

2-2023

### Jesus Tribe

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

PROJECT PORTFOLIO:

JESUS TRIBE



IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

PORTLAND SEMINARY

BY:

CHRISTOPHER RICHARDSON

PROJECT FACULTY:

MARK CHIRONNA

PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 2023



## CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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This certifies that the doctoral Project Portfolio of

Christopher Richardson

has been approved by  
the Evaluation Committee on March 15, 2023  
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics, Church, and Culture.

### Evaluation Committee:

Primary Project Faculty: Mark Chironna, DMin

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## Dedication

To those besieged and bewildered and often betrayed servants of the Lord Jesus, who found yourselves in a storm that billowed and battered your souls living in this “Time of Tribes”: I pray you find solidarity and hope in rebuilding the family of Jesus. May you never suffer or strive alone, though the path often feels lonely. I pray this work helps in some small way to push back the Tides of Tribalism and the difficulties in ministering in that tempest.

## Acknowledgments

To acknowledge all those that helped carry me past the finish line would be impossible. First, thank you Leonard Sweet, for the vision and the dream of building, as you put it, the Tribe of Issachar: those who, as the Biblical men and women of old, knew and understood the times and what to do. Your passion and zest for life and for Jesus is contagious. I pray that I am always seeking to grow and to glow from the inside the way you do. Thank you for helping us find strength in the broken places.

Second, thank you Mark Chironna. You have helped us to stay the course and complete our work with diligence. You have expanded my horizons, led me to fresh waters of knowledge, and pushed me to grow in ways I never expected. I have been blessed by your work in the Pentecostal world and depth of knowledge there.

Third to my peer group, Dave Bach and Phil Berlin. We came together in the most challenging of times. Each step cheering me on, pushing me to improve, and helping me when I couldn't find the right way to cite something. My life has been blessed by your insights and your courage. Dave you have proven a friend beyond reckoning and your wisdom has improved my ministry. Phil your spirit is an inspiration to me, thank you for sharing it.

Fourth to my cohort, *COHORT/COVID-19* and the rest of the DMIN team. We started when the world was chaos. No initial advance in person, no London trip, only wonder and joy and perseverance. You have each inspired me in your own way, and my largest regret is that we don't all live together on some large farm where we can just talk theology and laugh and eat Len's various food products.

And fifth, but most importantly, to my wife Robin. When I was limping you were my cane, when I couldn't walk you were my wheelchair, when I wanted to just lay down and quit, you carried me on. I am beyond grateful for your sacrifice these last three years. To Jack and Phoebe, you are my heart. Thank you for putting up with the late nights, early mornings, constant reading, and weekend writing. Dad's done!

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## Research Method

This Doctoral Project utilized a blended research and design methodology called ‘Collaborative Design for Ministry and Nonprofit Contexts’. In Collaborative Design, practitioners work with stakeholder representatives to address a Need, Problem, or Opportunity (NPO) in their context. Using a combination of bibliographic resources, local knowledge derived from stakeholder Workshops, and an iterative process of continuous adjustment using ‘just enough’ feedback information at each juncture of development, practitioners produce an application-oriented Project that seeks to effect Christ-centered change.

## Abstract

Christians and churches in the early twenty-first century seem to belong to various tribes which leads to confused, disjointed loyalties. This confusion can lead to acrimony within churches. To develop and maintain the unity spoken of by Jesus Christ, these groups would benefit by better understanding and recognizing the prevalence of tribalism. Further, this should lead to the instigation of processes by which they can effectively evaluate and re-align their tribal loyalties toward a more definitive and effective modeling of Jesus and his lordship.

Church leadership will benefit from a better understanding of the forces of tribalism at work both in our world and in their churches.

Beyond that, they will need specific, intentional processes that can be employed to assist their communities to define, articulate, and understand together their tribal loyalties.

Among the specific insights gathered through this research, I have found that many church leaders are only somewhat aware of the actual manifestations of tribalism. Seemingly because of the homogeneity that is seen in many churches, the conversations around tribalism are either one sided or non-existent.

This project has emerged from my vocational place as a pastor of a church dying from tribalism. The church eventually closed in late summer of 2022 largely due to the inability of the congregation to have healthy discussions around key tribal conflicts. Key inflection points included disagreement on the most effective and Godly response to the management of COVID-19. A second disagreement involved the question of how the church leadership should respond to the concept of taking a partisan position in the contentious 2020 election and subsequent aftermath.

Growing from that context, this project has culminated in the formation of a website that will equip church leaders with both knowledge and tools to understand, teach about, and confront tribalism in healthy ways.

## Introduction

As I was pulling into our driveway, I received an email from a respected member of our church. She was a close friend and mentor of my wife. She decried the fact that as a pastor I made the decision to follow local guidelines and laws in Columbus, Ohio regarding the Covid Pandemic. She compared me to the rabbis who loaded their people onto Nazi trains destined for concentration camps and ultimately annihilation. She said it was not my fault, as my entire generation had been “dumbed down”. I responded to her in conversation, letting her know I was disappointed and hurt by her comments in the email, hopeful that we could reconcile and move on. However, at that point she proceeded to lambaste me loudly for over an hour. She and her husband then chose to remove themselves from the congregation. Both had been, up until that time, respected members of the church, even leading studies and retreats. Sadly, this was only the beginning.

Another woman in the congregation approached me seeking a discussion of vaccines in general. I agreed to have the conversation, but because I was still grieving the former confrontation, only on the condition that if the tone of the conversation became contentious, it would be over. She and her husband left the church soon after. Before their departure, they wrote a letter to the elders requesting they fire me as pastor. Their reason was that because I personally advocated for vaccines in a private conversation, I had to be pro-abortion as well. I never made any statements from the pulpit about being for or against the Covid vaccines, only statements asking that we care for our neighbors.

In that same time frame, I happened to “like” a comment that Senator Bernie Sanders had made on Facebook, not related to any of the existing issues in the pandemic, or abortion. The brother of one of the elders of the church saw my post interaction and left the church, concluding that I must be pro-abortion.

In the days following the announcement of the 2020 election results, there were quite a number of our congregation who insisted that I call out the “stolen election” from the pulpit. I repeatedly confirmed that I had no intention of making the pulpit a place for political diatribe. They left the church.

One good friend came to me and asked me to get involved with the racial reconciliation efforts taking place during late summer of 2020. I immediately agreed that there was an incredible need to reckon with our long history with racial inequality. With some trepidation, I sought to engage the issue with the congregation, knowing that many were already suspicious and distrusting of the Black Lives Matter movement. These church members were often quite vitriolic in their comments about that movement. I found myself in an impossible situation, knowing that whatever I said, I could not please everyone. I preached an entire series about race and reconciliation. While I would have liked to have done and said more immediately, apparently what I shared was insufficient, as those who requested I do so then left the church. In addition, others left because I discussed it too much.

In these and many more instances I felt the ugly reality of tribalism in our church. Then in the summer of 2021 I started to realize that I had lost the goodwill of my congregation and my own confidence to be able to make a difference in that place. At that point I felt I had no recourse but to seek a new position. Leadership reassured me that they had confidence in me, but that began a long conversation about the future of that church, culminating in them closing their doors late summer of 2022.

While this was ongoing, I was seeking to establish a beachhead in that congregation for the work that this doctoral project proposes. In a crushing and painful way, I experienced first-hand the resistance people express when clergy attempt to address the problems rooted in types of tribal loyalties. Though the loyalties I found myself confronted with were political affiliations, cultural affiliations, and ethnic affiliations, these and many more loyalties create the “us versus them” dynamic that currently defines much of our culture.

How would I move forward with a doctoral project seeking to create an awareness regarding tribalism and then the development of a “Jesus Tribe” when the very place I was hoping to launch it from dissolved? Thankfully, a new door has opened for us in another city in the southeast, and we are working fervently toward making a way forward in forming this local church in a “Jesus Tribe” consciousness and mentality.

In the effort to build the positive “Jesus Tribe” it became obvious that a number of deficits had to be recognized and addressed. If we can see those deficits clearly, then we can also begin to see the need to return to the most basic starting point in Christian scripture and tradition: Loving God cannot be separated from loving others. 1 John makes it quite plain: *“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.”*<sup>1</sup> When we were in Ohio, we found disdain and near hatred amongst the members of the congregation toward anyone who disagreed with them. It almost seemed more severe when those who disagreed were fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore, in order to serve the formation of a people to live as a “Jesus Tribe”, the following deficits require address in this doctoral project:

1. **Theological deficit:** If the very nature of God is revealed first in Trinitarian love and second in God’s love of people, then all of theology must flow from that fountainhead. Good theology can behave as lifeblood in the Church, but this theological deficit is about a lack of personally knowing the God who is love (see 1 John 4:7-21). This creates a need to revisit again that foundational reality as the beginning of any and every conversation that is tied to what it means to follow Jesus.
2. **Anthropological deficit.** Anthropologists focus their study to define and identify aspects of being human. A Christ-centered anthropology finds expression in what it means to be

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4:20 (New International Version).

and become truly human from God's perspective. That anthropology forces us to ask: if we can dehumanize others to justify our failure to relate to them, how well do we know what it means to be truly human?

3. **Narrative deficit.** We have lost our ability to faithfully "trust the story" of Jesus as Len Sweet says.<sup>2</sup> In today's tribal world, the story of Jesus competes with the stories of all the other tribes. This creates an incongruency in many Christians, where we are seeking to trust many stories. This impoverishes our creeds and deeds and makes it necessary once again to "curate the tradition" as Issacharians<sup>3</sup> and reacquaint those who profess to follow Jesus in the Story of Jesus and demonstrate what following him is really all about.
4. **Spiritual deficit.** All these deficits have created a formation deficit in that so many have forgotten that to be spiritual is impossible apart from the Holy Spirit, and to be spiritual, again as Len Sweet says, "is to be human"<sup>4</sup> (from a Christian perspective). This doctoral project has as one of its goals a re-forming of spirituality in relation to being and becoming human.
5. **Christological deficit.** I found that in inviting the congregation to be faithful to Jesus, they often claimed a "Biblical Worldview" in defense of their hatred, their embracing of conspiratorial thinking, and their utter delight in "us versus them" thinking that justified so much that is not Christlike. It has become apparent that a "Biblical Worldview" is dependent on who is reading the Bible and how they are interpreting it. In this project, I intend to offer an alternative: A Christ-centered, cross-shaped worldview which is the only way in which loving God and loving our neighbor is possible. Loving our neighbor as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18; Deut. 6:4-5) is paramount in the mind of Jesus and a Christ-centered, cross-shaped, worldview (Mark 12:28-34). Luke speaks of a scribe who raised the question for Jesus as to who his neighbor was that God expected him to love. Jesus proceeded to tell the parable of "The Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-37). Note well, there is no "Good Samaritan"<sup>5</sup> to a

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Sweet, "Semiotics, Church and Culture Advance, Day 5," DMIN 709, Semiotics, Church, and Culture (Class Zoom Lecture, George Fox University, Newberg, OR, September 11, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Sweet, "Semiotics, Church and Culture Zoom Discussion," DMIN 719, Semiotics, Church and Culture (Class Zoom Lecture, George Fox University, Newberg, OR, March 19, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Sweet, "Semiotics, Church and Culture Zoom Discussion," DMIN 709, Semiotics, Church, and Culture (Class Zoom Lecture, George Fox University, Newberg, OR, October 12, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Samaritans were the presumed descendants of the Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (main components of the northern kingdom of Israel), with some admixture over the centuries of non-Israelite groups from the Assyrian and Hellenistic empires. This ethnic approach, more than the geographic one, has the virtue of clarifying matters for the situation we find in the 1st century A.D. For, by the 1st century, the region of Samaria was inhabited by a number of different ethnic groups, the

Second Temple Jewish person, as they are considered a mixed breed and “Jews have no dealing with Samaritans”. John’s Gospel in 4:9 inserts this parenthetical expression intentionally to the Johannine community.

To sum up these deficits I perceived to be evident in the congregation I formerly pastored; In my estimation, and in agreement with the thrust of this project, they didn’t know God as well as they thought. For example, I do not believe they knew how little they knew of the “others”, either Christian or non-Christian, that didn’t fit within their tribal paradigm. On occasion they seemed to hate the “others,” let alone attempt to love them. Based on these observations, one could surmise they didn’t really experientially know and live the Story of Jesus. Seemingly, they didn’t know that to be spiritual requires allowing the Holy Spirit to make us more and more human by way of the Cross. They appeared to believe their “Biblical Worldview” was indeed inspired because of the way they read and interpreted the Bible, even while they appeared to marginalize the centrality of Christ, the Cross, and what it means to be human.

In 1970, Alvin Toffler made the statement that “by instructing students how to learn, unlearn, and relearn, a powerful new dimension can be added to education.” He would go on to add this insight quoted from Herbert Gerjuoy that “ ‘Tomorrow’s illiterate will not be the man who cannot read, of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who can’t read, he will be the man who has not learned how to learn.’ ”<sup>6</sup>

It became increasingly evident to me in my brief tenure with that congregation that they were spiritually illiterate in relation to the actual call of Jesus and how they refused to learn, unlearn, and relearn the story of Jesus and what it means to follow him. Given that painful epiphany I endured, I was left with three questions:

1. What needs to be un-learned if we are to become the Jesus Tribe?
2. What needs to be re-learned as the Jesus Tribe?
3. What needs to be newly learned in the Jesus Tribe?

This project is a hopeful attempt to address as clearly as possible these deficits, the questions they raise, and to present a path forward that can bring needed correctives to the Christian Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and perhaps beyond.

The project is rooted in the creation of a website that will be the locus for the formation of Jesus Tribe spaces that can become communities regionally, nationally, and globally. The concepts came as a result of discovering that I found myself as an outsider to the tribal loyalties present in that local

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exact percentages of which are not known. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew, Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Volume Three, Companions and Competitors* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 533-534.

<sup>6</sup> Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 414.

church I felt called away from prior to its demise. As I began to attempt to address these issues in that local congregation, it became increasingly evident there were many deficits that required unlearning, relearning, and new learning, as Toffler espoused. This became obvious to me once I began to address these issues pastorally as the overseer of a congregation that claimed loyalty to Jesus.

Semiotically, I had to go “outside the camp” to identity with Jesus in this project and suffer what has been essential in the formation of a cross-shaped pathway forward with my project (Hebrews 13:7-16). The writer to the Hebrews in that passage talks about continually offering a “sacrifice of praise to God”.<sup>7</sup> I have learned that even talking about the Jesus Tribe, however reverent my words, requires experiencing sacrificial anguish when the consequences of those words made me an outsider. It ought not to be surprising, as Jesus himself was crucified as an outsider in order to create a new company of true insiders. Toward that end, I trust this project will serve its intended purpose.

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<sup>7</sup> Heb. 13:15 (NIV).

# Doctoral Project



# Presentation of Project

## Introduction

When we began our doctoral journey with Dr. Leonard Sweet, he compared us to the tribe of Issachar “those who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.”<sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup> As a pastoral practitioner, my concerns are related to the practical wisdom necessary for leaders and followers alike to be able to discern how we navigate the waters of tribalism<sup>10</sup> in the current culture and how that will impact the future. For that reason, I have developed a website project that will focus on two primary domains: 1) understanding the times- the theory and ideas of current tribalism and 2) know what the Church ought to do- practices to help Christians re-orient themselves in the tribe of Jesus.

The utilitarian nature of the website makes it possible for readers to move easily from one section to another and begin a certain practice while seeking further understanding. At the same time, the reader can consider those parts that are most relevant to them at any given time. The flexibility that a website provides offers the opportunity to provide access to *YouTube* and other streaming platforms, brief posts on *Facebook*, *Instagram* or *Twitter*, and various other social platforms where tribes indeed gather and interact. Website interactivity will also allow spotlights on those areas many will need to unlearn, relearn, and learn anew. In those spaces it will be possible to walk with other church leaders and clergy in other geographies as they seek to implement and learn what I have presented here. As will become clear, those who aim to participate in the Jesus Tribe need others in order to journey well, so one goal is to help build those bonds.

This showcase is the full text of some of the blog posts that will be on the site, and the full text of some of the suggested church practices and rhythms that will be on the website. Each of these is designed to address one or many of the key deficits that mark the current tribalism found in many churches. It will also contain outlines of the remainder. The website will be in tab form which will allow an easier visual journey. In order to showcase this, I have created a sample website using my own copy and stock images from *godaddy.com*. This is only representative, as I will be utilizing a web-designer in winter of 2023 to fully build this according to this vision.

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Chron. 12:32 (NRSV).

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Sweet, “Semiotics, Church and Culture Advance, Day 4,” DMIN 709, Semiotics, Church, and Culture (Class Zoom Lecture, George Fox University, Newberg, OR, September 10, 2020).

