorize these references into groups. As noted, this process is dynamic and can be rapid.[12]

A distinguishing factor of modern thinking is the ability to communicate only in references, as opposed to embodied experiences. Modernity is in fact a term for the rise of the categorical over the concrete. As journalist David Epstein writes about the rise of modernity, "the more powerful their abstract thinking, the less they had to rely on their concrete experience of the world as a reference point."[13] The primacy of our referents is a defining characteristic of modern, literate culture.

In the modern age, referents have subsumed sensory experience as meaning making devices.[14] Culturally, we have come to give preference to our predefined categories of understanding over our own direct, embodied sensory experiences. We give more weight to a predetermined meaning of a word than we do our own experience.

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[12] Consider the development of signs and words with new meanings on sex and gender just in the 2010s. The problem, as journalist Jonathan Merritt notes, is that this cuts both ways: the shorthand for complex theological concepts can quickly become lost. In a post-Christian culture, words such as 'grace" can no longer be assumed. See Jonathan Merritt, *Learning to Speak God from Scratch: Why Sacred Words are Vanishing—And How We Can Revive The*m (New York: Convergent, 2018).

[13] David Epstein, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World* (New York: Riverhead, 2019), 44.

[14] McGilchrist, 135.

The Relationship of Sign and Meaning

However, signs are not bijective symbols, with a one-to-one correspondence between sign and meaning. Words depend on context. For example, the word "fire" and an image of a fire may represent danger, to the premodern person drawing on a cave wall and to the modern person staring at an iconic label on the side of a clothes iron, but "fire" can also symbolize warmth and safety, which is why context is vital.

The words we use shape our understanding of our direct experience. For instance, the concept of seven colors in the rainbow is a "discovery" by Isaac Newton; prior to Newton, most people thought there were only five colors in the rainbow.[15] Color theorist David Scott Kastan writes while exploring our words for color, "The eye sees what it is disposed to see, and language does a lot of the disposing… it focuses our vision, providing the lenses through which we look, defining, we might say, the visual field."[16] The relationship of experience and sign is dynamic.

Like lost sheep, words wander away from initial, shared understandings. Time and space have an effect on this change. Changing linguistic contexts shape and redefine reality. Original experiences become lost; reference words get removed from their sensory origins. Etymology is the linguistic archeology dig of reconnecting references to human experiences.

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[15] David Scott Kastan with Stephen Farthing, *On Color* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 12.

[16] Kastan, 8.

The rise of post-literate culture further complicates the dynamic between the words we use and what we intend to mean with the words we use. As has been often noted, for the last few generations something quite significant has been happening. Literate culture has been giving way to image-based culture. The image rises while the word falls.[17] (Why? For any number of reasons, one of which is almost certainly the rise of image-based communication technologies such as television.) Images are returning to predominance as sign-making tools. While as modern, literate people, we may think that meaning is formed through the precision of words we use, the culture is moving toward a post-literate *langue* defined first by images, the implications of which we have not yet begun to understand. One of the consequences is the divergency of meaning that comes with image-based communication. While empirical thought suggests that words are convergent, driving toward a single meaning, in post-literate culture, images are divergent, or introducing multiple meanings.

But this is not to suggest the words are precise while images are fuzzy. Words have divergent meanings, too. Consider "conservative," for example. When we use the word "conservative," are we simply referring to "one who conserves" or to an adherent of a specific political, economic or religious ideology, and if the latter, is that ideology defined according to a simple preference for the status quo, or to a specific, evolving set of policies and positions?

The goal of this linguistic exploration is that sign-making and therefore definitions are never a singular, linear endeavor. We do not associate a word or an image

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[17] For an in-depth examination of this phenomenon, read the excellent Mitchell Stephens, *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

to a static meaning and call it done. Rather, signing, comparing, and re-signing is a continuously shifting process.

Semiotics is the study of the ever-changing process of textual and visual signs, symbols, and their meanings. To understand semiotics, consider the famous song lyric by rock musician Tom Petty, "The waiting is the hardest part, every day you get one more yard."[18] What does the phrase "one more yard" in the song reference? American football, of course; the slow march down the field toward a touchdown and the implication that relationships are a game. But what if a different or future culture does not know about or consider American football, which is kind of an arcane reference? They might consider the more precise "three feet," which is technical but loses the poetry. There is nothing culturally significant about "three feet." Or, even worse, what if instead they opted for the other definition of yard in a typical dictionary today? A lawn. Can you imagine a future researcher wondering what "every day you get one more lawn" means? To appreciate the reference, you need to know the hidden meaning of the sport. Now consider that much of our language, including the Bible, is poetic. What additional, powerful meanings are hidden in the words we use?

The Role of the Receiver

Thus far, I have described a dyadic model of communication. In dyadic communication, I send an idea through my voice, written communication, visual, and physical cues, using a set of signs (word and images) understood by me, and assume (or

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[18] Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, "The Waiting," by Tom Petty, recorded 1981, on Hard Promises, Backstreet, 33 ⅓ rpm.

hope) that the receiver - one with whom I am communicating - perceives it the way I intend. Of course, as anyone in a significant relationship with another human being can attest, that is often not what happens at all!

To suggest that we experience something, such as when we step outside our house, slip and fall on a sheet of frozen water, and then we make a label for that sheet, such as "snow," is simplistic. Words do not simply emerge at the end of a one-way journey from our sensory experience to labels we apply to said experience. Instead, words find epistemological power as they are applied within specific contexts, as a famous study on the multitude of Eskimo words for "snow" affirmed.[19] Signs are not one-way delivery systems from addresser to addressee, but involve a complex system of context, code, and culture, to adapt linguist Roman Jakobson's famous model.[20]

I experienced the power of the receiver in the communication act when I went home one night. After a busy day at work, I had something important to share, but with a large family, it was hard to get a word heard. I walked in the door and started describing something of incredible importance to my family but watched in frustration as everyone moved about the kitchen and asked each other and me questions at once. I tried an annoying technique where I repeated the first part of my lead sentence three of four times to get everyone's attention. My wife rightfully hated this. She said, "I'm listening, just tell me already. I have to do this other thing too!" Later, I read a friend's social media

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[19] David Robson, "Are there really 50 Eskimo words for snow?" *New Scientist* 2896, December 18, 2012, https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21628962-800-are-there-really-50-eskimo-words-for-snow/.

[20] Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960), 353.

status update was a helpful reminder. It said, "If you want to tell someone something, make sure that they are first in a position to hear it." Interest in activities and thoughts, focused feedback on decisions to be made—these acts of empathy were a much better approach to my family. Then, when we reconnected, they were in a better position to hear the thing I needed to say as well.

In his writings on rhetoric, Aristotle was the first to recognize the relationship between what we say and how we say it. The classical understanding of rhetoric is a set of instruments or tools used to create a specific persuasive goal. Rhetoric has sometimes been seen as illegitimate to "true" communication. But as homileticians Robert Reid and Lucy Lind Hogan write,

> More recent conceptions of rhetoric treat art as intrinsic to human knowing itself. Since we employ language as a symbol-making system in order to communicate … dismissing rhetoric as nothing more than manipulative efforts to influence others, even when people use persuasion appropriately, is naive. Rhetoric, for good or ill, is intrinsic to all the convictional understanding of our lives—to all reasoning.[21]

Dyadic communication is an overly simplistic model for how meaning is formed. Post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida writes that Saussure's dyadic model perpetuated the Greek "opposition of matter and spirit".[22] Just because we say it does not mean people hear it as we intend, though many of us communicate this way. My communication discovery with my family was a testament to the influence of variables such as context, code, and culture.

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[21] Robert Reid and Lucy Lind Hogan, *The Six Deadly Sins of Preaching: Becoming Responsible for the Faith We Proclaim,* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 9.

[22] Chandler, 100.