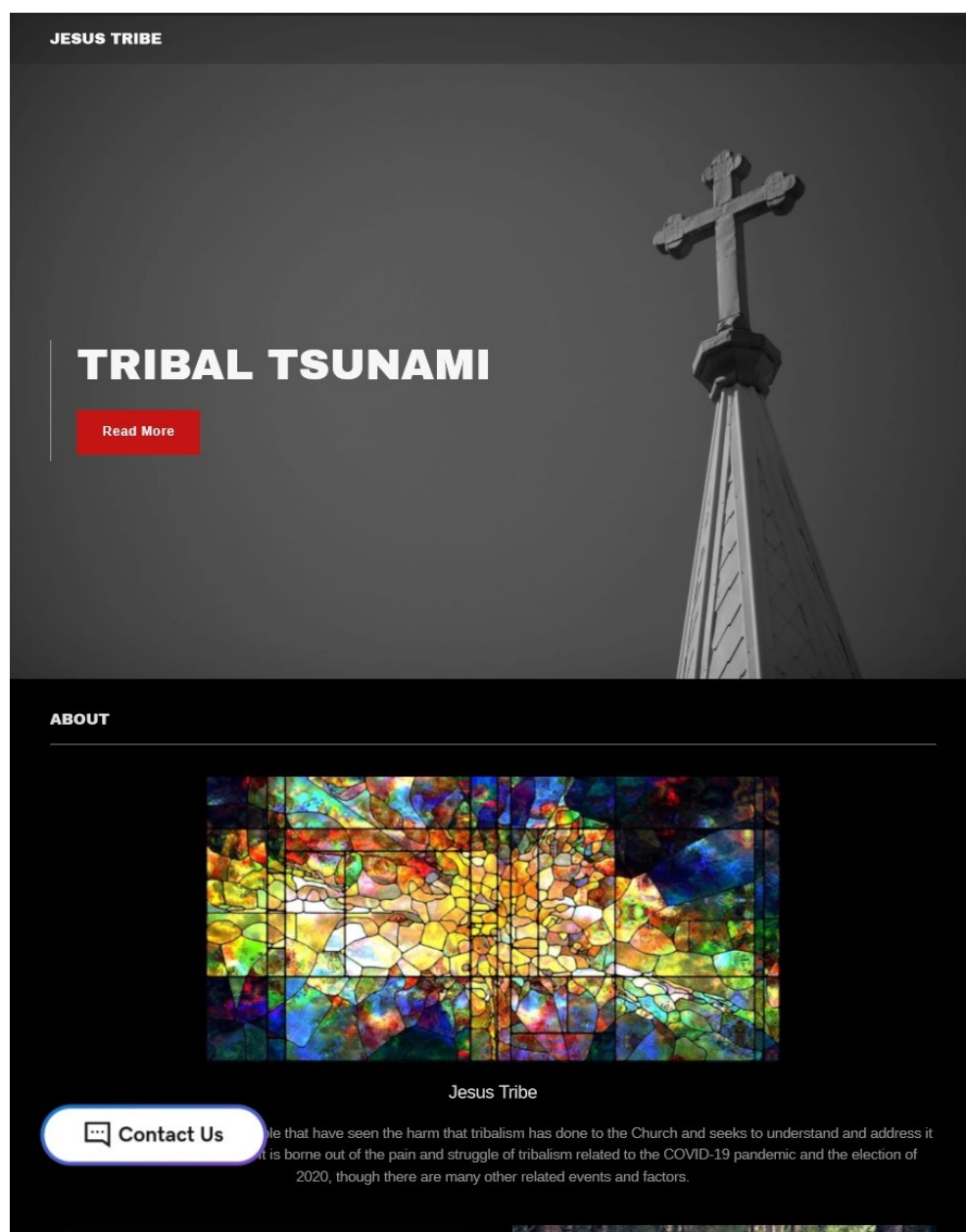
<sup>10</sup> Oxford Languages defines this as “the state or fact of being organized in a tribe or tribes.” Much of this work details the unique tribes of the twenty-first century and their unique organization, which as a result of those unique traits have presented a novel struggle for the Christian church. Oxford English Dictionary, ‘Tribalism’. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2014. <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>

Following, then, is the order of presentation: first, some screenshots of a mockup website that demonstrate what the look and feel of the overall project could look like. This provides an ultra-wide view of the project in order to understand it from the widest view possible. Second, there is a more comprehensive outline indicating which sections correspond and discuss which ideas. These represent the various tabs of the website. I have included a visual graphic to assist in demonstrating that layout at the beginning of that section. Third, I have included some samples of extended writing for the blog posts and full text of some of the practices I suggest for churches and their leadership. Throughout the blog sections, specific exercises lead engaged church leaders unlearn, relearn, and learn anew to recognize the five key deficits argued in this work: theological deficit, anthropological deficit, spiritual deficit, narrative deficit, and Christological deficit.

### Website Example Screenshots

The following images are screenshots representing the proposed appearance of the Jesus Tribe website. These are simply made from stock images and stock web design from the *godaddy.com* website builder. Following soon after completion and acceptance of this Doctoral Project, a professional web designer will curate the actual website, based on this presentation of the vision.

The reader will note the very small print appearing in the sample screen shots on the following pages. Please note that the actual copy appears, beginning on page 19, better facilitating comprehension of ideas communicated.



**FIGURE 1: SPLASH PAGE AND HOME PAGE OF JESUS-TRIBE.COM<sup>11</sup>**

<sup>11</sup> Ben Stevens, "Church Steeple and Cross," Photo, Getty Images/iStockphoto, Accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/church-steeple-and-cross-gm162660711-23222197>.

Andrew Ags, "Metaphorical Stained Glass," Photo, Getty Images/iStockphoto, Accessed January 15, 2023, <https://depositphotos.com/113809360/stock-photo-metaphorical-stained-glass.html>.

**JESUS TRIBE**

**TRIBAL TSUNAMI**

### The Slow Storm

The year 2020 opened, as years often do, with some optimism and hope. Maybe there was no good reason for it, but we humans can be stubborn at times, and New Years is a time for optimism.


Many of us had heard of a new respiratory virus going around China, but only whispers and internet rumors. A photo here or story there, but this was 2020, it could easily have been deepfakes. None of us knew what to expect. In addition, we were familiar with pandemics that weren't SARs, Swine flu, Ebola, all seemed threatening, very few affected us on a large scale in the United States.

I had cause for optimism as well. I was going to be starting my second year in a pastorate, and anyone who has belonged to a church or served in a church knows that the first year is often mostly making acquaintances. We had a really solid leadership team, we had a good facility, and we had a good plan to move from a diminishing community church back to a thriving multi-generational and hopefully multi-ethnic church. We had built trust and we were seeing new faces.

Just a few short months later, as spring was beginning to sprung, I was getting more concerned with the virus being in the United States. Leadership was downplaying it, but that's pretty standard. I was uneasy.

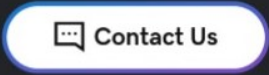
Then I remember clearly, Facebook friends of mine were at the Oklahoma City Thunder and Utah Jazz game. The players were preparing to take the court... and then they weren't. Rudy Gobert made some dumb jokes, which I know he has regretted immensely since, and suddenly the NBA was off. No more games for awhile.

Then the governor in Ohio, where I was serving, announced a series of steps to mitigate the virus. Then suddenly our church needed to go from meeting like regular, to telling our people to stay home and watch on our newly created livestream.



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Tribal Tsunami   Works Cited and Consulted



**FIGURE 2: TRIBAL TSUNAMI INTRODUCTION TO JESUS-TRIBE.COM<sup>12</sup>**

<sup>12</sup> Zacarias Da Mata, "Windy Coast," Photo, Getty Images/iStockphoto. Accessed January 15, 2023, <https://stock.adobe.com/images/windy-coast/48699362>.

JESUS TRIBE

PENTECOST

God's Plan for the Church

They were together in one place. Waiting. Jesus told them to wait, so they waited. I imagine in some ways it was a bit like those old cartoons or westerns. The hero says "wait here for my signal." The rest of the group says, "Ok, but what's your signal?" "Oh, you'll know!" And the hero winks and walks out.

Jesus though, looking at his followers who had just endured the trauma of watching him endure capital punishment, said "wait, you'll know when it's time." And then HE ROSE INTO THE AIR. Gone.

I mean, ok Jesus, that's pretty cool and all. But if you can do that, you also have to know that those guys that killed you are still out there! And should we feel safe?!

I imagine some being worried, some being laid back, and then some being Peter, whatever he was. I think the thing they would have definitely had in common was a deep sense of confusion. We gave three years to this guy, and now we wait. And we're just supposed to know it when we see it? What if we miss it?

They did not. They could not. Acts tells us a great wind hit the house, and tongues of fire rested on them. Hard to miss. and they knew just what words to say and how to say them. And they somehow had an auto-translator in that fire-tongue!

I think one problem that presents itself in the way we read and understand the story of Pentecost is that we are utilitarian to a fault. We often conceive of this as a story of utility. God needed to share the message, the best way to do that was simply have some great preachers instantly translated into the native tongues.

Another problem with the way we read this is that we take it out of the grand narrative of scripture. Scripture isn't 66 books or even 31,000 verses, though it is also that. Scripture is the story of God and humanity, the story of home and belonging, the story of the fall and the resurrection. The story of old creation and new.

And in old creation we have the story of Babel, in which the obstinate humans had their language confused and their unity fractured. Pentecost is, in many ways, God reversing and undoing the problems his people had made.

In the story of Babel, God confused the language of the people, scattering them to the ends of the earth. In the story of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit transcended the confused language and gathered those who had been scattered (diaspora) under a new hope.

OUTLINE:

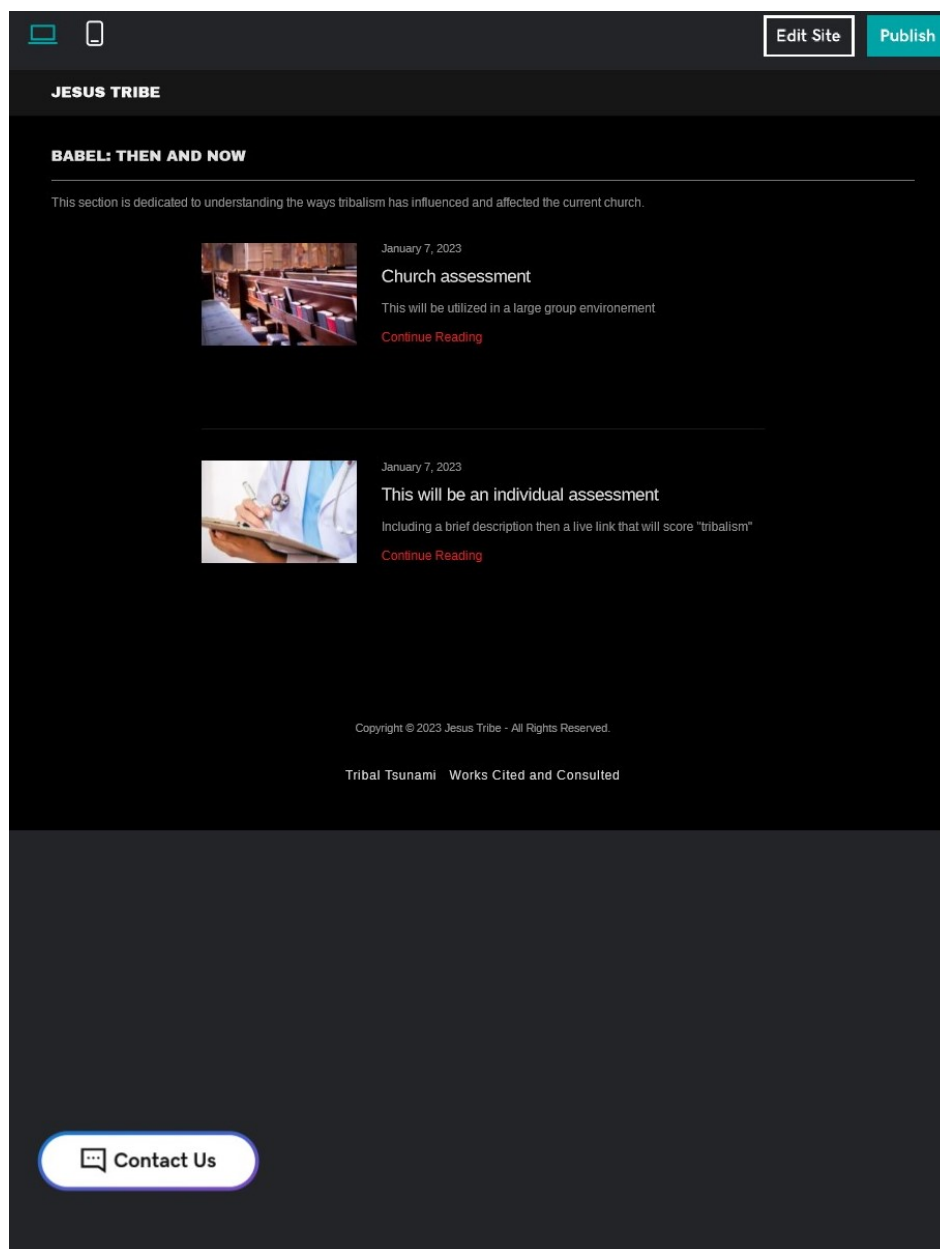
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**FIGURE 3: PENTECOST BLOG POST**<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Carolos Caetano, "Live coals burning in barbeque," Photo, Getty Images/iStockphoto,



**FIGURE 4: BABEL THEN AND NOW ASSESSMENTS<sup>14</sup>**


accessed January 15, 2023, <https://depositphotos.com/53180389/stock-photo-live-coals-burning-in-barbecue.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Henson, "Church Pews," Photo, Getty Images/iStockphoto, accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/church-pews-gm512522627-46947672>.


PS Photograph, "Doctor Writing," Photo, Getty Images/iStockphoto, accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/male-doctor-writing-on-medical-document-gm457044123-30535580>.

JESUS TRIBE


RETURN TO THE TABLE

All on the Table



This is a strategy for gathering groups and discussing the current events that threaten dissolution.

Lenten Devotional



This is a devotional meant to be done during the Lenten season.

Venn Values



This is a workshop to be done in a smaller group setting, discussing the shared values of the tribes of the people present.

Sermon Series


This is a suggested lectionary calendar to address tribalism in the church worship setting.

Community Assessment


This is a suggested assessment for the community to work through together, either in a worship setting or in other large group meetings.

Personal Assessment


This is a suggested personal assessment that will score an individual's "tribalism" in a way they can understand it.

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Tribal Tsunami Works Cited and Consulted

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**FIGURE 5: RETURN TO THE TABLE- PRACTICAL RESOURCES FOR CHURCHES**<sup>15</sup>



## Jesus Tribe: Website Outline

Table 1 is a visual representation of the layout. Each bold section represents a top-level tab on the website, with each subsection being a tab in the drop-down menu below that, allowing for easy navigation between topics and ideas.

**TABLE 1: BASIC TAB LAYOUT OF JESUS-TRIBE.COM**

<b>Introduction: Tribal Tsunami</b>	<b>Section 1: Pentecost to Eternity</b>	<b>Section 2: Babel and the Here and Now</b>	<b>Section 3: The Table of Jesus</b>
Tribal Tsunami	1.1: Pentecost and Eternity	2.1: Babel Then	3.1: The Practices of Jesus
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<sup>15</sup> Mino Andriani, "Breads on Background," Photo, Getty Images/iStockPhoto, Accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/different-bread-and-bread-slices-gm477767196-66903929?phrase=breads>.

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## Jesus Tribe

### Introduction: Tribal Tsunami

- Churches have been overcome by tribal wars in recent years, especially in the COVID era and the election of 2020.
- This has resulted in burnout in pastors and division in churches.
- This blog and website attempt to look at causes, and some suggested strategies, for dealing with this.
- This is limited to the US American church, and my personal expertise is limited to Biblical interpretation, theology, and church history. I will discuss sociology, psychology, and politics, but none of those with the depth of a full expert.
- The purpose is to help and equip pastors and church leaders see and begin working on this issue.
- This section will address the five key deficits that have been identified through this research.
- End this section with a brief discussion of the term "tribe" and the current conversation about whether it is an inherently pejorative and colonialist term or if it can still be used in a respectful manner.

### Section 1: Pentecost to Eternity

The goal in this section is to tell the Pentecost story, and then show what God's ultimate future is meant to look like. The goal of the church was to be Missional, Relational, and Incarnational (from Len Sweet *So Beautiful* book). There are malfunctions in each of those which will be examined in the Babel section.

Meta-theme: Home and identity. Pentecost marks God making his home in and with us, which should remake our identity.

#### 1.1- Pentecost and Eternity

- Pentecost began a diverse movement of God. Revelation 7.9 shows that eternity continues with representatives of every tribe tongue and nation.
- Pentecost unified a diverse movement. Revelation reveals an ultimate unity in one city.
- Pentecost sends the Holy Spirit among us. Revelation ends with Yahweh dwelling among his people.
- This is an aspect of addressing the theological deficit and anthropological deficit.

### 1.2- Jesus the Great High Priest

- His Relational posture to us is also meant to be *our* relational posture to the world.

### 1.3- Jesus the Sender and the Sent

- His Missional goal from God is also meant to be *our* goal to the rest of the world.

### 1.4- Jesus our home and family

- His Incarnation (the Word moved into the neighborhood- John 1 from the Message) is now *our* place in the world.
- Incarnation means we share language. Does not necessarily mean our language is identical or homogeneous, as Pentecost makes them understand and Revelation indicates *every* tongue not a *single* tongue.

### 1.5- Between Pentecost and Eternity

- Section wrap up

## Section 2: Babel and the Here and Now

The goal in this section is to backtrack to Babel, demonstrate what the big problem with it is, and then how we have also embraced that today. Much of this section will deconstruct and diagnose potential sources of the primary deficits: theological, anthropological, narrative, Christological, and spiritual.

Meta-theme: Babel was people trying to reject God's sending them to make the whole earth their home, and instead insisting that home was where they were completely safe and identity fully expressed.

2.1 Babel Then: Start by explaining Babel and the story itself. We see from this that fear of losing their identity and comfort motivated the people to build their tower. This was a rejection of God's task and identity for them.

2.2 Memes, media, and myths: This is about the walls of Babel. Start with memes, language, signs. This is the tower itself, protecting us and insulating us from outside views or challenges.

- Memes*: The language of our Babels
- Media*: The voices that hold our Babels together
- Myths*: The stories that become memes that are told by our media that shape our Babels
- The major malfunction here is the "Incarnational" part of our MRI identity, we are unable to exist in our world because we are walled off. The deficit is narrative and anthropological.

2.2 "This is us": The walls protect us as we are from outside interference, but they often also define us. The first and largest manifestation of this is in the homogeneous unit principle. Popularized by Rick Warren, but it has almost always existed in the way the church has operated.

- a. These were once completely based on geography, and while people are sorting that way still, the internet allows much more sorting to occur along tribal lines.
- b. Racial, political, denominational Babels
- c. This has undermined the "Relational" side of MRI. This deficit is anthropological and spiritual.

2.3 "Or else we will be scattered": This is about fear and identity, fear of losing identity if we allow outsiders. Homogeneous unit is reinforced by fear.

- a. The major malfunction here is the "Missional" part.
- b. Leadership fear losing their position if they are scattered.
- c. Human identity is inherently wrapped up in other human beings, we cannot deny or avoid this "ubuntu".
- d. This undermined the "Missional" side of MRI. This deficit is theological, narrative, and Christological.

### **Section 3: The Table of Jesus**

The goal in this section is to help people consider the methods of Jesus and how we can seek to emulate and imitate them as we seek to build more robust manifestations of the Jesus Tribe. Within this section we will consider the ways Jesus helped his followers to un-learn, re-learn, and learn all new what it meant to be and to belong to his unique family, the Jesus Tribe.

Meta-theme: Jesus invites all the outcasts to find their home with him. We do not get that home via our fitting in or our conforming, but simply by invitation of the host. Since he first calls us away, we can voluntarily become exiles in order to find our home with him.

3.1 The Practices of Jesus: The goal of this section is to show that the practices of Jesus were meant to build a new kind of tribe, and that his methods ought to also inform our methods today.

- Jesus started with a call away. Leave your family and home and come follow.
- Jesus often next went to the table. We ought to also give the table prominent place.
- Jesus gathered his followers, and then scattered them. And repeat. They were not called to simply gather permanently.
- Jesus taught that whoever does the will of the father is his family.
- Jesus taught his followers that it wasn't their job to sort the weeds and wheat.

### 3.2 Methods and Means: Would his methods be our methods?

This will include some practical steps church leaders and pastors can use to try to raise awareness and help people deal with tribalism, modeled on the practices of Jesus. This leads from addressing the Christological deficit, embracing that theological perspective helps Christians unlearn, relearn, and learn anew the practices of Jesus. The assessments will guide Christians on an introspective journey to discover the incongruencies of their own faith and practice. Communal practices will help the process of unlearning, relearning, and learning anew within Christian community.

#### 3.2.1 Assessments:

- Venn Values Workshop:
  - Take time to have people identify the top 3-5 “tribes” they belong to and the values of those. This is a project best done in a group, so people can help refine the lists of values and where they overlap.
- Personal Time Inventory:
  - This will be done on a personal level. Essentially people will add up the hours they spend in a typical week participating in church activities, then compare to the hours they spend listening to podcasts, watching news, sharing memes, that reinforce their other tribal loyalties.
- Whole Church Inventory:
  - This will be a very brief questionnaire that pastors or church leaders can utilize in a large church gathering that can give some very basic understanding of their communities’ tribal loyalties.

#### 3.2.2 Communal Practice:

- All on the Table:
  - A detailed strategy for helping people dive deeper into discussion, with a meal and Communion at the end.
- A Lent Lectionary:
  - A series of suggested passages and sermon topics to help guide a church into consideration of this during the Lenten season.
- A Group Discussion Curriculum:
  - A 10-week group question format for small groups to have conversations around their particular loyalties and how they can often get mixed up and confused.

#### 3.2.3 Individual Practice:

- A Lenten Devotional:

- A 40-day personal devotional meant to help guide Christians into consideration of their own personal loyalties.

## Jesus Tribe: Website Copy

The following are sections of fuller copy of tabs and blog areas of the website, as outlined above. The samples are from sections *Tribal Tsunami*, Tab 2.2 *The Walls of Babel*, Tab 3.2.1 *Venn Diagram Exercise*, Tab 3.2.2 *All on the Table*, and Tab 3.2.3 *A Lenten Devotional*. *The Walls of Babel* section will primarily help address the theological deficit and anthropological deficit, though it will also touch on the others. *The Venn Diagram Exercise* will help address the anthropological deficit and narrative deficit by helping Christians confront their own values and stories in a safe community setting. *All on the Table* is a practice designed to help Christians mutually address their theological deficit and their anthropological deficit, but because it is flexible can be intentionally utilized to help address the spiritual deficit, narrative deficit, and Christological deficit. And finally *A Lenten Devotional* will help address the narrative deficit and the Christological deficit by inviting participants into a personal reflection space designed to focus and discipline their mind in the Lenten season.

### TRIBAL TSUNAMI

The year 2020 opened, as years often do, with some optimism and hope. Maybe there was no good reason for it, but we humans can be stubborn at times, and the New Year is always a time for optimism.

Many of us had heard of a new respiratory virus going around China, but only whispers and internet rumors. A photo here or story there, but as this was 2020, it could easily have been deepfakes. None of us knew what to expect. In addition, we were familiar with pandemics that weren't: SARs, Swine flu, Ebola, all seemed threatening, very few affected us on a large scale in the United States.

I had cause for optimism as well. I was going to be starting my second year in a pastorate, and anyone who has belonged to a church or served in a church knows that the first year is often mostly making acquaintances. We had a solid leadership team, we had a good facility, and we had a good plan to move from a diminishing community church back to a thriving multi-generational and hopefully multi-ethnic church. We had built trust and we were seeing new faces.

Just a few short months later, as spring was beginning to spring, I was getting more concerned with the virus being in the United States. National leadership was downplaying it, but that's pretty standard. I was uneasy.

Then I remember clearly that March, Facebook friends of mine were at the Oklahoma City Thunder and Utah Jazz game. The players were preparing to take the court... and then they weren't. Rudy Gobert made some dumb jokes, which I know he has since regretted immensely, and suddenly the entire NBA was off. No more games for a while.

The governor in Ohio, where I was pastoring at the time, announced a series of steps to mitigate the virus. Then suddenly our church needed to go from meeting as usual, to telling our people to stay home and watch on our newly created livestream.

Over the following weeks and months, the Tribal Tremors began to swell, eventually building to a full Tribal Tsunami that would threaten relationships, churches, even the electoral integrity of the United States itself. Church leaders found themselves asking how we got here, and just as importantly, what we can do about it.

## **TAB 2.2: THE WALLS OF BABEL- MEMES, MEDIA, AND MYTHS**

One of the interesting things that has come from recent years in politics is the way that words themselves can quickly take on an entire freight train's worth of meaning. Words have always been multivalent, but the power and speed with which words have lost meaning and been given new, deep emotional meaning seems like a new phenomenon.

The word "wall" was just a normal, descriptive noun until around April of 2014.<sup>16</sup> At that time, Donald Trump was testing the waters for a second presidential run (his first officially in 2000, though he had talked some publicly in other years) at a conservative event in New Hampshire called the "Freedom Summit." He mentioned there that we could build an unclimbable fence to ensure our southern border was secure. The idea morphed into a wall by the time he officially announced his candidacy a little over a year later, where he also promised to make Mexico pay for it.

The Washington Post has detailed more than 200 times that candidate Trump would mention the wall during his 2015 and 2016 campaign.<sup>17</sup> The word "wall" means: "a continuous vertical brick or stone structure that encloses or divides an area of land" as a noun or "enclose (an area) within walls, especially to protect it or lend it some privacy" as a verb, according to Oxford Languages.<sup>18</sup>

But according to the unfolding campaign, the internet culture that boomed around it, and the now residual emotional investment in the word, "wall" became so much more than those simple definitions. If you were a Trumpist, then wall represented safety and security. It represented power and it represented someone standing up and making a difference. It wasn't simply about that wall,

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<sup>16</sup> Mia Jankowicz, "A Timeline of Unfulfilled Promises Trump Made," *Business Insider*, September 6, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/timeline-of-president-trumps-unfulfilled-border-wall-promises-2020-9>.

<sup>17</sup> Salvador Rizo, "Fact Checking President Trump's Oval Office Address on Immigration," *Washington Post*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/01/09/fact-checking-president-trumps-oval-office-address-immigration>.

<sup>18</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 'Wall' *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2014, <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>.

it was about a simple, clear-cut idea of restoring the order of things. Boundaries, after all, are healthy and important things.

If you were a never-Trumper, then the wall represented xenophobia and fearmongering. It represented a meme word that tried to boil down a complex topic into a half-baked solution. It was about inciting fear and anger, and it would, of course, never work and Mexico would never pay for it.

Words are just words. But they are also much more. Words represent complex thought. The more words we can string together describing something, the more likely we are to both understand and agree about the definition of that thing. The fewer words we use, the more likely there is to be some misunderstanding or incongruity between what one says and the other understands.

And the word “wall” may never again be simply a word that describes borders or barriers. The word itself became a wall that divided the hearers into camps and helped them to categorize and, they believed, understand their friends, family, and neighbors.

So, now, more than 8 years after he first pitched the idea, the word “wall” could have a whole book about it. And, agree or disagree with the ideas behind it, the PR idea really did do exactly what Roger Stone and others hoped it would: helped elect Donald Trump in the 2016 election.

### ***The Walls of Babel***

Though I’ve studied theology, church history, and then by extension world/American history for most of my life, I still must confess that I know a good deal about history from the Civilization video games created by Fireaxis and Sid Meier. In that game the Walls of Babylon are very helpful defensive tools.

Now the biblical story of Babel does not mention walls, but we do know that many ancient cities built walls. And the walls of Babylon were particularly famous. First built by Hammurabi, then later expanded and fortified by Nebuchadnezzar II, these walls were the gold standard of walls everywhere.<sup>19</sup> And, beyond that, for a tower to be a tower, the tower must have walls of some sort. So, even if it was just a simple tower, there were walls to separate the outside from the inside.

The walls protected the city and also gave the city identity. The people inside knew they were inside, and those outside likewise knew their position. The walls acted as security, safety, and identity markers. Groups of people in cities or towers might have physical walls to mark their identity, but almost more importantly they have metaphorical and abstract walls that mark insiders and outsiders.

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<sup>19</sup> History.com editors, “Babylon,” *history.com*, February 2, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-middle-east/babylon>.

If we conceive of our modern tribes as current towers of Babel, then in the case of our current towers we can see *memes, myths, and media* become the walls of our tribes. They keep the good guys in and the bad guys out, and they make it obvious who is who. The walls are interlocking and often reinforcing of one another. Or, another way to understand it is, the memes/words are the bricks of the walls, the media is the mortar that keeps them together, and the myths are the overall shape and structure of the walls.

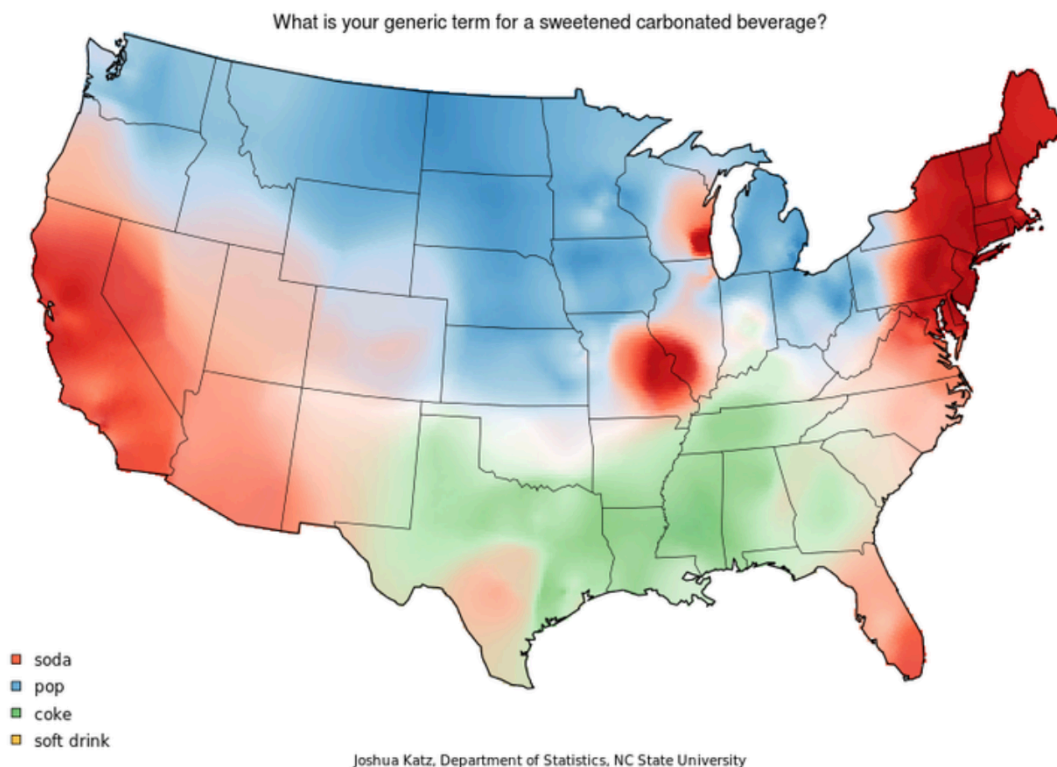
### *Memes and Orthocabulary*

In a tower or a walled city, the walls give shape to the boundaries, define who is inside and who is outside, and protect those inside from invasion or other harm. The first layer of walls that surround and protect each of our tribal towers is the wall of language, the wall of shibboleths, or the wall of memes. On first glance, memes and language may seem like very different types of distinguishers. But as we consider them, I believe we will see that they reinforce one another and provide the first type of boundary marker in our current tribal identities.

Depending on where you're from, you likely have a different name for the carbonated sugar beverage that many of us drink thirty-two ounces at a time. In US culture, my home state of Oklahoma is a bit of a crossroads. We don't usually identify as Midwest, but we don't really like getting lumped in with Texas either. This shows up in the heat map of what people call the sugar water. There are three main different terms people in the US use: soda, pop, and coke.

I have to confess; I can be a bit pedantic as a person. So, calling everything coke is *slightly* troubling for me. But in many places that is the generic name for the bubbly syrup. In much of Texas and the southeast of the United States, they call it coke. Most of the north plains and Midwest use the term *pop*, while the coasts seem to predominantly use the term *soda*.





**FIGURE 6: SODA, POP, AND COKE IN THE USA<sup>20</sup>**

And here is one funny feature about language: you can mark yourself as part of the tribe of the SEC or the Big10 in college football, simply by the term you use for the diabetes drink. Two very unrelated identity markers, but by using *coke* for a generic soda at the Big House in Michigan, you would mark yourself as an outsider to Midwest country.

Now if you're wearing white at the white out at Penn State, they will accept you into the tribe even if you use the wrong term for soda. The reason is that looking like you belong is a more important identity marker than one word about one particular kind of drink. However, in other situations and circumstances you may be viewed with suspicion if you do not conform to the correct tribal terminology.

Imagine for a minute though, that you show up to a football game in the south. *South* south, not fake south. You're deep in Alabama or Mississippi. Football is religion and that religion is life. And then you are asked at the gates what you might call the sweet nectar with bubbles in it? The person asking has a gun, and you're surrounded by folks with a gun? Are you in danger? Of course not, everyone with guns laughs... but you really need to get this right.

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<sup>20</sup> Tracey Peake, "You Say Tomato, I Say Soda. Or is it Pop?" *NC State News*, June 4, 2013, <https://news.ncsu.edu/2013/06/you-say-tomato-i-say-soda-or-is-it-pop/>.

Obviously, that's an absurd situation that would never happen at a football game. But something similar happened in the book of Judges. Anytime anyone tells me that history is inevitably getting worse, and people are getting more sinful, I ask when the last time they read Judges. Judges is full of surprises, and one story that can escape notice is in Judges chapter 12.

To summarize, there was a battle between Gilead and Ephraim, and Gilead won. After the battle, Gilead was finishing the job, but some Ephraimites and Gileadites were crossing a ford at the same time. Now the guards and soldiers could not tell just by looking who belonged to which army, so they devised a simple password system. One of the terms for an ear of grain in Hebrew was "shibboleth." However, there were regional differences in pronunciation. Those from Gilead were able to make the "sh" sound, but those from Ephraim used a hard "s" in the word instead.

After nearly drowning, these men emerged from the ford and they were asked "hey, what do you call that bubbly syrup water?" er, "how do you say the name of that food we all like?" by armed soldiers. No pressure, and those dead people over there don't have anything to do with this question.

This introduced the concept of a "shibboleth" in scripture, though of course that has been an unwritten understanding forever. Pretty quickly when someone starts talking, we can tell if they are "from around here" or not.

Today there is a very similar situation to the one with Ephraim and Gilead, except instead of trying to determine who we are literally at war with, we are trying to determine who is on our side and who is not. Who is part of our extended tribal family and who is not.

An additional layer of complication in today's world is the reality that most of us exist in and belong to many different tribes at the same time. So sometimes our language must adjust based on which tribe we are currently with. This is most distinct and obvious with children who speak one language at home but another at school, and the ability to shift language or dialects between groups is often called "code switching," a term coined by linguist Einar Haugen<sup>21</sup>

Code switching is not just something that occurs with different languages or language groups, it can also happen with different groups that speak the same language. This happens with different dialects or social groups. It also happens in a very simple way when many Christians use profane language in one context, then "clean it up" when they are participating in a church activity.

And instead of using the pronunciation of particular words, we use phrases, memes, jargon, and other language cues to mark ourselves as "insiders" or "outsiders" to particular tribes. We use

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<sup>21</sup> Susan Hutton, "The Burden of Code-Switching," *LSA Magazine*, June 23, 2022, <https://detroit.umich.edu/news-stories/the-burden-of-code-switching>.

shibboleths, but our shibboleths are much less simple than they were. Some of these are just lingo, and some represent what Edward Farley calls “deep symbols.”<sup>22</sup>

## **Memes**

Memes have had their definition memed. Usually when we think of memes today, we think of funny pictures with some sort of text overlaid. In this way, as “a picture is worth a thousand words” a meme can be worth an entire book. The meme carries with it all or many of the prior uses of the meme. In fact, one popular meme can be shared just via short tally marks in four different boxes. This is because the group has an internal knowledge and an agreed upon understanding of the meme itself. In other words, IYKYK.<sup>23</sup>

The term “meme” was coined by Richard Dawkins originally in *The Selfish Gene* and his usage was mainly that a meme was basically a viral idea, be it language or image or fashion, spread interpersonally.<sup>24</sup> But, as I mentioned, “meme” got memed. The internet took the word and added all kinds of freight to it, simultaneously increasing its usage while also corrupting it from Dawkins’ original intent. We could be upset, but that’s the way language has always functioned, sorry Mr. Dawkins.