Further, words do not live in a vacuum but are collections of referents that together constitute an entire *structure*, or system of meaning. Because words are context-specific, when settings shift and collide with other contexts, meanings collide as well. Linguist Paul Ricoeur notes that "a word receives meaning in specific contexts within which they are opposed to other words taken literally; this shift in meaning results mainly from a clash between literal meanings, which excludes a literal use of the word in question and gives clues for the finding of a new meaning which is able to fit in the context of the sentence and to make sense in this context."[23]

Instead of a dyadic model, American philosopher and semiotics pioneer Charles Sanders Peirce conceived a triadic sign system consisting of the symbol (the word or image for the thing), the thing or object itself, and the concept we develop, which Peirce called the interpretant.[24] René Magritte's famous painting *The Treachery of Images* captures this idea by pairing an iconic image of a tobacco pipe with the caption, "This is not a pipe." Peirce is considered a founder in the development of the field of semiotics and Magritte's work is perhaps the first semiotic work of art: in it, Magritte illustrates that the interpretant is not the pipe itself, but the meaning we develop in our mind as a result of our experience of the sign.[25] His surrealist insight later appeared in commercial

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[23] Paul Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics," *New Literary History*, 6, no.1 (1974): 99.

[24] Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1998), 70.

[25] Paul Cobley and Litza Jansz, *Introducing Semiotics: A Graphic Guide* (London: Icon Books, 2012), loc. 149.

advertising in the form of a now iconic ad for the Volkswagen Beetle which simply showed the vehicle with a one-word tagline: "lemon."[26] Such ironic, things-do-not-mean-what you-think-they-mean communication is now commonplace. While the dyadic model implies that power in the communication exchange lies with the sender, the triadic model acknowledges that in actuality power in the exchange happens with the receiver, who interprets what she or he wants from our communication, regardless of what we have in mind.

The triadic nature of all human communication sets the stage for the role of metaphor in meaning-making. All signs are by their very nature metaphors, which are the mechanism for the interactivity of signs and meaning. As communication theorist Jeff Bezemer writes, metaphor is "inescapable as long as we engage with the world. There is no path that leads away from metaphor."[27]

Metaphor and Language

Have you ever noticed how often people use metaphors to describe daily life? Metaphors are the means by which we define things as mundane as our day—"The drive home was a jungle"—and as profound as meaning in our existence—"The last year since we met has been heaven." Of course, neither the drive home nor the new relationship is

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[26] Andrea Hiott, *Thinking Small: The Long Strange Trip of the Volkswagen Beetle* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2012), 366.

[27] Jeff Bezemer and Gunther Kress, *Multimodality, Learning and Communication: A Social Semiotic Frame* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 8-9.

actually a jungle or heaven, respectively, but we use these metaphors to describe the events of our lives and create meaning, for ourselves and for others.

The use of metaphors in human conversation is an everyday, common occurrence. Research has shown that, regardless of language, people "spontaneously use about five to six metaphors per minute in spoken conversation."[28] One archeologist estimates that "three-quarters of our language consists of worn-out metaphors."[29]

Metaphors are signs and symbols in the form of words and images that we use to compare our embodied, sensory experience to other experiences and through these comparisons to establish meaning and define reality. They are "strange words,"[30] according to Aristotle; objects by which we compare, contrast, and transfer meaning from what is known to what is unknown.

Metaphor is foundational to the formation of language. Perhaps the reason is that metaphors lie at the beginning of cognition. Nobel Prize winning physiologist Gerald Edelmen writes, "early on in thinking, metaphor can dominate, and even after the application of logic, language is rich with metaphorical expression."[31] The signs we make create meaning by metaphorically comparing new experiences with previously known and shared human experiences. When we call our drive home a jungle, we are assuming

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[28] Gerald Zaltman and Lindsay Zaltman, *Marketing Metaphoria: What Deep Metaphors Reveal About the Minds of Consumers (*Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2008), loc. 188.

[29] A. H. Sayce, *The Principles of Comparative Philology* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1893), 39, as quoted in Geary, loc. 421.

[30] Aristotle, "De Poetica," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle,* ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1478.

[31] Gerald Edelman, *Second Nature: Brain Science and Human Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 90.

the one with whom we communicate will understand our comparison of commuter cars with threatening wild animals and highways with overgrown paths. To understand metaphor is to understand language. More fundamentally, it is to understand how we communicate, or how we relate to one another.

To understand problems with our current definition of growth, and begin to find new definitions for church growth, we must consider the influence of metaphors on meaning.

The power and problem of metaphors is that they are much more than a form of linguistic color. By paralleling an unknown concept with a known one, metaphor invites participants to map their knowledge onto a new idea. Metaphors are the mechanism of meaning making and are inextricably tied to the definitions we hold for our words. Linguist James Geary writes, “Metaphor is most familiar as the literary device through which we describe one thing in terms of another, as when the author of the Old Testament Song of Songs describes a lover’s navel as ‘a round goblet never lacking mixed wine’. Yet metaphor is much, much more than this. Metaphor is not just confined to art and literature but is at work in all fields of human endeavor.”[32] Or, according to Aristotle, an eye for metaphor is a sign of genius, “since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity of dissimilars.”[33]

A well-known study highlighted the power of metaphor in public opinions about crime. The study surveyed a set of participants on opinions about solving crime in a city.

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[32] James Geary, *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), loc. 84.

[33] Aristotle, 1479.

To one group, the survey described crime as a "beast preying" on the city; to another, crime was a "virus infecting" the city. Those who imagined the virus universally suggested "vaccines" in the form of reforms and preventative tactics to minimize and eliminate the virus. Those who imagined the beast suggested "hunting parties" and animal control measures to track down those engaging in the crime and eliminating them.[34] In the study, beasts and viruses are metaphors for crime. The primary metaphor the researcher used shaped people's understanding of an appropriate response.

Like magnets for good or ill, metaphors—in the form of text or image—shape our conception of reality. One study proved that people who hold a warm cup of coffee for a stranger are more likely to infer that the stranger has a warm personality.[35] In another study, business students in a securities analysis course picked investments according to the attractiveness of prospectus designs over quantitative performance data, and in fact chose the poorest performing investments.[36] Linguist James Geary writes, "the Arabic word for metaphor is *isti'ara*, or 'loan.' … A metaphor juxtaposes two different things and then skews our point of view, so unexpected similarities emerge. Metaphorical thinking half discovers and half invents the likenesses it describes."[37] Metaphors do not just illustrate but function symbiotically ("together" + "live") with meaning.

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[34] Paul H Thibodeau, and Lera Boroditsky. "Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning." *PLoS ONE* 6, no. 2 (2011): E16782. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0016782

[35] Lawrence E. Willams and John A Bargh. "Experiencing Physical Warmth Promotes Interpersonal Warmth." *Science* (New York, N.Y.) 322, no. 5901 (2008): 606-607. http://doi.org/10.1126/science.1162548

[36] Geary, loc. 1058.

[37] Geary, loc. 185.

The recognition of semiotics—the relationship, between word, image and meaning—is perhaps the most important linguistic development of the twentieth century. Shared metaphors, then, become the basis for shared understanding. But it can present challenges to the gospel communicator: If we cannot assume that the words we use will communicate what we intend to say, then how are we to effectively communicate? Even more troubling, is there a single meaning at all? It is to this topic we will turn next.

APPENDIX B: CROSSING THE LINE

As words are not "pure" labels for common sensory experiences, set apart from time and space, but dynamic metaphors that change according to specific cultural contexts, they "cross lines." Their meaning is both shaped by and shapes the context in which they live. In a church context, "growth" is such a word, and our definition of growth changes according to the influence of the metaphors we employ in our communication. The words we use shape our reality. Understanding a "post-critical" approach to language and meaning is a necessary prerequisite to the work of breaking old images of growth embedded in the church.

The problem with metaphors is that they are vague. As with questions about meaning, to suggest that modern notions of objectivity are problematic can be disturbing to the seeker of truth. As children of the Enlightenment, we are accustomed to the promise of propositional precision, and metaphors cross lines. As Geary notes, "Metaphors are two-edged: they reveal and conceal, highlight and hide."[38]

While they can be brilliant as a means of comparison and revelation, they are not full depictions of reality. Like any other means of human communication, metaphors "can be misused and even abused by preachers."[39] So, if words are neither complete nor objective, how are we to use them, particularly if we are to stake claims about what is true? Geary writes,

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[38] Geary, 93.

[39] Jay Richard Akkerman, "The Graphic Gospel: Preaching in a Post Literate Age" (2004), Asbury Seminary, D.Min. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 42.

> Comparing your beloved to a red, red rose might be fine if you're writing a poem, but these thinkers believed more exact language was needed to express the 'truth'—a term, by the way, distilled from Icelandic, Swedish, Anglo-Saxon, and other non-English words meaning "believed" rather than "certain."… Even the word "literal"—derived from the Latin litera, meaning "letter"—is a metaphor. "Literal" means "according to the letter"; that is, actual, accurate, factual. But litera is, in turn, derived from the verb linire, meaning "to smear," and was transferred to litera when authors began smearing words on parchment instead of carving them into wood or stone. The roots of linire are also visible in the word "liniment," which denotes a salve or ointment. Thus, the literal meaning of "literal" is to smear or spread, a fitting metaphor for the way metaphor oozes over rigid definitional borders.[40] [ital. original]

Metaphors confuse the premise and promise of Enlightenment philosophy (and the primary benefit of print-based communication)[41] and the scientific worldview, which has been the promise of a linear, objective, "pure" meaning, independent of the human mind and divorced from personal experience (bias)—our own and others.

Scientist Edmund Husserl writes that Galilean thinking "was a turning point in Western civilization. Until then, math and science were seen as providing knowledge about reality; now they were reconceived as reality itself. 'As if' became 'it is!' And 'to be' became 'to be measurable.' Galileo's work opened up a powerful new path for the West—but one that was also treacherous."[42] Indeed, many in the scientific community, including Stephen Hawking, are so resolute about the universality of the scientific worldview that they deny the existence of philosophy altogether.[43]

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[40] Geary, loc 393.

[41] Stephens, 208.

[42] Robert P. Crease, *The Workshop and the World: What Ten Thinkers Can Teach Us About Science and Authority* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 196-197.

[43] D. Scott Callum, "The Death of Philosophy: A Response to Stephen Hawking," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31, no. 2 (2012): 384-404, https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2012.10751783.

The treachery is that such precision is itself aspirational. Scientific philosopher Michael Polanyi's seminal 1958 work on the role of personal experience in the pursuit of knowledge falsified this promise. While it is conventional to think of science in such broad terms, the expansion of scientific thought to worldview is itself a philosophical proposition. Polanyi writes that "science is regarded as objectively established in spite of its passionate origins."[44] He identities the objectivist worldview with Enlightenment scientist Pierre-Simon Laplace, who formulated a "conception of science pursuing the ideal of absolute detachment by representing the world in terms of its exactly determined particulars."[45] The Laplacian ideal of universal knowledge became largely unchallenged and "continues to sustain a universal tendency to enhance the observational accuracy and systematic precision of science, at the expense of its bearing on its subject matter."[46]

In spite of the shared, cultural assumption that universal knowledge is achievable through natural observation and experimentation, and with it the concomitant attempt to marginalize metaphor and language as a basis for meaning, our language betrays our ability to achieve universal knowledge. In spite of our attempts to achieve "pure" detachment, metaphors remain the basis of language.

The power of metaphor to both reveal and shape reality is the same power that makes metaphors problematic. Metaphors are polyvalent; they are personal, messy, and vague. No metaphor perfectly describes reality. The words we choose fail to achieve the

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[44] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 141.

[45] Polanyi, 146.

[46] Polanyi, 148.

precision we seek. As all knowledge is dependent on the language we use to describe it, all knowledge is therefore contextualized in time and space and according to the experience of sender and receiver.

The realization of the limitations of language and even of science led some 20th century philosophers to simply focus on particular knowledge, instead of universal knowledge,[47] and others to a postmodern worldview that rejected universal knowledge altogether. A philosophical climate which has elevated detached, particular knowledge of categories and patterns, divorced from holistic understanding, has had devastating consequences. The last one hundred years have been a terror trail through the classical disciplines, including theology.[48] Many in the church deconstructed the veracity of shared Christian stories and traditions in favor of a set of verifiable propositions and empirical analysis.[49] This work has left us with ruins and rubble.

How do we move forward? In order to advocate for new metaphors in the pursuit of a new definition of growth, it is necessary to take a fresh look at the relationship of metaphor and knowledge.

One way to consider this relationship is through viewpoints, or perspectives.

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[47] Historian Diarmaid MacCulloch describes the modern European expectation of a scholar as someone who "knows a lot about not very much." Diarmaid McCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 2.

[48] Dr. Leonard Sweet, personal conversation, April 28, 2018.

[49] Perhaps the most infamous of these initiatives was The Jesus Seminar.

Perspectives on Knowledge

In a podcast episode, journalist Malcolm Gladwell investigated the backstory of perhaps the most iconic photograph in the history of the civil rights movement. The photograph, taken at a march in 1963, became a sculpture in 1995 called "The Foot Solider of Birmingham." Use of a key photograph was one of King's strategic goals with the marches. He used mass media to turn the tide of American public opinion.[50] Gladwell notes that the image that emerged from the march that day in Birmingham was wildly successful. It appeared on the front page of papers around the world. A year later, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which, according to Gladwell's recounting was "written in Birmingham."[51]

Yet, the events of the day the photograph was taken were more complicated than the sculpture suggests. For instance, "foot soldier" is a term for the people who marched in King's army. The sculpture shows a foot soldier being accosted by a racist cop and his attack dog. But the man being attacked—Walter Gadsden—was not actually a foot soldier. As Gladwell discovered, Gadsden was a bystander, a student who was skipping school that day. He was in fact trying to avoid the protestors, and neither supported the civil rights movement nor believed he benefitted from the movement.

Second, the sculpture shows the police officer releasing a vicious dog at the young man. But the actual police officer in the photograph, Dick Middleton, was trying

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[50] "Race, Civil Rights and Photography," Lens: Photography, Video and Visual Journalism, New York Times, January 28, 2016, https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/01/18/race-civil-rights-and-photography/.

[51] Malcolm Gladwell, "The Foot Soldier of Birmingham," Revisionist History, July 6, 2017, Audio, 35:39.

to restrain the dog, and did not want the dog to attack the young man. In the podcast, Middleton's widow tells Gladwell that her husband was vilified for the photograph. It was not the truth, she said. But the hate mail came from all over the world.

Third, the positions of the two men in the sculpture are entirely different than the photograph indicates. Both the photo and the witnesses to the event describe a sudden accidental bumping together of two people incidentally connected to a march. The sculpture captures an entirely different narrative, a core visual of what was happening during that time, with a vulnerable boy whose hands are behind him in non-violent resistance. The artistic framing of the sculpture was not a mistake. It was intentional.

Gladwell interviewed the artist, Ronald S. McDowell. McDowell knew that the sculpture was an interpretation. He had no interest in being "objective." He wanted to tell a story. He made the boy in the sculpture smaller than the young man in the photograph, and the officer larger. There are plenty of other events surrounding King's marches that captured actual moments of vicious dogs and oppressive police. 8mm footage as shown in the PBS documentary film *Eyes on the Prize*, for example, shows imagery that is strikingly similar to McDowell's sculpture.[52]

So, the question is, which one is the truth? Are the events surrounding the publication of the photograph, and its impact on public opinion, the truth? Does Gladwell's investigation uncover the "real" truth? Is McDowell's sculpture the truth?

What if all three are the truth? The photograph documented a moment. It happened. It is by definition non-fiction. But sometimes photographs can represent things

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[52] *Eyes on the Prize*, produced by Henry Hampton (PBS, 1987), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eyes_on_the_Prize.

in ways that seem different from what happened. That is what happens here, as Gladwell notes. While perhaps misleading in terms of the characters involved, the "spirit" of the image captures a spirit of resistance. While not necessarily factual, it is still truthful.