So, the meme got memed, and interestingly has come back on the other side. Single words can be memes, looks or even a gif or emoji can be a meme now. Memes are largely images, and images in the 2020s are power. Groups in Christianity today use memes in very different ways, and the same meme will incite rage in one Christian while making another laugh. The reason is that memes are emotional shibboleths, things that reinforce prior beliefs by communicating to and from insiders.

One way we can think of it is that memes are one of the types of bricks we build in our language walls that separate our tribes in the 2020s.

## *Deep Symbols*

Edward Farley explores the concept of “deep symbols” in the book of the same name. Deep symbols are words that are more than words, what Farley calls “words of power.” Words of power are words that have been passed down, that have been used in tradition, and that provide some grounding for the community ideas and ideals. However, in recent years and due to the postmodern turn, our words of power are not in evidence in our communities. Farley states, “members of our churches typically spend their lives in massive, secularized institutions in which

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<sup>22</sup> Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 3.

<sup>23</sup> If You Know You Know, which you must not have or you would not have followed the footnote.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1978).

the words of power have all but disappeared.”<sup>25</sup> As a consequence of that, “With their words of power in atrophy, the religious groups will be more or less traditionless, citing the Bible, but not in such a way that real human interrelation is offered to its oncoming generations.”<sup>26</sup>

Essentially, as our deep symbols and words of power have lost their rooting in our communities, we have also become untethered. We have lost much of what has made us distinct. And in my view, this has led to seeking other symbols and words that will mark us instead. These new words often lack any deep roots and function much more as password shibboleths that we often do not evaluate their meaning.

### *Orthocabulary*

For many of us, we don’t really consider the question: why do we say it that way? Or why do we say it at all? Most of us just know that within our towers we share language and we share linguistic markers. We say “shibboleth” correctly when we need to come back inside, without asking why we started saying that to begin with. We go along to get along. This is just a normal part of life.

The consequence of that is that sometimes our church communities say certain things or write certain things that the vast majority of the people do not understand or consider in depth much. This is likely true of many of the doctrinal statements that exist at many churches in the US.

Because of the tribal nature of our churches, many times we are not concerned if everyone agrees exactly on certain definitions, we are only concerned that people sign the covenant and believe what it says, however they may happen to understand that.

In my opinion this has moved us away from being concerned with orthodoxy, which is the idea that people believe the correct things on what we consider essential, and moved us to an idea I call “orthocabulary” which means that as long as you use the “right” words, we will consider you an insider even if you don’t mean them.

For instance, if you mention we need a “spirit-filled” pastor, you are likely part of a charismatic or Pentecostal type church. If you say we need someone who brings the “inerrant word”, likely a more conservative type Baptist or non-denominational church. If you speak of justice, or if you mention a bishop, or the holy eucharist, these are all clues to your tribe.

Well, what do we mean when we say “spirit-filled”? Some mean speaking in tongues, others a thunderous preacher, others just a person that demonstrates the fruit of the spirit. What do we mean when we say, “inerrant word of God”? Well, some mean trustworthy, others mean the King James is literally from the hand of God.

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<sup>25</sup> Farley, *Deep Symbols*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Farley, *Deep Symbols*, 22.

We use these terms as memes, and they become an orthocabulary of shibboleths, and we stop worrying whether we actually agree because it is easier to avoid those difficult conversations, and will you please just call the carbonated sugar water "coke" so we can get into the football game?!

Likely some Ephraimites could actually produce the "sh" sound, and they might have slipped past the first wall. In order to help keep us safe from scattering and keep us us, we have two other walls that help define and refine our identities. Or two other components of the wall that give shape.

## **Media**

A second of the three Babylonian walls in our tribal world is the media we consume. Many can speak our language or meme our memes for some amount of time, but their true colors start to become in evidence in the way they interact or consume media. If we conceive of the memes of our tribes as the bricks in the walls, then we could consider the media of our tribes to be the mortar. It helps stick the memes/language together and make a sensible shape out of it all.

One of the superpowers of what it means to be human is our ability to create and collaborate in communities. Some will say that it's our large brains, others our use of tools, and still others will say it's that we're the best distance runners on the planet. Those are true, but I think you could find solid common ground among Christians, other theists, and atheists that what has made humans the top of the top of the food chain is our ability to work together.

Genesis 2 tells us that God said it's not good for the man to be alone. Humans have adapted and have incredibly demonstrative faces- whites our eyes show one another where we're looking, mouth shows our general mood, eyebrows show if we're Dwayne the Rock Johnson or not. Language allows us to quickly share information (though as discussed miscommunication can happen).

One of the great benefits of cooperation is that we are able to leverage the expertise and ability of one another for the benefit of all. This *should* be more and more beneficial as the human race has more knowledge now than ever before.

The counterpoint to this, however, is that if someone is not speaking our language, we can't leverage their expertise. If someone is speaking our language but they are not doing it the way our tribe does, we often *will not* leverage their expertise. Why not? Trust.

So theoretically our tribes should have local and trusted experts on a variety of things that help the community to thrive. Jed knows about agriculture, so you ask him why your pumpkins aren't growing. Jody knows about building structures, so you ask her expertise if you are seeking to expand your home. Since none of us can be experts in everything, it is incredibly helpful to have people in our tribe that are experts on each thing.

As technology has grown, so has our ability to expand our tribe. Now, those that speak our meme language get past our first defenses, and we see if they are part of our tribe or not. If so, then we invite them to speak to us more. Now, rather than needing to know personally a doctor or lawyer in

our tribe, we can access types of expertise via the media we consume. Essentially if a media personality or “expert” speaks the right shibboleths, we will invite that person to be a fixture of an expert in our life. And if we deem a news station trustworthy, then we will stick with them because we hate to change our previous decisions.

This has to do with the way we often make decisions and operate on a day-to-day basis. Safety is one of the primary drivers of what it means to be in a tribe. We’ll consider this more in depth in a later section. We gather to protect one another, and one of the ways we protect one another is through our expertise. Once we trust someone, we trust their expertise, and we ask fewer and fewer questions to validate their views and opinions. In other words, once they get past our first wall, we’re quite a bit less suspicious.

### *Entertainment, news, social media*

As we’ve already discussed, language not only helps us *express* our thinking it helps us *form* our thinking. And large batches of language or memes become media. The term media is just the plural of medium and a medium is just the word that describes the substance or material that does the communicating. A book is a medium of communication, sign language is a medium of communication, even facial expressions are mediums of communication.

As technology has developed, so has our media of communication. As our media has developed, so has our sphere of influence. Many of us have watched in near real time as Ukraine has fought against Russian aggression, through the media of smart phones and websites.

For the purposes of this conversation, I am considering three major sections of media that we as USAmericans normally consume: entertainment media, news media, and social media. We will talk about these in separate sections with the full understanding that while these may have been fully distinct types of media before, the lines are blurred between each. Most “news” is also packaged to be entertaining, often having comments from regular people. Most entertainment can be accused of having some sort of agenda, as people frequently do with the NFL or Disney. And social media is a jungle of confusion.

### Entertainment Media

One of the most exciting days for me as a young lad was the day my mom first brought home a cable box. One of the first things she had to do after it was set up was to block the Disney Channel (Southern Baptists were boycotting Disney) but after that there was much joy in my home. We had jumped from about seven channels we could get with an antenna to nearly one hundred on cable.

Entertainment has been an important part of the human experience probably since the first caveman drew comics on the wall to impress a cave girl. Each iteration and growth in the entertainment world seems accelerated from the last. First cave comics, then after language came storytelling. Then eventually story writing when writing was invented. Then a very long gap while we invented plays and then radio and then television and then color television! One significant blow to my dignity was when my kids recently asked if TV existed when I was their age.

Television started with just a few broadcast channels. Then grew to a few more. Then a few more. Then someone realized that people would pay good money each month for more channels, especially if they were free of advertising. Then someone realized people would still pay even with advertising.

In the days of radio, certain broadcasts became cultural lodestones and touchstones, pointing culture while also examining it. With an estimated 90% of US American families having radios by the end of the 1940s, radio made a giant nation much more of a village. Fittingly enough for this conversation, one of the very first radio broadcasts that demonstrated the ability of this new medium was in November of 1920, when a Pittsburgh radio station delivered presidential election results as they happened. During his presidential term, FDR utilized the nascent technology to broadcast addresses to the entire country in the 30s and 40s.<sup>27</sup>

But likely the entertainment event many of us think about when we consider the power of early radio is the spectacle of "War of the Worlds" broadcast on radio October 30 of 1938. That event is an interesting study of the power of media and also of the difficulty of people in switching between fact and fiction. It is easy to look back and laugh at the gullible folks in Newark that the New York Times later reported fled their homes with masks on, fearful of gas raids.<sup>28</sup> It is much more sobering to consider the way inaccurate or massively incomplete information sends people into similar frenzies today.

In those early days of radio, entertainment media was usually distinct from news media, and clearly demarcated as such. But also, due to a lack of other options, entertainment media helped shape the entire nation in a much more homogeneous way. There was one main thing on, and people talked about it the next day.

Television began to worm its way into the public eye in the late 1940s. Coming off World War II, the nation was starting to consume again. Largely television sales began around the New York City area because that was one of the only areas that had much of a television signal. So, it makes perfect sense that the 1947 World Series between the Yankees and (at that time) Brooklyn Dodgers was the first sporting event on live TV.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Farrell Evans, "8 Moments When Radio Helped Bring Americans Together," *history.com*, August 12, 2012, <https://www.history.com/news/most-famous-historic-radio-broadcasts>.

<sup>28</sup> George Dixon, "Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact," *New York Times*, October 31, 1938, <https://www.nytimes.com/1938/10/31/archives/radio-listeners-in-panic-taking-war-drama-as-fact-many-flee-homes.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Nick Vlk, "Television and the Passive Consumer," *The Automatic Life Style Final Project*, May 7, 2002, <https://www.cs.cornell.edu/~pjs54/Teaching/AutomaticLifestyle-S02/Projects/Vlk/history.html>.

In those early days, there were very few channels and very few programs. The channels would shut off at night. The cultural impact of the programs that did exist was significant. These entertainment events would be the talk of the offices and schools the next day.

Fast forward to the 2020s, and not only do we have constant, on-demand streaming of an endless array of libraries, many or even most of the things that have ever been broadcast are available online somewhere. This not only presents us with a dizzying array of choices, but it also changes the way we are entertained as a nation. We do not have the *one* story of the War of the Worlds that is shaping our conversations and our views, we have the many stories shaping our imagination and our views. Even if we just consider fantasy stories, right now there is the Witcher on Netflix, House of the Dragon on HBO, and the Rings of Power on Amazon. I've only watched one of the three, so can't speak to the quality. But this is where our divisions continue.

### **3.2.1: VENN VALUES WORKSHOP**

Begin by selecting the participants in the workshop. They should be people that have amiable relationships, but that are also comfortable in saying difficult things. An ideal group size would be 4-6 with one facilitator.

One person is selected to start, and that person lists out the various organizations, clubs, and loyalties he/she has. For example: the person is a member of the church, a member of the rotary club, a certain HOA, a fan of a certain football team, registered to vote with a certain party.

It is important to be as exhaustive as possible in this.

Then the person will identify which 4 or 5 "tribes" are the most important and which have shaped him/her the most.

The facilitator will then draw a Venn diagram in a way that each of the tribes can overlap with each of the others. Be creative in the shapes, doesn't need to be pretty.

Now the person that has started will begin with one tribe and describe the values of the tribe. The facilitator will seek whether those values overlap with other tribes. For example: a political party and a sports team both value "winning" so that would be in the section of overlap for those.

Do this for each person and with each of the "tribes" they belong to. Then spend time discussing any overlap the tribes have with Jesus and his tribe. There will not necessarily be a "right" or "wrong" way to understand this, but the major purpose is to help people start to unbundle their personal tribes from the Jesus Tribe. This is to help them see that the values and priorities of Jesus are not always identical to a political party or the rotary club.



### **3.2.2: ALL ON THE TABLE: STARTUP GUIDE**

#### **Goals**

One of the consequences of social media and social isolation has been hyper-individualism when it comes to ethics and social views. Churches have also viewed those as parts of an individualistic pursuit of discipleship. "All on the Table" is a process and practice for helping people discuss complex issues while also affirming their community and unity based on the table and communion of Jesus Christ.

#### **Start**

Begin by selected around 10% of the expected future participants. So, for example, if you believe that when publicized this monthly event will bring 100 people for conversation, select 10 that you believe already demonstrate maturity and critical thinking. This will be a pilot group, and as the process goes they will become your table facilitators.

You will want to start with your pilot group 3-9 months before your official launch of this program. I call it "All on the Table" but your verbiage can obviously vary. The leader/pastor/staff whoever is starting the program will facilitate these first 3-9 meetings.

#### **First meeting**

Discuss and implement guide rules. Examples would be- no interrupting. Seek to understand before making your point. No dominating the conversation. No name calling. Then also include some examples of helpful ways to disagree in conversation.

In this first meeting, select a topic that you know will elicit disagreement, but that you also know will not be particularly emotional. Something like tattoos on Christians or can Hollywood movies help benefit the Christian life. In preparation, the leader will seek either presenters or scripture passages or some other "jumping off point" to spur parts of the conversation.

Then the leader(s) will build segments of questions for the table to discuss about each segment of presentation. The goal will be to help people have conversations about difficult topics, but the largest goal is to re-train them how to recognize they are part of the same Jesus-tribe even if they disagree on some of these things.

During the trial period, gradually increase the emotional content of each meeting. This could go to modern politics, to debated theological issues, whatever. The goal is to help the group learn how to lean into hard conversations.

After the conversation is done, the community will take communion together and perhaps sing a song or recite a creed or the Lord's prayer. This is important, because it is a recognition that regardless of what came before, we are united by the body and blood of Christ. Then after that, the group will break in order to fellowship over a meal. It can be a simple meal, but it is an important part of the process to again, leave with the closure and feeling of being a family again.

## **Launch**

After training your pilot group, now is time to launch. This will be open to anyone and everyone, so brief with your launch group, who are now the table facilitators. Their job is to keep the conversation going and on track, and to ensure that everyone is allowed to speak.

Follow the same process for the large group that you did for your pilot group. Start with relatively benign topics, and gradually work up to more difficult ones. The goal, again, is not that everyone leaves believing exactly the same thing or agreeing. The goal is that they realize that even in their disagreement, they are the family of Jesus Christ.

## **Tips**

- Table printouts with rules and guidelines are helpful.
- Sometimes you can have participants ask the questions, rather than the facilitator.
- It is important to vary the format, sometimes have presenters, sometimes videos, sometimes other ways of starting the conversation. Routine can get bogged down, which leads to stagnant conversation, so try to keep changing things.

### **3.2.3: JESUS TRIBE- A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL**

This Lenten Devotional is one practical way to address the unlearning, re-learning, and new learning that must happen if the Jesus Tribe is to make up the deficits that come from the tribal world of today. Though it will help with all five deficits, those that it most specifically will seek to ameliorate would be the spiritual deficit and the narrative deficit as it is a daily discipline that will help participants to see themselves in the story.

#### **Day 1 (Ash Wednesday)**

*"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."* Genesis 3.19<sup>30</sup>

Today is Ash Wednesday and the first day of Lent. This Lenten devotional is aimed to help you evaluate and consider the loyalties and tribes in your life. One of the most major expectations within it is to create space and silence to consider your predispositions and positions in light of being a follower of Jesus.

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<sup>30</sup> Gen. 3:19 (NIV).

On this first day of Lent, consider the limited time you have on this earth. Each of us has a number of days and we are not promised tomorrow. Ash Wednesday is the perfect opportunity to consider our purpose, our relationship to Jesus, and our relationships to others.

Today is a day of reflection and consideration. Today you are encouraged to spend thirty or more minutes in silence and contemplation of your finite life. From dust you come, to dust you will return. What does God want with you in between? How does that relate to your belonging and the groups you participate in? Do your groups, or tribes, benefit your relationship to Jesus?

## **Day 2**

*"As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him.*

*"Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him." Matthew 4<sup>31</sup>*

### *The Call of the First Disciples*

As you read and consider this brief story of the call of the first disciples, what occurs to you? Do these first followers have contact with their family of origin going forward? Are they nervous about leaving behind their source of income? Why would they follow this itinerant preacher on such short notice?

Take a few short minutes and pray and meditate on those questions, then continue.

The thing I consider in this story is that in order to decide to follow Jesus, these disciples had to make a decision to leave behind the life they knew. In the story of Luke, the call comes immediately after pulling in a whole boat-full of fish. Now, I'm no fisherman, but I'm confident that a boat full of fish would be good for business and good for the bank account.

Jesus asked them to leave all that behind. On this second day of this devotion practice, consider what it would look like to leave it all behind to follow Jesus on his great adventure. Consider leaving your job, not even two weeks' notice. Consider leaving the family: "I've got to follow this preacher, you guys will be ok, right?" Consider leaving your smart phone, your carefully crafted social media presence, your television shows, your news sources- all because a new teacher invited you to follow him.

The first major theme of this short devotion cycle will be "leaving." The question is, what does "leaving" look like in the modern Christian practice? Is it a one-time call, or is it something that we

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<sup>31</sup> Matt. 4:18-22 (NIV).

continually work through? Take a few more moments to meditate and pray about what you consider the call to “leave” in your current Christian formation.

### **Day 3**

*“...the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

*“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up [left behind his new life] and went to his father...”*

Luke 15<sup>32</sup>

#### *The Departure of the Prodigal Son*

This is just a small segment of one of the two most well-known of all Jesus’ parables. Yesterday we considered the first disciples. In order to follow Jesus, they were put to a choice: everything you’ve ever known, your established job and your family, or this preacher from Nazareth?

Today we are considering what will, on the surface, seem like an easier choice: would we leave our mess in order to return home to a loving father? Because the younger son practiced “leaving” twice, once when he left his home, and once when he left his mess to return home.