And the sculpture is clearly not factual at all, in the sense that it does not reproduce the photo but actively re-imagines the photo. But what it does do is reproduce the story behind the photograph, better perhaps than the photograph itself. As Gladwell notes, the sculpture is a work of imagination. It is not literal. It is art. Yet, the statue is understood as having historical authority.

All three interpretations—the photo, the story behind the photo, and the artistic re-imagining of the photo—are truth, each in its own way. These three perspectives on truth belie the conventional wisdom that there is a single perspective on truth. According to Gladwell's investigation, truth lives separate from the sender's intent; it is a function of message, medium, context and code; and is dependent on the receiver's knowledge and perspective.

Scientist Michael Polanyi acknowledges that it is impossible to achieve the stated purpose of science to establish complete, empirically verified control over experience, because of the necessity of extrapolating the probable to the certain. He uses the example of a bunch of white balls in a sack. If you add a few black balls, and then happen to draw one out, you still believe it is mostly full of white balls: "Now suppose that we had ourselves placed the balls, 95 percent of them white and 5 percent of them black, into the sack, and then having shaken them up, we drew out a black ball. We should be very

surprised yet remain unshaken in our belief that the bag contained the balls we had put into it."[53]

In other words, scientific knowledge is always probable knowledge. Since we cannot do experiments forever, we must eventually conclude with a high degree of probability that our answer is correct. We start succumbing to a form of confirmation bias and verify only what we believe is probably true. Continued experiments amount to an infinity rule in mathematics. We can get close but can never know with complete certainty. Polanyi writes, "all truth is but the external pole of belief, and to destroy all belief would be to deny all truth… Objectivism has totally falsified our conception of truth, by exalting what we can know and prove, while covering up with ambiguous utterances all that we know and cannot prove, even though the latter knowledge underlies, and must ultimately set its seal to, all that we can prove."[54]

This is not to say that there is no such thing as truth, as some have concluded; rather, that our personal perspective is both limited and inextricably intertwined with a full understanding of truth. Our ability to see a final answer is limited to our view of the problem.

It is worth diving deeper into the three types of truth presented in Gladwell's investigation. The first are the events surrounding the publication of the photograph, or what we may call Rational Truth. These events are non-fiction. They happened. Therefore, they are true. The second is Gladwell's investigation into the "story behind the

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[53] Polanyi, 22.

[54] Polanyi, 301.

story." What he finds is the immediate, first-hand, sensory experience of the characters in the story, and of course the revelation that in their story lies a "different" truth. We may call this Relative Truth. The third is McDowell's sculpture, which captures not the photograph and the events surrounding it, but the larger narrative at play during the story of the Civil Rights movement as a whole. We may call this Relational Truth. Let us look at all three in more detail.

What we think: rational truth

Theologically speaking, rational truth is absolute truth or timeless truth. Truth that is timeless and absolute is akin to truth that comes from God the Creator, who is timeless and absolute. Rational truth is often the position of the positivist, who according to theologian N. T. Wright, claims that "there are some things that are simply 'objectively' true… which can be tested empirically."[55]

Positivism holds the belief that there is a definable, usually single explanation for every phenomenon and that we can discover this explanation through an empirical methodology of criticism. This understanding of truth emerged from and alongside the scientific study of the material world. Beginning in the mid-19th century, the pursuit of rational truth extended into the study of the spiritual world. Culture has benefitted greatly from empirical thought and the idea that there is a rational answer to every situation. But in spite of the realization of its limitations among the scientific and philosophy

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[55] N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 32-33.

communities,[56] positivist thinking remains pervasive, to the point which many in the Western world now assume there is only a rational, usually single explanation for everything material. Many also now assume that actions and behaviors follow rational convictions. While this view has largely been abandoned by philosophers, it is still common in a variety of spheres within Christendom, including both fundamentalist and progressive camps. Wright calls this view "naive realism."[57]

The classic Western apologetic is to present truth as a set of claims with supporting argumentation, just as this work seeks to do. If we cannot articulate and defend it, we cannot stake a claim to it or justify its truthfulness. This kind of truth is private, analytical, and detached—as studies have shown that detached silent reading is private, analytical, and detached.[58]

Western Christianity is so ingrained in a positivist approach to truth that to see through a different lens is more than many can grasp. This is particularly true in the church, where many are not only wed to positivist thinking as an epistemic worldview but as an expression of righteousness. In this rational view, the goal for the apologist, or the one defending the church, is to simply persuade another of the rightness of a position, and having done so, it is assumed that right action will follow. Of course, this does not always happen, and in our current era of "fake news," increasingly less so. Rational superiority often has little to no bearing on individual behavior.

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[56] Wright, 33.

[57] Wright, 33.

[58] Stephens, 80.

What we feel: relative truth

Relative truth is the opposite of rational truth. It is timely truth. It occurs in contextual space and time (which is also the etymological basis for the word "contemporary"). Relative truth is rooted in the human experience of the five senses of sight, sound, hearing, taste, and touch.

To some, relative truth is relativist truth, or the opposite to positivist truth. As theologian N.T. Wright notes, "The much-discussed contemporary phenomenon of cultural and theological relativism is itself in this case simply the dark side of positivism."[59] Postmodern thought positioned relativism as the opposite to rationalism.

But relative truth is not subjective or purely phenomenological truth. Wright rejects the dichotomy and suggests a third way of "critical realism," which is "the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence 'critical')."[60] In other words, truth is indeed something objective and "pure" that exists outside of our personal experience, yet it unknowable apart our personal experience, which inevitably introduce bias.

Novelist Cormac McCarthy places this relative view on the protagonist in his critically-acclaimed novel, *Blood Meridian*: "... In this world more things exist without

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[59] Wright, 33.

[60] Wright, 35.

our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others."[61]

At some level, truth is relative. It is timely, or "of the time" (contemporary), and experienced through the five human senses. However, while by appearance, relational truth opposes rational truth, relative truth does not necessarily negate rational truth. Rather, the two forms can live in paradoxical tension, similar to different hemispheres of the mind. To use brain researcher Iain McGilchrist's categories, relative truth is the right hemisphere of the five senses and of experience, while rational truth is the left hemisphere of reference and rationality. The human mind experiences first, through the five senses, and then rationalizes by making references, premises and syllogisms based on human experience. He says:

> The right hemisphere [of the brain] needs the left hemisphere in order to be able to unpack experience. Without its distance and structure, certainly, there could be, for example, no art, only experience – Wordsworth's description of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility" is just one famous reflection of this. But, just as importantly, if the process ends with the left hemisphere, one only has concepts – abstractions and conceptions, not art at all. Similarly, the immediate pre-conceptual sense of awe can evolve into religion only with the help of the left hemisphere: though, if the process stops here, all one has is theology, or sociology, or empty ritual: something else. It seems that, the work of division having been done by the left hemisphere, a new union must be sought, and for this to happen the process needs to be returned to the right hemisphere, so it can live.[62]

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[61] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West* (Vintage, 1992), 242.

[62] McGilchrist, 199.

All language forms in this fashion, as references to human experience. This means that because of its relationship to human experience, while rational thinking is not incorrect, it is incomplete. To be critical is to begin by saying, "no." But God's first word to humankind is not no, it is "yes."[63] While the fundamental stance of the Enlightenment philosopher is doubt, the fundamental stance of the Christian is faith. God begins not with criticism but with celebration, which is a sensory experience. Relative truth builds on rational truth by returning rational truth back to the world of human experience. One analogy on the difference is that of rational truth is truth that is immutable and from God the Creator, while relative truth is truth of the time and from God the Son, incarnate in Jesus. In this way relative truth is best understood in the specific time and space in which it is experienced.