It seems an easy choice, but how often do people today decide to stay in the mess? There is a certain taboo to saying, “I messed up, I lost, I did the wrong thing, and now I want to come crawling back home.”

Think about how long it would have taken the prodigal son to walk home. What do you imagine him thinking on the way? Do you think he would have been filled with shame and guilt? What if, even beyond that, the prodigal son considered his new mess his “home” how hard would that departure have been?

Today I want to invite you to spend some time praying and contemplating what a departure might mean or look like for you. Would you choose the potential guilt and shame to go home, or stay in the mess? Take time to ask God to reveal the difference in those places for you.

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<sup>32</sup> Luke 15:13-20 (NIV).

Beyond that, this story intrigued me because in the story, it is obvious that the prodigal should leave the mess. Is OUR mess always that obvious? What could we be supposed to leave that we've simply grown comfortable with?

#### **Day 4**

*"The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you:*

*"I will make you into a great nation,*

*and I will bless you;*

*I will make your name great,*

*and you will be a blessing.*

*I will bless those who bless you,*

*and whoever curses you I will curse;*

*and all peoples on earth*

*will be blessed through you."*

*"So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there."*

Genesis 12<sup>33</sup>

#### *Leaving Harran and Home*

In order to embrace the covenant of Yahweh, Abram had to leave his father's land and people and practice.

For Abram, the families he belonged to were really simple: his father's. For us today, it is never so simple. So, today I am going to ask you to think through the different families you belong to. What are some characteristics of those families? What do they practice, what do they look like? What do they value?

Spend 5-10 considering how the family you were raised in is different than the family you currently live in. Consider how geography influenced those families. Consider how the groups they

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<sup>33</sup> Gen. 12:1-5 (NIV).

belonged to changed over years, churches, volunteer organizations, political parties, schools, work.

As you consider, write down what you see as values of each of those families. Don't overthink this, just think about it and write what you think. What do these various groups that you belong to value, really care about? Note the similarities and differences. Consider which values you share and which you don't. Then just consider that for a few minutes.

## **Day 5**

### *Corporate Worship Day*

Today is the normal Christian day of worship. In many ways, worship is a calling us out of our norms; our routine on weekdays, our places of routine, the people we see most days. In addition, many people have recently felt "called out" from their church communities.

Sometimes this is a positive thing, but often it is hurtful and painful. Even if it is the moving of the Holy Spirit, it can hurt to follow in that way. Today when you go to worship, consider the people that have been called away or the people that have been called to join with your community. What values does your community already possess, what values do the newcomers bring, what values did the leavers take with them?

Take time to contemplate these things.

## **Day 6**

*"During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me.'*

*"The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. "For otherwise," they said, "we will all die!" So the people took their dough before the yeast was added, and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing. The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. The Lord had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians.*

*"The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Sukkoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children."*

Exodus 12<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Exod. 12:31-37 (NIV).

### *The Departure from Egypt*

Long after Abram was called away from his land of birth and family, his descendants had become slaves in Egypt. They cried out to God, day and night, to deliver them from this slavery, and we are told that God heard their cry. God called Moses to intercede with Pharaoh. After ten plagues, finally Pharaoh let the Jews leave.

But the Jewish people had to venture out into the unknown. How far was the promised land? What dangers would they face? Would they have enough food?

In order to get to the promised land, the people of Israel first had to depart Egypt, and though they hated it in Egypt, it was predictable, and they understood it. In order to grasp God's promise, they had to venture into the dark of the desert, without a promise of prosperity anytime soon.

The Jewish people left their mess in a similar way to the way the prodigal left his mess, with the hope and promise of home at the end. For the Jewish people, it was again obvious that slavery was worse than being free. What might spiritual slavery look like for Christians today?

Are there groups or families we might belong to that compromise our ability to know and follow Jesus? Do we confuse the values of the various tribes and families with the values of Jesus' tribe? Take a few minutes to consider if there is an Egypt in your life. What could that be?

### **Day 7**

*"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:*

*"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.'*

*"Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. All their neighbors assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.*

*"Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god. Cyrus king of Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah."*

Ezra 1<sup>35</sup>

### *The Departure from Babylon*

Seventy years before Ezra 1, the people of Judah (the last intact tribe of Israel) were taken away to Exile in Babylon (2 Kings 24, 25, 1 Chronicles 9.1, Jeremiah 39.9). But, as they were there, Jeremiah the prophet wrote them a letter, telling them to basically make themselves at home, to pray for the prosperity of Babylon, to plant gardens and to give their sons and daughters in marriage.

The people of Judah were supposed to become at home, in a place they were not at home. So, do you think it was difficult to leave their temporary home of exile behind, when God called them back to Jerusalem? What might that be like? Take a few minutes to consider places or times you got comfortable that you did not expect to become comfortable. What did it take for you to leave that behind?

In many ways, as Christians today we share similarities with the exiles of Babylon. Is it easy to get comfortable in places that are not our home? What might it look like to leave that home behind, as the people of Judah left behind their exile?

Take a few minutes to pray through this today. Ask God to bring clarity and understanding, meditate on the difficulty of leaving Babylon for the Jewish people.

### **Day 8**

*"As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'*

*Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.'*

*"He said to another man, 'Follow me.'*

*But he replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'*

*Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'*

*"Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.' "*

Luke 9<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ezra 1:1-8 (NIV).

<sup>36</sup> Luke 9:57-62 (NIV).



## *Reflections on Leaving*

The first disciples, the prodigal son, Abram who became Abraham, Moses and the Jewish people, the exiles in Babylon, the commonality among them all was: at some point they had to leave in order to know the life God had for them.

Departures happen in all of life, we depart our homes for work or school, we depart our families of origin for new families of decision. Very often, though, when it comes to the Christian life, we are told we can have it without ever departing. But is that what we see in the Bible?

In this passage, we see the high call of Jesus, the call to a willingness to leave anything and everything to follow him. Some departures are temporary, like leaving home for the day. Some departures are permanent, like leaving a hometown. Some seem permanent at the time, but end up being temporary.

One of the things that happens over and over in the gospels and the New Testament, is an invitation to leave the old life behind and find a new life with Jesus. That was very concrete and easy to show how life was changed. Today it is much less concrete.

The rest of this devotional will focus on seeking to understand the groups and tribes we belong to and seeing what it might mean to “leave them behind” in order to first belong to Jesus. We do see that people frequently return to their old tribes, but with a new loyalty structure. And the only way to properly carry it out is to evaluate and consider.

Spend a few minutes meditating on what it would have looked like for you, to have this traveling preacher Jesus tell you to leave your family, your work, whatever else behind. What would that mean for you? How would you respond?

## **Day 9**

### *Liminal space- the space between*

We considered how Jesus called his disciples away from the lives they knew and loved. We considered how the lost son had to leave behind his mess and his life of self. We considered how Abram had to leave his father’s country to become Abraham. We considered how the exiles had to leave their home away from home, to return to a broken and ruined homeland. We have considered how Moses had to lead his people into the wilderness.

We considered all those things, but now we must consider the space between spaces. This idea, a place that is also “nowhere” is often called “liminal space” today.<sup>37</sup> It means the space between. Our

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<sup>37</sup> Arnold Van Gennep initially wrote about liminal space in his book *The Rites of Passage* published in 1909. For more discussion, see: <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-impact-of-liminal-space-on-your-mental-health-5204371>

bodies are full of “liminal fluid” that keeps our organs separate, and in the same way liminal space keeps spaces separate. Think of liminal space as the gap itself.

In psychology and in spiritual formation, there is also a need for “liminal space.” We need to be between spaces and between times for a time. We need to be “nowhere.” In our modern, immediate, fast-paced society, how often do you just sit in a room, no TV, phone powered down, no internet on, not even music, food or drink. How often do we just sit and consider? How often do we wander on forest trails? How often do we pause for any amount of time?

For the next couple weeks, I am going to invite you into a “tribal” liminal space. A time to go away from your previous loyalties and tribes. Don’t move out of your family home or anything but do spend a little more time in empty rooms, with nothing “on.” In addition, if at all possible, disengage from any of the tribes you usually belong to: if you watch Fox or CNN or MSNBC, I’m asking you to take ten days off. If you participate in online forums that discuss groups or politics or certain theologies, I am asking you to disengage for ten days.

In this time, it is a practice of being in “liminal space”, it’s a feeling of being disjointed, a feeling of being disoriented, but it often leads to a place of greater strength and conviction.

Take a little time and reflect on what it means to be in liminal space, how does it feel when we are between jobs, or between events, between shows or between communities? Why do we rush from one place to another, why is it hard to take time to be on journey? And how does that compare or contrast with what we see of Jesus in the Bible?

## **Day 10**

### *Liminal space- Travel from Babylon*

It is estimated that it took Ezra and the exiles he traveled with nearly four months to travel the nearly 900 miles from Babylon back to Jerusalem. That is quite a bit of time between worlds, time to evaluate what they want Jerusalem to be when they rebuild, time to evaluate what their experience was in the land of Babylon.

Interestingly, there would have been a change for the Jewish people in even the language they would use day to day. In Babylon they would have used Hebrew at home and Akkadian when they interacted with native Babylonians. This would have been a change that they processed in their long journey home.

We live in an instant society. Our travel times are drastically reduced. We could travel 900 miles in a matter of hours, without much reflection on what the last place was or valued and what the next place is or what we want it to be.

In our Christian life, if we are dissatisfied, we can simply relocate to another church down the road, with no time in between. We can communicate instantly, watch news from anywhere in the world. All this instant in our world has squeezed out the space between. We don’t have time or space

between anymore, and that often short circuits our processing and consideration of what we are doing.

It is tempting to try to fill every bit of time constructing things or deconstructing them, theologies, values, whatever. But, the invitation right now is not to try to build or take apart any of your tribes or loyalties there. The invitation is just to consider them. You may have a little extra time right now, distancing from tribal spaces. Take that time to consider them.

Consider the next ten days or so as simply a space/time between. This is meant to be a time of contemplation and consideration.

Today I want to invite you to a bit of creative reflection. Here is what I want to invite you to do: draw several circles on a piece of paper. Inside each circle, write a group you belong to (these are your "tribes"). In at least one, write "church" or "Jesus family" or whatever language you'd like to use to describe your faith. But other examples would be your work, your ethnicity, your school, geography, etc. Be creative.

Now, without any consideration of whether there is overlap or not, I want to invite you to write the values of those groups. An example is this: every job has the value of making money, at least to some degree. That may not be the controlling value, but it is a value. So, take the liminal space of today to consider the values of the groups, "tribes" you belong to. Pray on this as well.

## **Day 11**

### *Liminal Space- Wilderness from Egypt*

As the Israelites journeyed in the wilderness, many of them wished they were back in Egypt. Egypt, after all, provided good meat and good drink, it provided safety, and in their memory anyway, it provided comfort. Forgetting of course that they were slaves, many saw Egypt as the "good old days." They would go on to spend 40 years in that wilderness, 40 years in that liminal space! Imagine traveling that long.

Much like the Jews had to change their language in Babylon, they would have had to do that first in Egypt. Rather than speaking Egyptian, once they made it to the promised land, they were able to speak Hebrew all the time. Language makes a huge impression on our identity.

Yesterday I had you consider the values of some of the tribes you belong to, we will return to that, but for today, I would like you to do something similar. Take a few minutes to write words and ways that those groups talk that are unique to those groups. An example is that, if you belong to a food service staff, you often use particular lingo to that restaurant or business that communicates to the others who also work there.

It could be inside jokes in your family, or work specific lingo, or it could be political lingo. But take time and just consider the way certain groups you belong to talk. So, take some time and just think,

write examples. There is no rush and no minimum length. Take the liminal space and consider language today.

## **Day 12**

### *Corporate Worship Day*

Can our acts of worship be liminal space? Can our time in worship be time between times?

In many ways, worship is a liminal space. We are not accomplishing in the way we normally do. We are not being paid, but we are also not exactly participating in leisure activities. Time flows outside, but in this we take time away, time out, to practice sacrifice in the name of the Lamb. Allow your worship today to be an act of rest, an act of sacrifice, and act of joy. And spend time considering how worship is a liminal space.

## **Day 13**

### *Liminal Space- Sarah and Abraham*

Abraham, Abram at the time, was promised something if he left his father's land and family and went out on his own. He and Sarah, Sarai at the time, were promised descendants and that they would become a great nation. But it was twenty-five, 25!, years later when Isaac was finally born.

Sarah and Abraham lived in the liminal space, between the promise of God and his fulfillment, for twenty-five years. In that time, they likely would have reflected what their life would have been if they had stayed with his family in their land.

Today, I want to invite you to consider what your life might have been if you were not a Christian. Do you know non-Christians where you live? How do they live? Do they watch the same things as you, think the same way? Or is there a big difference?

I have encouraged you to consider the values of the tribes you belong to, and also the language of the tribes you belong to. Today, I want you to think about "narratives" of the tribes and groups you belong to. What stories do they tell? What stories do they repeat? What do those stories say about their own group identity?

Write a few words down about those stories. Don't overthink this, it doesn't have to be incredibly profound, it is just an exercise in knowing and understanding the groups we belong to. Groups are often defined by their stories, and it is no different with the tribes we belong to today.

Are there stories that extoll that tribe's greatness? Stories about a founder? Stories that explain the quality of that tribe? Are there stories that set that tribe apart? Take time to consider, and then spend a few words that you think define the tribe of Jesus in story too.

## Day 14

*"At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.*

*"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance."*

John 19, 20<sup>38</sup>

### *Liminal Space- Between Crucifixion and Resurrection*

John 19 ends at sundown on Friday, John 20 begins with sunrise on Sunday. In between was a full day of liminal space for the disciples and all those that loved and knew Jesus. We don't really know what they did, but it seems like they gathered together after having scattered during the crucifixion.

It seems like they might have been hiding out, but we don't really have much evidence.

Take some time today to think about where you would have gone, what you would have done. Would you have returned to your family of origin? Sought to get your job back? Would you have stayed with the other disciples? Would you have left them all behind to live in the wilderness?

Wilderness and liminal space are such prominent themes in scripture that we often take them for granted, forget about them. And the time between the crucifixion and resurrection is one of those that is hardly even considered or mentioned.

But it was real and lived.

In many ways, the space and time between spaces and times allows us to grow and reflect. It allows us to enter a new space and a new time with fresh eyes and a fresh heart.

Beyond that, we all live in a similar liminal space as Christians today. We proclaim the resurrection, but we wait on the fullness of that resurrection. Consider what your loyalties today would look like if Christ was here in the fullness of his kingdom? Would you participate in the same groups, same tribes as you do now?

Take some time today, while we are still sitting in this liminal space, to pray through that today. Ask God to reveal to you the strength of your loyalties, where would you go if you were on that Holy Saturday?

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<sup>38</sup> John 19:41- 20:1 (NIV).

## Day 15

*"The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.'"*

*"Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave."*

*"Then a voice said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"*

1 Kings 19<sup>39</sup>

### *Liminal Space- The Cave*

One of the most easily recognized stories in scripture, the story of Elijah in the cave, demonstrates how easily many of us could miss the voice of God today. Elijah is the last faithful prophet of Yahweh, the Lord God. He has stood against the prophets of Baal, and now finds himself deep in despair. So he flees.

Elijah finds himself in a cave, isolated from the rest of his world. And here we find a God who promised to appear.

The norm for expecting God to show up is usually that God will show up in the spectacle, or in the dramatic. We think God is in the fantastic. And he is.

But this story serves as a reminder of the God we find in the liminal space. The space between.

If Elijah had run from event to event, if he had just turned on the TV or his phone and zoned out, he would have missed the "gentle whisper" that God wanted to speak.

Liminal space is a space in the wilderness, re-adjusting and rediscovering what it means to belong to the tribe, the family of Jesus. Some of this time will be directed, but mostly it will be encouraging to distance from the other tribes that demand your attention. Distance from sources of information and tribal formation is important in this time.

Take some time to simply listen now. As you do, consider the groups you belong to. Those we labeled earlier. Do your groups bring noise in your life? Do they demand attention? Is there a way they block you from being able to hear the voice of God? Take time to consider these things, and to simply listen for the gentle whisper.

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<sup>39</sup> 1 Kings 19:11-13 (NIV).

## Day 16

*"The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.'"*

Exodus 16<sup>40</sup>

### *Liminal Space- Destination Addiction*<sup>41</sup>

The people of Israel had the same issue we often do: an addiction to "getting there." We are, like Israel, called out of Egypt. In our world the "Egypt" could be any number of things: personal sin struggles, undue loyalty to particular groups, an addiction to sports or entertainment or food. Whatever it is, there is a space between being called out of that addiction and safely arriving "at home."

The purpose of this devotional is to help Christians evaluate their group loyalty. Now, for each of us, we have some level of group loyalty because that group has served us well in the past. But, unfortunately, those groups that serve us well function much like Egypt.

The people of Israel first went to Egypt because they had a need: there was famine, but due to the diligence of Joseph, Egypt had plenty. So his brothers and father joined him in Egypt. But, then, as people do, they got comfortable. And, as people do, they multiplied. Then, sadly as people do, the Egyptians enslaved them.

So quite a while later, the nation had grown and they cried out to God. We know this part. They were set free, but there was a space between being set free and arriving at home. Liminal space.

The groups you belong to have served you well in the past. However, as often happens, those groups demand more and more of our loyalty. They begin to shape our behavior and attitudes in ways we do not fully understand. And eventually their values become our values.

The goal in this liminal space is to "wander" a bit, much like Israel did. To wander and to allow God to perhaps meet us in that wandering. Like the gentle whisper met Elijah, we are seeking a God who will meet us after we seek to leave behind some of our old tribes or groups.

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<sup>40</sup> Exodus 16:1-3 (NIV).

<sup>41</sup> Leonard Sweet, "Semiotics, Church and Culture Lecture," DMIN 809, Semiotics, Church, and Culture (Class Zoom Lecture, George Fox University, Newberg, OR, November 1, 2021).

Take some space and ask God to reveal to you more about the groups you belong to. Ask him to reveal how they influence your values or thinking or talking. Then wait on the gentle whisper.

### **Day 17**

*"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.*

*"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'*

*"Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'*

*"Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'"*

Matthew 16<sup>42</sup>

#### *Liminal Space- Space Between Purposes*

We all have multiple purposes in life: relationships, work, hobbies, children, grandchildren, spouses, friends. Jesus also had multiple purposes. His chief work of reconciliation culminated in the cross and resurrection. So, Jesus seemed to know for some time that was the direction his life was headed.

In that, Jesus lived a decent amount of time in the liminal space before the cross. Think about the stress, the anxiety, that likely accompanied that anticipation. Think of the difficulty in loving the disciples and knowing the pain that his cross would cause them. Think about the dread.

Often in our lives liminal space is a space of leaving something to go to something else. But it is space where we are not anywhere in particular.

Think of all the liminal spaces you've had- when you've accepted a new position but are waiting to finish at your old one. When you are engaged, or pregnant, or ready to move and waiting on the right home.

Liminal space provides time to adjust our mindset, and to reestablish ourselves in our new area.

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<sup>42</sup> Matt. 16:21-24 (NIV).



Take a little time to ask God what it means to head toward a loyalty to him- to take up the cross of forsaking all other tribes, groups, nations, loyalties, and pursue loyalty to him first. Now take a few minutes to listen for the gentle whisper.

## **Day 18**

### *Liminal Space- Space to Look and See*

There is no specific passage today or Monday. Instead, it will be about guiding through consideration of two specific types of loyalties: political and theological/denominational.

The disciples started to follow Jesus, but didn't quite understand what they were signing up for. See, they likely believed, at first, that Jesus was a rabbi like other rabbis. They would have believed that they would travel with him for some time and learn what it meant to be part of his school.

The first signal that something was up was probably the inclusion of both the tax-collector and the zealot. These two groups were enemies, but generally rabbi schools would have had people that were mostly on the same page.

Then, as things continued, as they saw Jesus heal, they would have begun to think "Messiah", which was correct, but their understanding was very different than ours.

For the Jewish people, the Messiah would have been a political figure. Sent to restore the nation of Israel. We see this language throughout the Gospels. But Jesus was a very peculiar Messiah. Every time it seemed like his crowds were getting big, he said something offensive and drove them off. Every time he got a gathering, he said something crazy like "you're going to need to eat my flesh and drink my blood." Yikes.

The message of Jesus both was, and was not, political.

In the 2020s, politics has become the national religion in the United States. People often are more attached to political figures than they are to even their own families in many cases. It is common to see how politics has divided states, families, churches.

Should politics ever be more important to us than the family of Jesus though?

What would it look like to place that back into its proper place?

Today, appeal to the gentle whisper. Ask God: what do you think of my politics? Do you support the politicians I do?

Wait. It's tempting to let this one go by quickly. Hold an image of a politician in your mind. Now ask God to reveal his views on the person.

Now do that with policy opinions.

Now. Here is the hard part. Ask God what he wants you to do with those that voted opposite of you. And wait.

## **Day 19**

### *Corporate Worship Day*

As you gather today with your community of Christians, consider the way politics often infiltrate our community gatherings. How do we discuss them? Do we confront hard truths or do we seek easy alliances?

We can affirm with our mouths that we believe Jesus followers can belong to a variety of political parties and positions, but do we believe it with our hearts?

Today I encourage you, as you worship with your church community, to look with new eyes. How would you respond if the sermon had specific politics? How would the church respond? Would you feel comfortable if the person worshipping next to you voted for the “wrong” presidential candidate?

Ask that God would give you the eyes to see the others that worship the way he does. Ask that God would give you the freedom to worship and to embrace those that would have voted differently than you did.

## **Day 20**

### *Liminal Space- Family Disputes*

There are a few clues in the Gospels. Most notably, to me, is that it is mentioned that Judas would steal from the community purse. But, the table life of the disciples was not likely to be all slaps on the back and laughs. These followers from a variety of areas, careers, opinions, politics... they did not get along all the time.

We see James and John (my favorite because I love “Sons of Thunder”) asking Jesus to have the honored seats in his kingdom. Think that went over very well?

So, there were family disputes.

In the wilderness, in the space between space, it is the perfect opportunity to consider the way we have treated our own family. Sadly, the Christian family has had a propensity to not treat our own very well. Whether it’s battle lines about doctrine or communion or baptism or who can preach, we have tended to be vicious and harmful in our disagreements.

Tribal loyalty is not just a problem outside the church, but a problem in the church. Tribalism often leads Christians to cut off, to disown, other Christians because of things they deem to be bad practice or “heresy.”

Jesus said... "whoever does the will of my father is my brother or sister" though. He didn't say if we practiced the right communion or held exactly the right theology.

Today, in this liminal space, take time to move into the wilderness of theology and the Christian family. Are those in the Christian family that you have harbored bad feelings toward based on their: doctrine? politics? practice? denomination? something else?

Take time to hold an image of that group before you and ask God what he thinks about them. Ask God to allow you to see them the way he does.

What stands out to you?

## **Day 21**

*"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

*"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*

*"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."*

Luke 15<sup>43</sup>

*"He replied to him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'"*

Matthew 12<sup>44</sup>

## *Coming Home*

We are going to shift the conversation now, from the space between spaces, to the space of finding our home and our tribe with Jesus. Many of us who have been Christian for some time can take for granted that we know what this means. But it is important to continually renew our vision and understanding of what it means to belong to Jesus.

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<sup>43</sup> Luke 15:19-24 (NIV).

<sup>44</sup> Matt. 12:48-50 (NIV).

It is not reasonable or even possible to only belong to the tribe of Jesus in the current world. But, it is reasonable and possible for the tribe of Jesus to be the *controlling* tribe in our lives. During the next couple weeks, we will be seeking to consider and process what that might mean,

When the prodigal son decided to return home, he first left behind the new life he had built. It was not a good life, but it was the life he had. There was a risk he would get home and be rejected.

In the second verse, Jesus was teaching and his natural family came to get him away from there. But, he replied in a way that would redefine family forever for followers of Jesus. Family is not based on our birth or even our past, family is based on our relationship to Jesus and Jesus alone.

That is the same for our modern Jesus Tribe. The hope is that this time will be time to consider, reflect, and re-order our idea of belonging based on Jesus' words above. Take a little time now to ask God to convict your heart. Ask how our priorities might be confused or misplaced. Ask for wisdom and insight and guidance.

## **Day 22**

*"After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.*

*"Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' "*

Luke 5<sup>45</sup>

*"When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, **Simon who was called the Zealot**, Judas son of James, and **Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.**"*

Luke 6<sup>46</sup>

*Jesus Tribe- Values*

Who do you eat meals with? If you assembled your closest twelve friends, what would that group look like? Most likely, many or most would look very much like you, right?

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<sup>45</sup> Luke 5:27-30 (NIV).

<sup>46</sup> Luke 6:13-16 (NIV).

When we are invited home to return to the Father's house, we have some evaluations to consider about what the other people in that home will be like. Will they be just like us? Or how different will they be?

The composition of the group of the main apostles of Jesus gives a clue about Jesus' values. And beyond that, it gives us an indication of what will happen soon after Jesus' resurrection.

Some background, in the first century, tax-collectors were much less popular than IRS agents are today. For the Jewish people, tax-collectors were blood traitors, rather than standing with their people, they made huge profit from betraying them. Many considered tax-collectors to be the worst of the worst.

Zealots were not an actual group during Jesus' day, but they were starting to form. So the usage of the term likely indicated someone that would have wanted a violent resistance to Rome. Many of these eventually made daggers that could be cleverly hidden on their forearms, to stab and then slip away into the crowds.

So, when Jesus invited a zealot and a tax-collector to be apostles and representatives of this new family he was starting... well he was saying quite a bit without having to say anything at all. Spend a little time today considering who Jesus might invite to that table today. Pray and ask which tribes might be represented.

## **Day 23**

*"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

*"Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!' Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?'"*

Acts 2<sup>47</sup>

*Jesus Tribe- Values, every tribe, tongue, and nation*

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<sup>47</sup> Acts 2:1-12 (NIV).

The miracle of Pentecost serves as a sort of reversal of the curse of the Tower of Babel. At Babel the languages of the world were confused, and tribes ultimately began. At Pentecost, God used a miraculous event to speak the good news to representatives of every tribe, tongue, and nation. These were still Jews, but Jews from the "diaspora" which is a fancy way of saying they lived elsewhere but considered themselves Jews still.

If Jesus began to show his "family values" in the composition of the disciples he called (zealots and tax-collectors), then the Holy Spirit fully stamped and co-signed that in this revelation at Pentecost.

We sometimes take it for granted that Christians will value anyone regardless of race or ethnicity, but unfortunately that is not the case. In the mission of God, sending Christians out to every corner of the earth with good news, God reveals his desire for diversity in the body of Christ.

Take a little time today and consider God's desire for diversity, and the often very human desire for homogeneity, for sameness. Ask God to reveal if you have any of those tendencies. Are you willing to break bread with the zealots and tax-collectors of your world? The Cretans and Arabs and Romans?

## **Day 24**

*"So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*

Galatians 3<sup>48</sup>

*Jesus Tribe- Neither Jew nor Greek*

Jesus started by inviting a tax collector and a zealot. Then the Holy Spirit continued by granting tongues to spread the good news in every language. But what would happen after that?

Conflict. As you likely guessed. Paul is speaking to a group of Christians, Jewish and Gentile, in Galatia. They have been told that they need to conform to the Old Testament law in order to remain in good standing with Jesus. Paul is... rightfully upset. The new covenant is one based on grace and faith, not law following.

And when someone is welcomed into Jesus' new family, that person becomes part of the "one" family of God, not a main family and a secondary family.

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<sup>48</sup> Gal. 3:26-29 (NIV).

God's goal is a unified, though not uniform, family. God is not seeking to make all difference go away, he is not seeking to deny that there are different races and genders and socioeconomic status. He is seeking to make Christians unified *even in* their difference.

How can that happen if all these other tribes in our world- politics, denominations, doctrines, sports teams, states, nationality, race, gender- how can unity happen if those other tribes determine our main values and operation?

Today, take some time to pray to the God of the gentle whisper. Ask him to reveal to you what it means to be one in his body. How can we maintain difference, but also be one the way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one?

Spend a few minutes jotting down notes- anything you think of. What would a unified body of Christ look like in our world today? Forget about if it's realistic, just write down some ideas. What could that body accomplish? How would Christians treat one another in that body? How would differences look?

Take 5-10 minutes to just consider this, and write what thoughts occur to you.

## **Day 25**

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

Matthew 5<sup>49</sup>

*"For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."*

Romans 5<sup>50</sup>

*Jesus Tribe- Distinct Value: Enemies*

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<sup>49</sup> Matt. 5:43-48 (NIV).

<sup>50</sup> Rom. 5:10, 11 (NIV).

Paul knew a thing or two about being Jesus' enemy. Paul spent a good portion of his young, professional life chasing and persecuting the followers of Jesus. Then, in a moment of blinding light and immense grace, Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus. Jesus so identified with his own followers, that he asked Paul why Paul was persecuting "me". Did Jesus excise justice in that moment? Or did he do greater?

After seeking to spend some time in the "wilderness" or liminal space here, we are seeking to consider and build some identity markers for the Jesus Tribe now. We saw how Jesus valued diversity in his community, inviting a zealot and a tax-collector. We saw how the Holy Spirit fell in such a way that the gospel reached all types of people. And now we see the ethic and value that would allow the Church to persevere even with all that difference and diversity in the ranks: love of the enemy.

Of all the Christian values, to me this is the most uniquely Christian. There are other world religions that preach peace with enemies, and reconciliation, but this is not either of those. This goes beyond that.

Consider what Paul said, the former persecutor of the church: "while we were enemies, we were reconciled." Would that our world would say the same of us!

Jesus included this in the sermon on the mount. Today, I want you to spend time thinking about the tribes and groups you belong to. What would be the result if that group began to seek to love their enemies? What if the United States did? Or our political parties? What if our sports teams did? Take a few minutes and consider what this means in the real world.

## **Day 26**

### *Corporate Worship Day*

One of the most striking phrases in all of scripture to me is found in Acts 9, verse 17. Ananias, a disciple of Jesus, has been called upon to come and to meet Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor of the early church. Ananias does not seem too happy about his call, but goes anyway.

When he arrives, he approaches this man who has been tormenting and murdering Christians, and based on the witness of Jesus to him, says "Brother Saul..."<sup>51</sup>

Ananias calls out of his former enemy the good and beautiful that Jesus has created in Saul. When you go to worship today, look around at the pews and seats. Look in the faces, consider that each of these was once, similarly, an enemy of God. He welcomed them in. He welcomed you in.

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<sup>51</sup> Acts 9:17 (NIV).



Should we also be the hands that welcome? Pray for the enemies in your life, that they would be blessed and joyful.

## **Day 27**

*"But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

*"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."*

Luke 6<sup>52</sup>

*Jesus Tribe- Distinct Value: Enemies (again)*

Wait, didn't we... haven't we had enough of the loving the enemies thing? No.

The reason the Jesus Tribe slowly and surely took over the Roman empire was not because of a strength of apologetics or a reasonable faith, though I'm sure they had both. The reason that the Christians invaded and converted a whole empire was their radical and world-shaking resolve: they would love their enemies.

Of course, they were not perfect in this, only Jesus has been. But, when a Christian starts from a position of seeing that he/she was first loved by God when the person was opposed to God's work, and that God loved that person when that person was an enemy, well then it's much easier to love our enemies at that point.

We closed with this thought yesterday, but I want to encourage you to go back to it: what would the tribes and groups of this world be if they did not villainize enemies? How would our lives look, if when someone insulted us or our group, we invited them to dinner? How would our churches look if they were full of people that spoke poorly of us?

Jesus invited the tax-collector and the zealot (and let's be honest, the fishermen and Sons of Thunder would not have cared for Levi much either), and Jesus as the mediator made peace. Why?

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<sup>52</sup> Luke 6:27-36 (NIV).

Because each of them was far from God originally, and Jesus invited them to a radical love and forgiveness.

Today, imagine what our churches would do if we placed “love our enemies” as a distinct value? Who would we love? How would we love them?

## Day 28

*“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*

*“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’”*

*“Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’”*

Matthew 18<sup>53</sup>

*Jesus Tribe- Distinct Value: Forgiveness*

Loving our enemies seems impossible, and then when we add the expectation of forgiveness from Jesus... just, where do we start with that?

I like to say that when it comes to community, we often have to forgive others just for NOT being us. They don't do things the way we would, they don't say things the way we would, they don't drive or text or email or anything the way we would!

The very first step in loving enemies and forgiving those we love is: deciding we want to.

This may seem very obvious, but unfortunately it is not obvious. Many of us go through this life thinking that forgiveness sounds good, that Jesus' teachings are admirable, but that is where they stop. And why is that?

Our entire culture runs counter to these two values. We live in a culture of spite and revenge and derogatory thoughts and language. We don't want to turn the other cheek; we want to knock their heads off!

Jesus was different. And we can be too. Our first decision is to INTEND to be different though.

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<sup>53</sup> Matt. 18:21-22 (NIV).

This is one of the major places where our tribal rubber meets the cultural road: every other group and tribe we belong to will tell us that our enemies must not be humanized, must not be forgiven. So it is at this point that, if we follow Jesus, we must depart the land of our fathers and head into the wilderness. Will we work at forgiveness and enemy love? Or will we continue the path of least resistance and enemy hate?

Take a few minutes to be honest with God. Do you want to try this? He knows anyway, if you don't, ask that he change and mold you.

## **Day 29**

*"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."*

Matthew 5<sup>54</sup>

*Jesus Tribe- Distinct Value: Forgiveness (again)*

If we decide that we would like to be different, that we would like to start the journey of living according to forgiveness, what might we do next? Would we leave it there, satisfied that we *intend* to forgive, therefore the work is done?

We know better. Forgiveness is an intention, but it's also an action. An act of refusing to hold the wrongdoing against the person who did it. And this is a matter of urgency!

Jesus, in his seminal sermon, describes the urgency that even if we are in the midst of worship, we should stop where we are, and go to make things right. This particular teaching is about if someone has something against us, or that we need to be forgiven. But it is the same principal and the same urgency if we are on the other side and need to offer forgiveness.

Is there a phone call you need to make, a text message you need to send, a person you need to visit? Pray that God would give you the strength and the resolve to do so, today, right now. Go be reconciled.

## **Day 30**

*"Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many."*

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<sup>54</sup> Matt. 5:23-24 (NIV).

*"Now if the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.*

*"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."*

1 Corinthians 12<sup>55</sup>

#### *Jesus Tribe- Distinct Value: Diversity in Roles*

Often the main difficulty of community is accepting that others are not us. We must actually forgive them for not behaving or reacting as we would. For subverting our expectations.

Our world and our culture operate on the idea that certain body parts are more valuable. But Paul seems to be indicating here that each part needs the other. So, we can see that the value in the Jesus Tribe is for each toe and each eye, regardless of the value that our world might assign to them.

Take a little time to reflect on those parts of the body of Christ that are often neglected or considered less valuable. Consider the ones that are considered more. Each Christian is meant to be part of the body, which means being cut off means that we lack the full life. What value does our society assign this? If we don't get our way, what does our culture tell us to do?

Take some time to ask God to reveal to you what your place in the body is, and how to care for the other parts.

### **Day 31**

*"Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the*

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<sup>55</sup> 1 Cor. 12:12-27 (NIV).

body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

*"All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

*"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."*

James 3<sup>56</sup>

*Jesus Tribe- Distinct Value: Lingo and Discourse*

Think a little more about the language you use. Think about the kind of words you use to describe "friends" and "enemies." Sometimes the words come out of our hearts, but the words also can change our hearts. It is a feedback loop. So, it happens that at times when we curse someone, we become more hateful to them. And when we bless someone, our heart softens towards them.

We have seen that Jesus values loving our enemies. We have seen that he values inviting the outsider in. Are we able to do those things if we do not change the way we talk to, and talk about, "those people"?