The experience of relative truth requires full body involvement, not merely our detached, mind involvement. More complete knowing requires not only detached intellectual acknowledgement but a full commitment of faith and passion of one's personal presence and creativity. In the novel and film *Jurassic Park* by surgeon and storyteller Michael Crichton, doctor Alan Grant has studied dinosaurs his whole life, but when he encounters a living dinosaur, he realizes that there is so much more that he could ever have known by looking at bones in his lab. Based on his lab work, Grant thought he understood the meaning of various concepts and abstract categories. However, when he experienced dinosaurs first-hand, many of his preconceived definitions changed. Author

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[63] Karl Barth and Helmut Gollwitzer, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection with Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 67.

Michael Crichton writes, "They knew so little about dinosaurs, Grant thought. After 150 years of research and excavation all around the world, they still knew almost nothing about what the dinosaurs had really been like."[64] In the film, actor Sam O'Neill portrays Dr. Grant as a child, beside himself with joy as he leans on a prone stegosaur, experiencing firsthand things he has merely imagined his whole life, correcting false notions.

This kind of dynamic meaning-making falsifies facile perceptions of "objectivity." As metaphor-making theologian Leonard Sweet compares, "to be modern meant to trust in objectivity and to learn to be objective. In fact, to say someone is objective is a high compliment. But does anyone want to be treated like an object? When you treat something like an object, when you get objective, you bring under your control what you are studying and make it submit to your authority."[65] To explain, Sweet uses the metaphor of a bird in a pan. Modernist scientists learned much about nature by pinning down dead specimens. But their perspective was incomplete. A living bird is out of our control. We cannot pin it to a table to study it. We have to stand under its nest to study its habits. As Sweet says, "there is no understanding without standing-under."[66]

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[64] Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park* (New York: Random House, 1990), 63.

[65] Eric Peterson and Leonard Sweet, *Wade in the Water: Following the Sacred Stream of Baptism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), xii.

[66] Peterson and Sweet.

What we share: relational truth

Finally, truth is also found in what we share. Truth that is time-full, or understood in the fullness of time, is relational. While at one level we may "know" something to be true in a rational sense, we only "know" it at a deeper level through our relative proximity to it. Students of Hebrew will recognize this sort of relative knowledge, as there is a deeper sort of knowing that aligns with proximity. To the Hebrew, knowing is intimacy, as is captured in the verse, "Adam knew Eve."[67] To the Christian, truth is not a proposition at all, but a person: Jesus. Our perspective on truth changes depending on our proximity to Jesus. William of Baskerville, the titular character of Umberto Eco's classic *The Name of the Rose*, describes his deductive ability to his novice according to his proximity to the object in question, a horse:

> If you see something from a distance, and you do not understand what it is, you will be content with defining it as a body of some dimension. When you come closer, you will then define it as an animal, even if you do not know whether it is a horse or an ass. And finally, when it is still closer, you will be able to say it is a horse even if you do not know whether it is Brunellus or Niger. And only when you are at the proper distance will you see that it is Brunellus (or, rather, that horse and not another, however you decide to call it.) And that will be full knowledge, the learning of the singular.[68]

William teaches his disciple that truth is fully understood according to the observer's proximate relationship to the object. We cannot fully know from a distance, but only when we are intimately close to it. Thus, truth is relational, and therefore understood in community.

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[67] Genesis 4:1.

[68] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (New York: Mariner, 1980), 31.

Theologically speaking, this means that, to some degree, truth is revealed. It comes to us not as knowledge acquired by human inquiry, which can be discovered as a detached observer, but as wisdom acquired by revelation of God's Spirit, which occurs in relationship with the observed.

Luke's Gospel tells a story about Jesus being baptized: "…and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." (Luke 3:22) To the Christian, this is surely one of the most beautiful verses in the Bible. You could see the Holy Spirit. You could hear God's voice. You could touch Jesus. In that moment, you could physically experience the entire Trinity. All three persons of the Trinity were present. This scripture is an example of the inner relationship of the Trinity, which may be understood as *kenosis* —a word that captures the emptying of self simultaneously present in all three persons of the Trinity. The three persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit—model kenosis. Each empties the self out for the others. Each person of the Trinity is focused not on self but the others, and through perfected love, each is in turn filled up even in the act of emptying. The Father, Son and the Holy Spirit love one another—they are truly love itself. In this beautiful scripture passage, we get to witness the Trinity engaged in the kenosis that is the essence of the Trinity: happy in the mystery of an inner-connected relationship of love. Relational truth is understood in community.

Metaphors Unlock New Perspectives

No metaphor, and therefore no single word, perfectly captures reality. As depictions of reality, all metaphors eventually break down. But the limitations of our

metaphors and language do not equate to limitations of truth. Instead, our words demonstrate that truth is not contained in a single proposition or definition.

Each of these perspectives—rational truth, relative truth, and relational truth—is not falsifiable, yet each is incomplete. Together, they provide a more complete perspective. Thus, Polanyi writes, "though every person may believe something different to be true, there is only one truth."[69]

Metaphors offer differing perspectives, and as we introduce new metaphors, we make truth relative to our time and space. In so doing, we unlock new perspectives on truth. "Crossing the line" with metaphors is how we wake up new life and new meaning, offering epistemic access to both the world and to God.[70]

This is what Jesus did, and perhaps why he taught in metaphors. Consider a common question regarding biblical interpretation: How many points are there in a parable? Medieval research understood parables to be allegorical, but German theologian Adolf Jülicher changed this thinking by emphasizing a single "point" over a range of bijective symbols.[71] Later research began to see parables as polyvalent, with meaning a function of the receiver's participation in the storytelling process[72], though the "one point" interpretation of parables is often what gets communicated from contemporary pulpits.

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[69] Polanyi, 333.

[70] David O. Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation: Worship and the Formative Power of the Arts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 42.

[71] Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu, 2 volumes* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1888), https://archive.org/details/diegleichnisred01jlgoog/page/n13.

[72] Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1954).

The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) is the longest and perhaps most famous parable in the Bible. It is the story of an ungrateful son who demands his inheritance, squanders it in a far-off land, returns home in shame, and receives the father's unmerited favor. Or, it is the story of an older brother, who perhaps like Israel, has lived an obedient life and out of self-righteousness judges the action of a brother. Or, perhaps it is the story of a loving father, who allows the younger brother and the older brother to learn and grow, each in his own way.

Is there one meaning to this story, or multiple meanings? The "point" of the story is one thing from the perspective of the father, another from the son, and yet a third from the older brother. The beauty of the parable, and the beauty of metaphor, is its ability to offer multiple meanings to a variety of listeners. Christians return to biblical stories again and again, not because the stories change, but because people change. In the case of the story of the prodigal son, the same reader may resonate with all three characters over various stages and moments of life.

Pastors and Christians may agree with the power of metaphor in principle yet cling to the notion that there is only one meaning to find. By insisting on a single "point," we reduce the power of our stories and their ability to speak in unique ways in time and space. As I write in *Digital Storytellers*,

> Has it ever struck you how little the Bible is present in worship today? Most of the time, Protestant worship is expository. In the past, worship contained both the telling of the biblical story itself, and a commentary on it. Now, we almost always get the commentary. Sermon-centered worship, if based on the Bible at all, is mostly the presentation of one person's understanding of biblical stories; based on his or her private, quiet analysis of biblical text. We've gotten used to the idea of

> the final answer. We skip the movie and go right to the criticism and review. We want the explanation – it's easier, faster, and seemingly "final."[73]

Exploration through metaphor is crucial to unlocking new perspectives. Yet we avoid metaphor because of its imprecision. Education advocate and creativity researcher Sir Ken Robinson notes that the modern American educational system's emphasis on standardized testing is exacerbating the fallacy of objectivist thinking. Seventy percent of high school senior year reading is now non-fiction. Literature is increasingly lost.[74] American children are "falling behind," yet we continue to push for higher standards and more rigorous testing.

The same educational struggles are present in other cultures, as well. High school students in Shanghai, China's largest city, finished first in an international standardized test of math, science, and reading proficiency given to students in sixty-five nations. The United States finished between fifteenth and thirty-first. As Michael Sokolove writes, "not everyone in China, however, viewed this result as an unmitigated triumph. Some expressed concern that an emphasis on rote learning was smuggling creative thinking and intellectual risk-taking."[75] A principal at a school in Shanghai that figured into the international testing was concerned enough about the stifling atmosphere that he

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[73] Len Wilson and Jason Moore, *Digital Storytellers: The Art of Communicating the Gospel in Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 76-77.

[74] Lyndsey Layton, "Common Core State Standards in English Spark War Over Words," Washington Post, December 2, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/common-core-state-standards-in-english-spark-war-over-words/2012/12/02/4a9701b0-38e1-11e2-8a97-363b0f9a0ab3_story.html

[75] Michael Sokolove, *Drama High: The Incredible True Story of a Brilliant Teacher, a Struggling Town, and the Magic of Theater* (New York: Riverhead, 2013), 134.

instituted reforms to foster more creativity. One of his innovations was a weekly talent show.[76]

The effects of quantifying learning will not be known for a long time, but the potential loss of creative thinking is frightening. While the value of the humanities is foremost that they teach us to be human, it is becoming increasingly clear that through their proclivity to promote divergent thinking, they also serve a quantifiable benefit. Recounting a major study on arts education, Sokolove writes that the brain prioritizes "emotionally tinged" information for long-term memory storage. Music and art have the ability to physically restructure our neurons.[77]

According to brain researcher Iain McGilchrist, though analysis is vital to our understanding, when it takes charge, it subsumes human experience. The implication is that while our signs and references give us the impression that we have necessary knowledge, we are missing one crucial step. While the left-hemisphere helps us detach and understand, its work is unfinished. What is missing is the part that re-integrates the concepts of the left hemisphere back into the holistic experience of the right hemisphere. McGilchrist argues that this last step is the most crucial part of how we find meaning.[78]

Further, getting lost in a sequence of patterns is ironic: by diving deep into single abstract fields of theory, we have abandoned the primary benefit of categorical thinking, which is the ability to compare and contrast various categories. It is almost like a return to premodern thinking but within single categories. As previously noted in the work of

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[76] Sokolove, 135.

[77] Sokolove, 128.

[78] McGilchrist, xxi.

prize-winning historian Diarmaid McCulloch, historiography is but one example where brilliant scholars fear making big proclamations. We dive deep down rabbit holes of specialization but have lost the ability to cross between categories of knowledge.

To compare across disciplines was the classic liberal ideal; once, the highest compliment was to be a "renaissance" person, or multi-disciplinary in one's ability to bring together disparate fields of knowledge and from the comparison to find new and deeper meaning. Today, it seems we have lost the ability to see the whole picture. As Epstein says, "premodern people miss the forest for the trees; modern people miss the trees for the forest."[79] To use a metaphor, it is as if we have access to every piece of the puzzle but have lost the box cover which provides the full image. When all we have are categorizations and patterns, we lose sight of the concrete. We need the concrete, or the right hemisphere world of sensory, immediate experience. The process that starts with the right hemisphere (the "sensory" side), goes to the left hemisphere (the "analytical" side), then back to the right brain again for employment. It is only when we see the re-collected, whole picture, with the holistic, embodied experience of affect joined with the abstract, detached, deconstructed analysis, that we gain full understanding.

To offer another metaphor, true musical understanding happens when a musician listens to a new musical work, begins to study it by breaking it down into component parts, then integrates the newly acquired knowledge in a complete, integrated performance of the work. Component knowledge does not equal holistic understanding. We are meant to experience, process and then present for final understanding. Critically,

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[79] Epstein, 44.

the way we complete this right-left-right journey of meaning making is through metaphor. As referents break down experience from whole to parts, metaphors provide a parts-to-whole reintegration. They act as field tests, placing abstract categories in real world settings, where like theorems they are tested and modified.

The Need for New Metaphors in Ministry

Thus, while individual metaphors are insufficient to capture full knowledge or explain reality, they are also critical to our understanding of reality. Meaning morphs and changes according to the metaphors we use. This is how metaphors work. They create a dynamic interplay of meanings between the one sending the sign and the one receiving the sign, all of which occurs in a larger environment of context, message, contact, and code.[80]

This form of meaning-making applies to all understanding, including our understanding of God. Abstract ideas of any kind – including ideas about God, discipleship, and congregational growth – must be rooted in human experience in order for them to make sense, to take root in our hearts, and to affect healthy change. Semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco, speaking through a character in his semiotic novel *The Name of the Rose*, observes that metaphors work in theological contexts because they are "more suited to the knowledge we have of God on this earth: He shows

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[80] These four additional variables form Roman Jakobson's communication paradigm, which is perhaps the most famous semiotic model in use today, according to Crystal Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 115.

Himself here more in that which is not than that which is, and therefore the similitudes of those things furthest from God lead us to a more exact notion of Him."[81]

Oddly, many in ministry distrust metaphors, because we have split metaphors into two categories: hermeneutical metaphors and biblical metaphors. Hermeneutical metaphors, like the classic "bridge" metaphor to explain atonement, are helpful for doctrine and preaching. But biblical metaphors, such as a "day" in creation, become the object of intense debate.[82] Our expectations for hermeneutical metaphors are lower, but we become uncomfortable with the idea of biblical metaphors, because we have tried to elevate the Scriptures to verified proofs, even though this split in our thinking reduces the power of Scripture, which is largely composed of metaphorical language (e.g., gardens, serpents, burning bushes, doves, fire, and so on).

All metaphors eventually collapse as tools for comparison. Because no metaphor is a complete image of reality, and since all metaphors reveal and all hide according to the place in culture and the context in which they live, the challenge of the one who wishes to communicate the gospel is to recognize when it is necessary to throw off old metaphors and find new ones. Metaphor acts as a "dim glass" through which we can view the truth of Jesus. As the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

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[81] Eco, 89.

[82] Len Wilson and Jason Moore, *Digital Storytellers: The Art of Communicating the Gospel in Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 35.

Thus, to discover new perspectives on the one truth of Jesus Christ, we need to acknowledge old metaphors and replace them with new ones. This is the challenge we must take on with an attempt to create a new definition of "growth."

In the church, we hold on to a strange bifurcation between a rich heritage of signs, symbols, and images, and a collection of teachings and apologetics framed according to Enlightenment-style "rational" arguments. As a pastor's kid, I spent my childhood in church, surrounded by Christian imagery from stained glass to altars and images in halls and classrooms, and I knew little about what these images meant. In some of the congregations my father served, some of the community put up a Christmas tree every year. The ornaments were all white and they were almost all strange symbols. I later learned the tree was called a Chrismon tree, and the symbols referred to visual representations of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus at various points in history.

I had no idea what the symbols meant and thought there was a secret visual language for Christians to which I was not privy. One of my initial motivations to attend seminary was to begin to understand the visual metaphors of my childhood in church, except seminary did not help this problem at all. All I got were sophisticated rational arguments. It seemed like no one thought in image, even though the repeated pattern of biblical revelation is through metaphorical imagery.[83]

This is especially concerning when the words and images we use do not just frame our understanding, they frame our actions. In the aforementioned crime study, the

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[83] Jason Moore and Len Wilson, *Design Matters: Creating Powerful Imagery for Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 24. This problem continues. It seems church communication today is often a twin terror of analytical knowledge and free-range image-making, neither of which are employed with any concern for full understanding.

metaphor defined the response: the virus group saw crime as a third-party problem and wanted to work together with other people to solve the threat. The beast group saw crime as a people problem and wanted to work against those people to enact punitive measures and eliminate the threat. In a review of the study, journalist Steve Rathje notes, "One of the most remarkable things about the metaphor's influence in this study was that it was covert. When participants were asked about what influenced their decision, no one mentioned the metaphor. They instead pointed to other aspects of the passage that were the same for all participants, such as statistics."[84]

What hidden impact do the words and images we use have on our efforts in ministry? This is the assumption behind my examination of the word "growth." That metaphor can have influence in a variety of fields is still a relatively new idea, as creating rational arguments has been considered superior to creating poetic ones since the rise of the Enlightenment. Geary, again: "For centuries, metaphor has been seen as a kind of cognitive frill, a pleasant but essentially useless embellishment to "normal" thought… New research in the social and cognitive sciences makes it increasingly plain that metaphorical thinking influences our attitudes, beliefs, and actions in surprising, hidden, and often oddball ways."[85]

In order to create a new definition for growth, we need to identify the contextual influences impacting our existing definition of growth. In addition to the "simple"

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[84] Steve Rathje, "The Power of Framing: It's Not What You Say, It's How You Say It," The Guardian, July 20, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/science/head-quarters/2017/jul/20/the-power-of-framing-its-not-what-you-say-its-how-you-say-it.