Each group we belong to has specific ways that it talks. Your family likely has code words, memes, phrases that are repeated to death. So it is with the news you watch, the forums you frequent, the friends you have in person and online. Think about how the words you hear get repeated.

Spend some time evaluating your sources of information. How do they talk about outsiders? Enemies? Opponents?

Now think about how we talk in our church communities. Is it that different?

Spend some time listening to the Holy Spirit. Then jot down a few words or phrases that came to mind today. No specific list, just code words or key words or memes that you thought of.

## **Day 32**

*"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you*

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<sup>56</sup> James 3:5-12 (NIV).

*gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”*

John 17<sup>57</sup>

### *Jesus Tribe- Distinct Value: Unity in Diversity*

Jesus prays for his followers, and the followers that follow the initial followers, that they will “be one.” What does he mean by that?

Often when we think about the unity that Jesus prayed for, we also consider it uniformity. We consider unity to be things that look alike, act alike, believe the same things. But is that the kind of prayer Jesus was praying here?

In order to consider that, we would do well to consider the nature of the Trinity of the Godhead. As Christians, we believe that God exists in three persons, but of one substance or energy. In other words, different personality traits, different manifestations, but still unified.

Jesus in the garden prayed that the cup would pass, then said “not my will, but yours be done.”<sup>58</sup> Which implies that their wills were not uniform in this situation. Jesus in his submission maintained the unity of the Trinity. When he prays that our unity would mimic his unity with the Father, it seems that precludes a complete uniformity.

What does it mean to exist in a Jesus Tribe that embraces unity while eschewing uniformity? Pray today that the Holy Spirit would guide your heart in discerning and discovering the differences.

## **Day 33**

### *Corporate Worship Day*

We have spent the first month of Lent pulling apart and looking at the various tribal habits and mentalities that we all have. We have discussed the Jesus Tribe and what it values, and we have invited you to stay in liminal space. Today in your worship with your community, we would encourage you to ask that God would guide you this coming week as we seek to put the pieces back together again. This week will have various exercises that will help re-orient your values, language, and perspectives to center on and flow from Jesus.

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<sup>57</sup> John 17:20-23 (NIV).

<sup>58</sup> Luke 22:42 (NIV).

### **Day 34**

#### *Jesus Tribe- Putting it together: Venn Values*

It may help to print this page, but today is your day. Don't think too much, but spend time listening to the gentle whisper. Then reflect back on the values of the Jesus Tribe and the other tribes you belong to. Now I want you to construct your own Venn diagram of those values. Don't overthink it, but consider which values your: family, political group, sports teams, state, city, church have, and consider if they overlap with Jesus' values. Then draw circles and emphasize where they overlap. That's it for the day, take your time and really consider though.

### **Day 35**

#### *Jesus Tribe- Putting it Together: Lingo and Dialect*

Today is another homework day. Consider the way Jesus talked, and also consider the way your other groups and tribes talk. "Jesus never used English", there got that out of the way. But, consider how Jesus talked to the poor, the powerful, his friends, his enemies. Consider the way our culture talks to one another, conversations online or via text, the way we engage our families or our enemies. Now think about keywords or phrases or lingo. And just write them out. How do our sources of entertainment talk about "them"? How did Jesus? What is the position on conflict? Jesus' position on conflict? Now, take this page and simply write your thoughts about the way our tribes talk. (Don't stress or overthink it, there aren't wrong answers here)

### **Day 36**

#### *Jesus Tribe- Putting it Together: The Outsider*

This is the last heavy homework day, promise. Today we want to consider the outsider. And again we're making lists today. But, I want you to spend time in prayer, and consider the ways Jesus and the disciples treated outsiders, and also consider the way our current tribes treat outsiders. How do we know if someone is an outsider? Then how do we treat them? For something like family this is easy: we know if they're family because we've seen them before, and they usually have our name and maybe our nose. But for something like our: political tribes, sports tribes, geography tribes... this is a little different. So take some time and write your thoughts down.

How do we treat and identify the outsider?

### **Day 37**

*"As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him.*

*"Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him."*

Matthew 4<sup>59</sup>

*"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."*

Revelation 3<sup>60</sup>

*Jesus Tribe- Putting it Together: Called Away and Called Back*

We started this entire thing with the first passage. Jesus called his disciples away from their old lives. But, on the resurrection, they went back to places and parts of their old lives. Their lives were changed, they had become salt and light for the world. Now, they looked and smelled and sounded like Jesus.

Jesus who ate with tax-collectors, sinners, and zealots. Jesus who made peace with enemies and forgave seventy times seven.

As we seek to put this together, consider what it would look like to live according to our loyalty to Jesus' tribe first. We must, from time to time, leave our other tribes to refresh our values, language, and general behavior. But we are meant to return to our other tribes, groups, and families, with a renewed sense of influence and identity.

Spend a little time just thinking about what this has been. Have you reconsidered any previous opinions? Have you reconsidered various loyalties? Have you heard the gentle whisper?

Take 5-10 minutes to ask God what he would have you change going forward.

## **Day 38**

*"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."*

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<sup>59</sup> Matt. 4:18-22 (NIV).

<sup>60</sup> Rev. 3:19, 20 (NIV).



Mark 4<sup>61</sup>

*Jesus Tribe- Putting it Together: The Slow Kingdom*

We live in a frantic and frenetic world. Each movement must be fast and urgent. We set goals and we achieve them. We live by the clock and by the calendar, making sure things get done efficiently in a timely manner.

But Jesus often compares the Kingdom of God to seeds, to growing things, to agriculture. And in the world of agriculture there is no rush. Natural forces must work in order to bring life from the dirt.

Is it not the same in our spiritual lives? This is near the end of our Lenten journey, but it is my prayer that it is just the beginning of your slow and sure work of being the Jesus Tribe. In order to do this well, it will take patience, perseverance, and taking the long view. All traits that Jesus himself practiced.

I hope you will revisit this devotional, that you will come back with fresh eyes in the months or years to come. I hope that you will invest in enriching your soil, watering the seeds, and reaping the harvest of the joy of living according to the values of the Jesus Tribe.

Take this time today to pray for the guidance from God, perseverance of the Spirit, and character of Jesus.

**Day 39**

*Jesus Tribe- The Cycle*

It begins with a call away. It could be like Peter and Andrew, or even Paul, a sudden and obvious call. It could be like the lost son, looking down at our own poverty and thinking the father might take us back. It could be like those at Pentecost who heard the good news in their own language. It could even be like Moses or Abraham. Regardless, the first call is always a call away. We need to be called away from time to time, to reconsider ourselves, our theology, our God. This is an important part in our growth, and rarely happens just once in our lives.

It continues with time between times. Liminal space. For Abraham and Sarah, 25 years before their baby boy they named "He Laughs" was born. For Moses and Israel, 40 years of wandering and wondering if God would finally get them home. For the lost son, some amount of time and distance, anxious about whether he would be welcomed or shunned. For the disciples, a full day and two nights, alone and lost.

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<sup>61</sup> Mark 4:26-29 (NIV).

The space between spaces is an important time where we are nowhere, and if we lose or forget it then our growth is often diminished and harmed.

Then the arrival home. We can reconfigure our ideas of our community, our tribe, our family. The time and space of consideration allows us to see which parts of our construction did not fit, which parts are not of Jesus and which parts are. This arrival allows us to rebuild fresh.

Jesus' call is one of loyalty to him first and last and in between. We will still be Jews or Greeks, male or female. We will still be eyes or ears or a toe. But our new primary identity is in him and his work and call for our lives.

How could he be inviting us to rearrange our loyalties from this? What would he ask us to reconfigure? What would he toss out completely? What would he keep? Take time to ask and reflect.

## **Day 40**

### *Worship Day (Palm Sunday)*

On this last day of Lent, take time to reflect on the journey that was. What stood out to you in this journey? What will you carry with you?

As you enter Holy Week, allow your mind to consider the time Jesus spent in the week between the entry into Jerusalem, his final meal, and ultimately his death on the Roman cross. Do not pass over this week too quickly. Easter is coming, but it is not yet. Soak in the space between. Let it permeate you and your mind and soul.

Pray for God's blessing on your worship today.

## Assessment

One of the innate challenges of addressing tribalism within church contexts is that this is going to be a slow process. Much like Jesus returned again and again to agricultural metaphors in his teaching, I would suggest that the Jesus Tribe is a very slow tree to produce fruit. This means that much of the evaluation and assessment at this stage is asking for subjective opinions on whether this approach will help. However, I believe that the writing and research can be immediately helpful for church leaders that are seeking to understand the turbulence that has surrounded recent events. Dr. Sweet told us at the beginning of this journey that part of our job is to connect dots and make connections.<sup>62</sup> I am hopeful that pastors and church leaders can find the dots I've connected here very helpful, and the feedback I have received over the last several terms has reinforced that.

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<sup>62</sup> Leonard Sweet, "Semiotics, Church and Culture Advance, Day 4," DMIN 709, Semiotics, Church, and Culture (Class Zoom Lecture, George Fox University, Newberg, OR, September 10, 2020).

The first criterion I set forth was: pastors and church leaders will find that my research helps explain the difficulty and turbulence of recent years. I have found that to be overwhelmingly the case. Anyone close to the church world is familiar with the recent flood of resignations and burnout in pastors and church staff. The Jesus Tribe project will help these pastors and church leaders to see that their struggles have not been in isolation, and that solidarity and explanatory power will help them minister in a healthier way. Each stakeholder that reviewed my work said something to the effect of "I thought that might have just been our church." Each pastor that I spoke to outside of my stakeholders said something similar. One common theme that I have found, however, is that many simply accept that as the natural state of things, without stopping to ask if there is anything we as church leaders can do to address it. I remain hopeful that this project might help church leaders ascertain some of the roots of the recent turbulence, and then as a result help them ask new questions that may not have occurred to them otherwise.

The second criterion I set forth was that my research would be understandable and readable by clergy and laity. This one was a little more ambivalent in the response from my stakeholders, with a 75% to 25% split. 75% found it readable and digestible, if at times somewhat challenging, while 25% said it might verge on the academic side. Though this project will seek to be understandable by anyone, it is to be expected that at times it will be impossible to completely simplify complex and difficult topics. This is a healthy percentage in my estimation.

The third criterion I set forth was that my suggested strategies would be feasible and helpful within church contexts. This got overwhelmingly positive results. I also know from my own personal church context experience that they would be feasible, as some of these we have tried in my various churches. In addition, I asked several to pilot parts of this project and got similar feedback about the feasibility. The larger difficulty, in assessing this project, is that of convincing church leaders that this project has heavy importance when the world is not in chaos. When COVID first hit, it would have been simple to show the value of this project because it was incredibly urgent in that moment. However, the nature of tribalism makes it best to address it when it is less pronounced and less heated. For example, addressing US American politics in church would be best done in a year with no major elections. The challenge in that is that many church leaders lead from a place of urgency and triage, so helping them see the value before it's an emergency will be an ongoing challenge.

And fourth, I set forth that the early readers would find this 80% helpful in their estimation. To quantify that, I asked them to tally which sections they would rate as "helpful" and which sections they would rate as "unhelpful" in a simple binary choice and then return that to me. Each stakeholder rated each of the suggested practical resources as "helpful" save two sections, which two separate stakeholders rated as "not helpful." This means that on that scale, my early readers easily surpassed the 80% benchmark I was seeking for this.

As mentioned, this will be a slow tree to bear fruit. As we each become aware of the challenges that will be faced in a shift in the way we approach tribalism, the hope of becoming a Jesus Tribe is fraught with its own challenges. Jesus often spoke of the processes involved in growth and development of trees, shrubs, and plants. One classic passage is from Mark in the Parable of the

Seed. Jesus is quite clear that the interaction between the seed and the soil is such that once the seed is planted, the soil begins to reveal the nature of the seed: All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head<sup>63</sup>. Given that there is a process involved that Jesus clearly indicates takes time, if the Jesus Tribe is to mature in a healthy and intended way, the maturation process must be embraced, patience must be exercised, and the awareness that change takes time must be acknowledged. If there is one thing I have realized in this entire doctoral journey, in working with a congregation in this regard, we can easily resist change and be reticent to make any changes. These are things we cannot ignore if we even hope to effect change.

To this point, I have seen this project and this work bear fruit in my own ministry. Based on the feedback I have received, both via stakeholders and through secondary conversations with ministers in other contexts, I am hopeful and confident that this project will be beneficial to other church leaders and ministers who seek to utilize it and put these suggestions into practice. As mentioned, the ongoing challenge will be to address issues either before they are at a boiling point or after they have calmed to a manageable level. The world of today is one of urgency and panic, but addressing tribalism cannot be done in that mode. It must be done in the slow, patient way that Jesus advocated, as a farmer tends the fields.

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<sup>63</sup> Mark 4:26-29 (NIV).

# Project Launch Plan

## Doctoral Project Description

Christians and churches in the twenty-first century have confused and disjointed loyalties, and therefore need a way to evaluate and re-align their tribal loyalties toward Jesus and his lordship. My project will address this via website that will contain theory around tribalism and practices for churches and individuals to understand and subvert societal tribalism within their own lives. I have titled this project “Jesus Tribe” and will host it at the domain Jesus-Tribe.com.

## Audience

The target audience for the Jesus Tribe website and blog is church leadership- both lay and vocational staff- who seek to evaluate the tribal nature of our society within their congregations and invite them a new understanding in the Jesus Tribe. I will engage these church leaders in a variety of ways, each pointing back to this particular website for further discussion, resources, workshops, and collaboration. The first step will be within my own congregation. In the spring of 2024 when I initially begin to roll out the website, I will reach out to key committee chairpersons and committee members within my church to solicit their engagement and feedback. At the same time, I will share my blog regularly in pastoral groups and with other pastor friends on social media to solicit their engagement and feedback. Concurrently, I will reach out to the Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina to see if I can help with workshops and/or events to do breakout groups. The thought is to slowly build the audience through concentric circles to which I belong, soliciting engagement and feedback through each level of relationship.

## Development Plan

Due to the potentially challenging nature of discussions of tribalism in our society, and the self-protective nature of those tribes, I am not planning to launch the actual website until spring/summer of 2024. This delay is related to my change in pastoral positions, as I am beginning a new pastorate in January of 2023. I believe it is necessary to earn trust and relational equity with this community before challenging any of their particular tribal practices. I will work with a web developer beginning in December of 2023 or January of 2024 to design the look and feel of the website. Then I will input my own copy over the following months, having the site ready to launch by late spring or early summer. In that time, I will also update the relevant sections to more fully discuss the contemporary tribal conflicts of late 2023 and early 2024. Contemporary culture is constantly moving and changing, and one strength of the website plan is that I will be able to address real tribal conflict as it occurs.

At launch, I will have all my initial practical tabs completely fleshed out. I anticipate the practical side of addressing Christian tribalism to be less controversial than the theory side, so that will be less strain on any relationships. Then, over the following months, I will publish weekly blogs that cover the theory side, beginning with the “Tribal Tsunami” that COVID unleashed, discussing the closure of my previous church as a result, walking through God’s plan at Pentecost, and the hindrance of that plan by our continual practice of living in a Tribal/Babel type of world. Ultimately pointing to the practices that Jesus himself demonstrated, the Table of Jesus, as ways forward for

our church communities. As 2024 is an election year, there is little doubt that political tribalism will again increase conflict in church communities. I will describe and discuss those as they occur within the blog space, and address the reactions of those Christians as part of the further substance and development of the “Tribal Tsunami” section.

After launch and while soliciting the feedback and engagement from my own church, I anticipate more practical groups and activities ideas to emerge that I have not currently considered. The strength of the website format is that, as we trial efforts in my church, we can share those practices immediately and others can also try them. After I have published via blog the entire outline that I have currently developed, then I will return to sections and add on current events and observations to bolster and keep those updated.

In outline form:

- Phase 1- Spring 2023- winter 2023: Complete the blog posts for the first 6 months, editing and revising. Begin collaboration with web designer. During this time lay the groundwork for implementing the following practices in my own church community: Lenten Devotional for 2024, All on the Table ministry practice in 2024.
- Phase 2- Winter 2023- spring 2024: Begin implementing the workshops designed in my current church context. Begin sharing the blogs offline with key leadership. Finalize web design. Build table leader group for All on the Table in my own church, and distribute Lenten Devotional.
- Phase 3- Spring 2024: Launch website. Add one blog section per week, sharing on social media and in direct conversation with other ministers and church leaders. Work my own church through the various assessments that I have created.
- Phase 4- Summer 2024 and beyond: YouTube channel and increased online collaboration, continual web updates, begin contacting conferences and the CBF of North Carolina regarding workshops for their leadership groups.

Key performance indicators will be:

- Launch the Lenten Devotional in my own church in 2024
- Launch an All on the Table ministry in my own church, building the table leader group in fall of 2023 and launching the ministry in summer of 2024
- Within the first 3 months begin building conversations in social media spheres, first Facebook, with other church leaders that will begin to act as a cohort in developing the Jesus Tribe
- Build at least one such cohort of 10-12 church leaders
- Train and empower each leader to evaluate and assess his/her own community

- Invite at least 3 churches to participate in at least one of the practices after 6 months

#### Development Process

As I will be sharing these blogs and practices on Facebook and other media, I believe I will have extended reach and feedback options. This will allow me to update particular blogs, or to expand on previous ideas in new blogs. The tab feature will also allow continual organization which will demonstrate the theory in a visual format that will help those that wish to jump from topic to topic and then return for greater depth. At the same time, these practices will be implemented and ongoing in my own church community, providing a real life laboratory.

In the process of studying and working with this project, it became increasingly evident that there are many more books beyond the scope of my research that are worthy of additional attention in the future. While I am aware of some of the content in those books, and while I will offer commentary in end notes and footnotes on those discoveries in the days to come, I foresee this as an ongoing process that will always require refining and upgrading as more knowledge becomes available and more content is written about and explored in this particular field of endeavor. The practical tools I have employed in this project will provide me the versatility to adapt them for all future additions that can and will take place.