[85] Geary, loc. 97.

metaphors of everyday speech, we have two other levels to consider: metaphor themes and deep metaphors.

APPENDIX C: PLUMB LINE

In addition to metaphors in our everyday language, metaphorical themes and "deep metaphors" exert contextual influence on our existing definition of growth. Deep metaphors in particular are largely unseen yet exert immense influence. Our definition of growth is influenced by a deep metaphor of improvement. Deep metaphors such as improvement can become limiting and even dangerous when as incomplete representations of reality they form a bounding box beyond which we cannot create new references and categories for meaning.

Metaphors are much more than surface-level descriptions of reality. But are all metaphors the same? According to market researcher Gerald Zaltman, there are actually three types of metaphors that shape our definition-making ability: individual metaphors based on our own sensory experiences, metaphor themes that shape our understanding of culture, and "deep metaphors"[86] that subconsciously shape our "paradigm", to use the Kuhnian term[87]. Let us examine metaphor themes and deep metaphors.

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[86] Market researcher Gerald Zaltman introduces the rubric of metaphors, metaphor themes and deep metaphors in *Marketing Metaphoria: What Deep Metaphors Reveal About the Minds of Consumers*, (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2008).

[87] Thomas S. Kuhn and Ian Hacking, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Fourth edition,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Metaphor Themes

It is an axiom among philologists that language is full of dead metaphors; in other words, most words we use today have a set of connotations and denotations that begin with human experience and which morph and change over time in culture.[88] Every day, we read signs all around us. Most of them are non-verbal and part of an entire system. Some metaphors become so strong, and so closely aligned with other metaphors to a single representation of reality, that they become metaphor themes. Zaltman writes, "Metaphor themes reside below surface metaphors, but are not completely buried in our unconscious."[89]

The film *Rebel Without a Cause* came out in 1955 and catapulted the angst-filled James Dean to a short-lived stardom that ended in his death by car crash from high speed driving on a California highway.[90] In his death, Dean embodied and codified a set of signs that has since proven impervious to cultural change. The image of disaffected young man searching for truth in a culture of conformity and falsehood has become a defining image of American life. Why? Perhaps because at its inception, the image of the rebellious young man captured a deep-seated metaphor for life that symbolized a group of people who did not share the values of post-war America. To those who resonated with

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[88] C.S. Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare", *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), 251.

[89] Zaltman, loc. 191-192.

[90] Claudia Springer, *James Dean Transfigured: The Many Faces of Rebel Iconography* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2007), 16.

the solitary, leather-bound biker, the rebel is the one who holds on to what is true, fights the "man", stands up against lies, and speaks truth to power and authority. It can be argued that rebellion is Marxist, though this is debatable.[91] The *Star Wars* brand is built on this metaphor (and some embrace it to the point of religion).

Prior to Marx, the theme of rebellion can be found in Robespierre, the American colonials and throughout revolutionary political movements.[92] The rebel is the one who knows the "truth" and shares it with others who will join in the fight against the powerful. The rebel exercises this knowledge via sheer will and autonomy, and in fact holds on to individual autonomy - what we call "rights" - as the sacrosanct value of life.

Of course, the word "rebellion," like most every word, is a metaphor, with etymological roots in embodied human experience. The Latin root of "rebel" is the same word that gives us the word "bellicose" - it describes a human physical stance, an act of "bowing up" one's back against a person or standing in a fighting position.

While all metaphors are rooted in the specific time and space in which they are created, most metaphors lose their "stickiness",[93] or their ability to create meaning, over time. Some metaphors like rebellion become part of a larger grouping, or theme, which define a particular cultural context or period of time. Metaphor themes become powerful

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[91] Springer, 7.

[92] Biblically, rebellion begins with the serpent. Ref. Isaiah 14:13.

[93] "Stickiness" is a metaphor about metaphors, made famous by Chip Heath and Dan Heath in *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007), and later adapted to ministry by Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark in their famous study on youth ministry, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

descriptions of reality and may or may not be conscious. Rebellion is in many ways a now subconscious symbol for truth in Western society today.

Whereas the World War II generation thought of rebels as activists fighting for a political cause, such as in the global 1930s, the teenager in *Rebel Without a Cause* expanded the image to fighting unseen domestic oppressors - the unspoken hypocrisy of false order. In a post-war era of conformity, to be rebellious became "cool"—a sign of the times, or a likeness for the zeitgeist, that was so strong it survives over sixty years later. The image was first articulated to a nationwide American audience by Marlon Brando in the 1953 *The Wild Ones*. Brando's character in the film established a visual archetype for a person, usually a young white male, who rejected the social mores of American society, even if he is incapable of articulating why. At one point in the film, another character asks Johnny what he is rebelling against. Johnny replies, "whaddya got?"

It is difficult to contextualize the influence of Brando's characterization now, because it has been so widely copied and parodied. James Dean clearly drew on Brando's characterization in his own portrayal of a disaffected young man. Elvis Presley used the archetype as the basis for his song and film, *Jailhouse Rock*. These characterizations helped establish a visual and musical identity. Rock and Roll became both musical genre and entire lifestyle. Iconic films like *Grease* suggested that graduating from conformity to rebellion was a form of liberation. The theme of the American rebel became codified.

Now, rebellion has become a normalized image for a "mature" adult in USAmerica. To "rebel" is an image not just for a Che or a Marx or someone fighting political power but for a person in any realm of society, from entertainment to politics to

religion.[94] Western culture celebrates the person who discovers his or her own individual autonomous will, which had previously been suppressed by unseen forces. American sexual politics, for example, may be understood as a subsidiary issue to the metaphor theme of the rebel. It seems sacrosanct to support and give voice to the individual who seeks to claim an identity over and against any sort of authoritative influence from another.[95]

Images of the rebellion theme such as jeans, leather, tattoos, motorcycles, and more continue to be so powerful that they are visible in shopping malls and commercial centers around the United States, 65 years later. One can go to the grocery store and see grandmothers with spiky hair, black t-shirts and torn jeans, still appropriating the image of the rebel, perhaps with no clue of what they are rebelling against.

In rebel culture, Christianity—the practice of the faith and its institutions—is a symbol of the oppressor. Some make a distinction between Christianity and Jesus, saying Jesus was a rebel (therefore good, true and beautiful) but the religion that came after him is not.[96] When Christian leaders get tattoos, wear leather, curse, drink, and so forth, they are adopting the images and habits of the rebel, presumably in an attempt to minister in a culture of rebellion—perhaps because they, too, wish to overthrow the "man."

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[94] For an image of a pastor personifying the rebellion metaphor theme, see Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber.

[95] This creates contradictions when the need to give voice to the individual against authority becomes itself authoritative. The limitation of the political solution is that it results in a never-ending cycle of violence. What happens after you win the fight? It is difficult to assume a position of authority if your reason for being is to fight positions of authority.

[96] Jefferson Bethke, "Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus", youtube.com, Jan 10, 2012, video, 4:03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGYlpqY.

Metaphor themes are powerful, and entire systems of meaning can be embedded in a single image—such as, in the case of rebellion, the image of a pair of blue jeans, which is expected to reach $80 billion as a global industry by 2022.[97] In our image-rich culture, the one who creates an image that captures an entire metaphor theme is a powerful communicator.

I offer this extended description of the metaphor theme of rebellion in order to establish the presence of shared cultural assumptions that drive behavior. Rebellion is visible enough to recognize. Yet, the most powerful metaphors are those that we cannot recognize. It is in this deepest layer that I believe our current conception of growth resides.

Deep Metaphors

When cultural metaphor themes find resonance with large groups of people and for long periods of time, they become “deep metaphors.” While we are usually aware of the individual metaphors we use, and we are sometimes aware of the influence of metaphor themes, we rarely recognize the power of deep metaphors. Deep metaphors are iconographic, invisible, longitudinal, and cross-cultural metaphor themes that find resonance and shape meaning with large groups of people and for long periods of time.

To use the semiotic language established by Saussure, deep metaphors have graduated from *parole* (an individual sign or symbol) to *langue* (an entire system of signs

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[97] “Denim Jeans’ Global Popularity Continues to Rise,” Fashionating World, March 1, 2017, https://www.fashionatingworld.com/new1-2/denim-jeans-global-popularity-continues-to-rise.

and symbols).[98] A deep metaphor is no longer a single code but represents an entire system of signs. Yet the increasing systemic influence of a deep metaphor does not correlate with increasing complexity. Rather, the power of deep metaphors lay beyond their complexity, in their singularity and simplicity.[99] Deep metaphors act as plumb lines, marking definitive answers by which we measure our reality.

Deep metaphors seem to be driven more by psychological and emotional reaction than rational thought. Marketing researcher Gerald Zaltman writes about metaphor themes and deep metaphors, "Both are hardwired in our brains and shaped by social contexts and experiences. Moreover, deep metaphors and emotions are unconscious operations that are vital perceptual and cognitive functions."[100]

As epistemologies, deep metaphors are powerful in shaping our understanding of reality. StrategyOne, a marketing firm, polled 1,000 Americans about unspoken metaphors that influence human behavior. They asked, what do you think best describes your life? Among six pre-selected answers:

- 51% said life is a journey
- 11% said life is a battle
- 8% said life is a novel[101]

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[98] Cobley, loc. 106.

[99] An oft-cited quote, attributed to United States Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendall Holmes, Jr., states, "For the simplicity that lies this side of complexity, I would not give a fig, but for the simplicity that lies on the other side of complexity, I would give my life."

[100] Zaltman, loc. 415.

[101] Geary, loc. 1139.

If I had built this survey, I would have added a few more options, based on my experiences in ministry with people of my home region, Dallas-Fort Worth: is life a "vacation"? Is life a "game"? Is life a "gig"? Sadly, some of these conjure negative denotations. In particular, "game" is an image for life I have heard used by some in my church community.

Metaphors and The Church

As signs that represent entire *langues*, metaphors offer explanations about how the world works that lead us to form assumptions about what is true and how we should be in relationship with one another—and, for the Christian, with God.

As noted, metaphors are not reality and therefore insufficient to describe reality. While we fear metaphors in the church, the real fear is not for metaphors themselves, but for the perceived threat of metaphor themes and deep metaphors. Recognizing the influence of metaphor themes and deep metaphors suggests that we are not nearly as objective and rational as we would like to think. Instead, our beliefs and behaviors are rooted in the images we use. We are more influenced by metaphors than we want to accept. While we may prefer to consider the mnemonics and memes we use to make meaning static, our sense of what is true is not as static as we would like to believe, but changes over time and with the influence of new sensory input.[102] In turn, these

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[102] In our mediated age, input largely comes from mass produced sources controlled by a small group of influencers. For more on this and its dangers, see Brooke Gladstone and Josh Neufeld, *The Influencing Machine: Brooke Gladstone on the Media* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

metaphors that define our lives, expressed in words and images, affect our view of the world and even our identity.

Let us return to the powerful image of James Dean's disaffected, rebellious young man. Consider a young man who has grown up in a home with a drug-addicted mother and an absentee father. He swears to himself that his life will be different and that he will escape his circumstances. He devotes his entire life to overcoming his upbringing. And he does so, to the point where he is able to attend college. But if he is to be successful, he must do more than just leave home and escape old, destructive images of adulthood in his mind.[103] He must develop new, constructive images for what his future will look like. Will he own a home of his own someday? Have a wife and children? Maintain a professional career? What he may not yet see is that at some point, he will come to a crossroads where he must choose a life path that was unmodeled in his childhood. In order to give his children a better upbringing than he had, he will have to make different decisions than his parents made. He will have to put new mentors around him to guide him. In order to overcome his negative past, he must either reframe or replace the metaphor he carries of a father who disappears when times get tough and a mother who turns to substance abuse. Since Maslow, psychologists have agreed on the need to not just give people material needs, but new, positive visions of their own futures.[104] Or, as C. S.

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[103] A good example of this dynamic can be found in Jeff Hobbs, *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace: A Brilliant Young Man Who Left Newark for the Ivy League* (New York: Scribner, 2014).

[104] Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50 (4): 370-96, doi.org/10.1037/h0054346.

Lewis observed in Mere Christianity, “fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms.”[105]

What the young man defines as good and bad changes according to his understanding of what is true. To understand behavior, then, we need to understand the metaphors that drive us. Virtue is behavior conducted in accordance with our understanding of the truth, which we call “good.” Vice is behavior conducted in rebellion to our understanding of the truth, which we call “bad.” In order to understand what drives our sense of virtue and of vice, we need to understand these terms, which are based on our relationship to the truth. What images do you use to define what is true? This question is of critical importance, because our behavior - the things we do - both arises from our understanding of the world and shapes out understanding of the world. Theologian James K.A. Smith writes, “the place we unconsciously strive toward is what ancient philosophers of habit called our telos—our goal, our end. But the telos we live toward is not something that we primarily know or believe or think about; rather, our telos is what we want, what we long for, what we crave… It is less an ideal that we have ideas about and more a vision of ‘the good life’ that we desire.”[106]

Further, the most powerful images are the ones we cannot see. As Smith notes, the limits of rationalism are not an anti-intellectual cry, but a recognition of the need for more knowledge.[107] This is the power of education. Naming a new metaphor can unlock all sorts of alternative ways of thinking and living. Thus, if we want to change our reality,

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[105] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christian*ity (New York: Harper Collins, 1952), 59.

[106] James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 11.

[107] Smith, 6.

the most important thing we can do is to plumb our own deepest trenches of what we consider to be true. It is the assumptions that are least obvious and most assumed that provide us the best clues. The key to deep change is to invent new metaphors.[108] Changing a deep metaphor can change hearts, lives, and communities.

Yet, this is easier said than done. As we consider the problem of the definition of growth, then is the solution to think of better metaphors? The deep metaphor is not easily overturned. Semiotician Crystal Downing describes the difficulty using the illustration of the pro-democracy killing of Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi:

> Only the most naive person would think that killing a dictator could change the way an entire culture thinks. The problem, as they say, is "systemic": humans perceive truth and correct behavior according to the *langue* (the system generating signs) in their cultures. Only through a change in langue, as may eventually happen in Egypt and Libya, will there be a change in signs.[109]

The more systemic a metaphor becomes, the more influence it exerts. Some metaphors become so embedded in our language and sign systems that we cannot recognize their hold on us. In their ubiquity, deep metaphors become unacknowledged, interpretant images we use as a basis for truth claims and behavior. They exert great influence over us, in shaping our understanding of reality and our visions of the future. Self-help gurus who promise a new vision of a personal future are misguided. Our visions are not blank slates; we already have visions of our future. They are shaped by the deep metaphors we carry around about life.

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[108] Lewis, 252.

[109] Downing, 105.

If we can agree, as English clergyman John Donne once wrote, that no man is an island[110] (which is of course a metaphor), and if all of life involves the interaction and exchange of humans in relationship, then this means that the nature of these exchanges, which is the study of semiotics, is as basic as life itself. Images are the means by which we communicate and form meaning. As words are the trees in the forest of language, and metaphors are the root and branches of words, then to communicate well, we need to understand the implications of the metaphors we use—their history, their present use, and their future use.

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[110] John Donne, "No Man Is an Island," *Meditation XVII: Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, 1624.

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