Blog formats allow the author to track how many visits each blog has. In addition, due to the aspiration for more healthy conversations and dialogue, I will be requesting that people have conversations in the comments. If in my tracking my visit count regularly increases, then I will have one measurable for understanding if it has struck a chord. In the practical areas, I will be seeking to hear from church leaders who have implemented these and asking that they share their thoughts and results. They will certainly tweak the processes which I suggest, so I will ask them to document their choices and share them with me. This will allow me to include those suggestions or say why I do not believe they are helpful.



# Appendix A— Milestone 1 The NPO Charter

## PERSONAL RESEARCH MANIFESTO

My approach on the NPO is to expand the sources I would normally consider, ask what the popular opinions are, and be sure to listen to thinkers I would normally disagree with.

## NPO STATEMENT

Churches, and my church specifically, needs to develop a better way of helping people identify and belong to Christ within the context of belonging to the Church, this will lead to a deeper and more fulfilling faith.

## NPO SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

Likely this will take the shape of evaluating membership. It could involve developing a different way of training “new” members, ways of covenanting with them, and how to train people into the culture of a church that does not operate according to the same standards as our greater culture. I would like to also develop a tool that will help people feel like they belong in a more concrete and real way. I do not anticipate a cost associated with this outside of time. A boundary that I will keep in mind is that this is about people who identify as Christian and their own belief in their belonging to the body of the church.

## NPO CONTEXT

The context for this project will be my particular church, Christian Fellowship Church. We are a non-denominational church in Columbus, Ohio. Mostly our church is conservative, though we do have some diversity there. It is a white church, mostly upper-middle class. It is a congregation of 125 or so, with a wide range of generations. This all means that my church community is and has been fairly comfortable, so seeing things as outsiders do can be a challenge.

## ROOT CAUSES

One of the chief causes we identified in my workshop is that tribalism is essentially a distortion of the need to belong, and it is itself based in exclusion based on what the group perceives as a lack of faithfulness, whatever that means for that particular group. This leads to less transparency and less honesty in group members when they question. It is magnified by the need to judge and determine who is “in” and who is “out.” These are often things that the Church has learned from a culture that claims acceptance but a rigid type of acceptance.

## DISCOVERY WORKSHOP STAKEHOLDERS

- Retired firefighter, 60 year old white male, father of two
- Homemaker, 50 year old white female, mother of two

- Teacher, 32 year old white female, mother of two
- Marketer, 36 year old white male, divorced, father of two
- Administrator, 30-year-old Indian female, single
- College student, pizza chef, 18-year-old white male, single

#### ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

- Pastor of twelve years, DMin graduate, and is currently helping found a seminary.
- Pastor of thirty years, DMin graduate, former director of missions, and current pastor.
- MDiv graduate and managing editor at a Christian ethics magazine.

#### 3-5 KEY BIBLICAL TEXTS

For my primary texts I would like to explore Babel and Pentecost as two archetypes. I would also like to explore Galatians 3 ("there is neither Jew nor Greek..."), and Matthew 10 (list of the disciples and their distinctive identities).

#### ACADEMIC RESOURCES

I plan to investigate the theology of reconciliation, spend a good amount of time investigating sociology and leading sociological thought, the work of theologian Miroslav Volf and sociologist Michel Maffesoli, and theology and psychology of belonging and community.

## Appendix B– Milestone 2 NPO Topic Expertise Essay

The 21st century has seen a cultural move to an era sociologist Michel Maffesoli termed “neo-tribalism.”<sup>64</sup> Neo-tribalism is marked by a shift from the individualism of the modern era into either tribalism or hyper-individualism, or perhaps both are aspects of the same movement. The biblical account is no stranger to tribalism. Tribalism is, at its base, the elevation of “us” and the deprecation of “them.”

In the interest of understanding the current milieu of neo-tribalism that has influenced the American church (and likely the worldwide church as well, but that is beyond the focus of this project), the following texts will be discussed and examined: Genesis 11.1-9, Matthew 10.2-4, Acts 2.1-13, Galatians 3.26-29, and Revelation 7.9 & 10, 21.24 & 26.

### **Genesis 11.1-9: The Tower of Babel**

*A Revised Standard Version reading with notes on select words*<sup>65</sup> <sup>66</sup> (Hebrew and Greek transliterated into English):

“1. Now the whole earth had one language (*saphah*; lip language, speech. also, edge, bank shore. *xeilos* in LXX) and the same words (*dabar*; saying, utterance, word. *phone* in LXX)

2. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

3. And they said (*amar*; to say, speak, utter. *eipon* in LXX) to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.

4. Then they said (*amar*), “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name (*sem/shem*; name, reputation, memorial, monument, “*The Name*” as designation for Yahweh. *onoma* in LXX) for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered (*phootz*; to scatter, be dispersed, break, shatter. *diaspeiro* in LXX) abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

5. The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.

6. And the Lord said (*amar*), “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language (*sapha. xeilos*, lip in LXX); and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

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<sup>64</sup> Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 1996).

<sup>65</sup> William Lee Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. (Leiden: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1971).

<sup>66</sup> James Strong. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).

7. Come, let us go down, and confuse (*balal*; mix, mingle, confuse, confound, fade away. *sugkeo* in LXX) their language (*sapha*. this use is *glossan* in LXX) there, so that they will not understand one another's speech (*sapha*, this use is *phone* in LXX)."

8. So the Lord scattered (*phootz*) them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

9. Therefore it was called (or its name was *shem*, parallel to vs 4) Babel, because there the Lord confused (*balal*) the language (*sapha*. *xeilos* in LXX) of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them (*phootz*) abroad over the face of all the earth."

The primary difficulty in interpreting the Tower of Babel story is the reason for Yahweh's judgement on the people of the tower. Why were they scattered?

One possibility that has been suggested is that Yahweh rejects the hubris of making a name.<sup>67</sup> This seems to rely on the connection between pride and making a name for themselves. However, there is a lack of evidence within the text of Genesis to this point to indicate that goal would be rejected by Yahweh. A second option is Yahweh's concern that "nothing will be impossible" and thus God sought to stymie the creative ability of the humans and to keep the human beings from growing in their knowledge and accomplishments.<sup>68</sup> But, again, there is nothing in the text that indicates growth of the human species as against the purposes of Yahweh. Lastly, one suggestion growing in popularity is the hypothesis that the ziggurat was being built with slave labor. This position bolsters its claim by citing the linguistic connections between the Tower of Babel episode and the brick building in the Exodus account.<sup>69</sup> While it is a fact that slave labor was often used throughout the ancient Near East of the time, that is also not directly indicated in the text, nor was there a prohibition at this point in history. None of these seem to be satisfactory as motivation for Yahweh to scatter the people of Babel through the earth.

Seemingly, as Terrence Fretheim points out, the reason for God's judgement is in the statement of the people "...otherwise we will be scattered abroad upon the whole face of the earth." According to Fretheim,

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<sup>67</sup> Piotr Malysz, "The Name Above Them All," *Lutheran Forum* 54, no. 1, (Spring 2020): 7.

<sup>68</sup> Matthew Michael. "The Tower of Babel and God's Heavenly Staircase," *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 39 no 1 (2017): 31-45.

<sup>69</sup> Sheila Tuller Keiter. "Outsmarting God: Egyptian Slavery and the Tower of Babel," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 41 no 3 (Jul - Sep 2013): 201, 202.

An isolationist view of their place in the world, centered on self-preservation, puts the rest of the creation at risk. The building project thus *understeps*, rather than oversteps human limits, for it prevents scattering and taking up the creational command that put the creation at risk.<sup>70</sup>

God's goal was for humans to completely fill and steward the earth (Genesis 1.28), so if the humans were intent upon remaining together in one place, then they were rejecting God's goal for them. Fretheim's explanation reading of the text seems to make the most sense of the text as it is situated within the canon. This caused Yahweh to "scatter" their language so that their tribes could also, thus, be scattered. This text seems to be the beginning of tribes and race in scripture.

### **Matthew 10.2-4**

#### *New Revised Standard Version*

"2 These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3 Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4 Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him."

This short segment of verses does not require much in the way of debate or discussion, but it is important for the fact that this is the "new Israel" that Jesus himself chose and assembled. Because of that, it is, in many ways, indicative of his plan and his vision for the people who would comprise his kingdom.

Based on a straightforward reading, the reader can know the vocations of several of these disciples. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen. Matthew was a tax collector. And though zealots had other main sources of work, Simon the zealot would likely have seen his main task in the world as the violent overthrow of Rome.<sup>71</sup> Judas Iscariot is noteworthy for his action of betrayal.

Though there would have been a large overlap in the identity of the men listed (and the women unlisted), there is also some very obvious distinction and difference among those who comprised Jesus' first followers. The most radical difference in worldview and perspective would likely have been between Simon the zealot and Matthew the tax collector. Simon would have believed Romans deserved death, and those that cooperated- such as Matthew- deserved the same. Matthew likely saw things from a more pragmatic lens, believing that sometimes a person had to compromise to get along. That Jesus called these two dynamically different men into his ring of discipleship shows that his vision for his new tribe would transcend and supersede any old allegiance or sympathy.

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<sup>70</sup> Terence Fretheim, *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 412.

<sup>71</sup> McKnight et al point out that the zealot party did not exist at the time Jesus walked on the earth, but the predecessors would likely have shared traits. [Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels](#).

That he called both also reveals his desire to have diversity within his ranks. This is further evidenced by his calling of fishermen, and the one who betrayed him.

### **Acts 2.1-13: Pentecost**

*A Revised Standard Version reading with some notes on particular words:*<sup>72 73</sup>

1. "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

2 And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

3 And there appeared to them tongues (*glossa*; tongue, body part, tongue, language/dialect) as of fire (*puros*; fire), distributed (*diamerizo*; to cleave asunder, to be divided, to be distributed, of note, used in each of the gospel accounts. Matthew, Mark, and John use the term regarding Jesus' garments at his crucifixion, Luke using the term to divide the cup at Passover/Last Supper) and resting on each one of them.

4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues (*glossais*), as the Spirit gave them utterance (*apophtheggomai*; to speak out, speak forth, not a word of every day speech, but "belonging to dignified and elevated discourse", used only here, and in Acts 2.14 and 26.25).

5 Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation (*ethnous*; nations, or Gentiles in other contexts) under heaven.

6 And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking (*lalountown*; from *laleo*, speaking) in his own language (*dialektow*; from *dialectos*, dialect, language, in contrast to *glossalalia* or tongue, used only 6 times in the NT, and only in Acts, 1.19, 2.6, 2.8, 21.40, 22.2. 26.14).

7 And they were amazed and wondered, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking (*lalountes*) Galileans?

8 And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language (*dialektow*)?

9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,

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<sup>72</sup> Frederick Danker and Kathryn Krug. *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>73</sup> James Strong. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).



10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,

11 Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues (*glossais*) the mighty works of God."

12 And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

13 But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine." "

The story of the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost starts in a similar way as the story of Babel: all together in one place. Pentecost, a term used by Diaspora Jews for the full day harvest festival that celebrated the "Festival of Weeks"<sup>74</sup>, was one of the three major times when the Jewish people who were spread abroad made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This event for Luke, according to JDG Dunn, is "the great theme" of Acts and there is "no story to tell" without it.<sup>75</sup>

Typically and often in a discussion about Pentecost, the student of the text can get lost in the debate and discussion concerning the giving of tongues after the event. However, that debate and discussion does not seem central to the story of Pentecost. The story of Pentecost is a story demonstrating the next move of the mission of God within the world. That God empowered the next move through a supernatural mutual understanding given by the Holy Spirit. Today's discussions about the gift of tongues is nearly always around that gift within worship and church practice, which is more appropriate for a discussion of 1 Corinthians and other epistles.

This is a story about mission, God's mission in the world as lived out by the apostles. There are two separate groups at the beginning of the story of Pentecost. First the Diaspora Jews, who are all gathered together in Jerusalem, something that is not all that common. Second the apostles of Jesus, and as Acts 2.1 points out, they were "all together in one place." In the Tower of Babel story, all the people of the world were gathered and purposed to build a tower in order to keep themselves gathered. However, here in the story of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gathered first the Jewish people and second the apostles together, so that they could be scattered after receiving the gospel message and being filled by the Holy Spirit.

At Babel the people decided, out of disobedience and fear of scattering, to remain together, and were consequently scattered by God confusing their language. At Pentecost, in contrast, the language is already confused, but through God's provision they are able to hear and believe the gospel message in their own dialect. This then, naturally leads to a "scattering" of the gospel message as those Diaspora Jews return to their homelands and the apostles continue to be "sent."

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<sup>74</sup> Robert Wall, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary: Volume IX*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 53.

<sup>75</sup> JDG Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Eerdmans, 1996), 22.

A new tribe that Jesus formed began to expand into different tongues and dialects, paving the way for “all nations.”

### **Galatians 3.28, 29**

*New Revised Standard Version*

“28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

These verses can be read in a straightforward way as well. Paul here is setting forth the identity and goal of Christians as they are united to Christ: one people, a new community that is not defined by their race, vocation, or gender. Paul does not say those categories no longer exist, simply that none of them has any bearing on the family of faith. This gives insight into the view of community that was evolving through the first great Christian theologian.

### **Revelation 7.9, 10, Revelation 21.24, 26**

*New Revised Standard Version*

“9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation (*ethnous*; nations, term also used for Gentiles), from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” “

“24 The *nations* (*ethne*) will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it...

26 People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the *nations* (*ethnawn*).”

As part of the vision of God’s telos for the creation, John of Patmos sees these two snapshots of God’s purpose. The first John sees the various nations, as Tony Evans points out “what I want you to note from that verse is that John saw them. The differences were visual.”<sup>76</sup> So early in the book of Revelation it is visually apparent that the tribe at the throne of God is diverse.

Later, in the new Jerusalem, there are two further uses of the Greek word “*ethne*” which is either translated “nations” or “Gentiles”, depending on the context. However, functionally both mean the same. Evans says this about that scene “that doesn’t mean we become ‘one race’... The kingdom of

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<sup>76</sup> Tony Evans, *Oneness Embraced Reconciliation, the Kingdom, and How We Are Stronger Together*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 62, 63.

heaven where we will one day go as the bride of Christ will be made up of diversity.”<sup>77</sup> Evans succinctly observes that there will continue racial diversity, according to this passage in Revelation, into eternity.

This makes three major narratives and two brief descriptor passages that all come together to describe God’s vision for his creation, his new creation, and the people that belong to him in it. The Tower of Babel scene reveals a humanity that, if left to its own devices, would remain safe and gathered, families and tribes as islands unto themselves. God had to confuse their language in order to break their inertia and move them out into the world, to scatter them. Then the selection of Jesus’ disciples began to reveal that his purpose was a diverse tribe, not based upon “correct” thoughts about the Romans, but based upon loyalty to Jesus and his cause and mission. This continued to expand in the event of Pentecost, an event that did not necessarily mirror Babel, but certainly rhymed with it. All the people were gathered, both the disciples and the Diaspora Jews, and then when they scattered again they took with them the gospel in multiple languages and tribes. God’s will for a tribe that transcends tribes took an immense step.

Paul in Galatians made this plan explicit: Jesus wanted a kingdom of one, but a kingdom that contains both Jews and “the nations” (Gentiles), slave and free, male and female. These identity markers would remain, but become subordinate to the tribal identity that Christ began building in the gospel accounts and continued to build through Paul and the disciples. Then in Revelation it is shown that the end goal is every segment of humanity represented in the new Jerusalem, their distinctions still intact, but not obstacles to unity.

These passages reveal the plan of God: a tribe that exists and belongs to Jesus Christ; a tribe that contains representatives of every other tribe, a tribe that is one with Christ and with one another, but also diverse and distinct in its members. This is the biblical vision, but what is the current trajectory?

The themes of unity and division have occurred throughout church history and its related events. Each of the following examples did not necessarily lead to a full schism, but many did. In some instances, the schism led to growth for the church, and in others it was detrimental. Each situation seems to be unique, but there are also many commonalities.

## **A Brief History of Division within the Church**

### *Early Church*

Though it would be impossible to discuss each incident of division through Church history, it will be helpful and illustrative to examine select incidents. One of the best known early schismatic moments within the Church was the division concerning Gentile converts to Christianity and their relationship to Jewish law. Acts 15 demonstrates this well: “Certain people came down from Judea

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<sup>77</sup> Evans, *Oneness Embraced*, 253.

to Antioch and were teaching the believers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' "<sup>78</sup> This issue led to a conflict between Peter and Paul<sup>79</sup>, though that seems to have been resolved before Acts 15.<sup>80</sup> The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible draws a connection between the ongoing church issue of circumcision among Gentile converts and the parting of Paul and Barnabas<sup>81</sup> (and perhaps John Mark) as well.<sup>82</sup> These major figures within the early church were seemingly reconciled<sup>83</sup>, but this was a clear foretaste of events to come.

Through each of the first century, the second century, and third century, the burgeoning young Church encountered conflict and division repeatedly, including the rise of Gnosticism, the Marcionite schism, ongoing legalism, Montanism, to name a few. Church leaders also struggled with the place of secular philosophy within the Church, to quote Tertullian "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?"<sup>84</sup> suggesting that the subjects studied in both locations were not compatible for discourse or dialogue.

Though conflict and division persisted within the Church through the first three centuries, it was not until the Council of Nicea that the Church had both the crisis and the clout to convene a full ecumenical council. In 323 AD, the main bishops and leaders of the Christian church, including Emperor Constantine, were gathered in Nicea to discuss primarily the nature of Jesus Christ.<sup>85</sup> Was he "homo-ousios" with God the Father, or "homo-i-ousios" with God the Father? Was he the same substance or a similar substance? The major figureheads of this conflict were Athanasius, who claimed that Jesus shared substance and was "begotten but not made", and Arius, who claimed that "there was when he was not" of Jesus. The entire church would finally agree to the language of Athanasius while rejecting Arius, with the support of Emperor Constantine.

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<sup>78</sup> Acts 15.1

<sup>79</sup> As demonstrated in Galatians 2

<sup>80</sup> The exact timeline for these events is unclear, as the incident Paul describes in Galatians 2 is not detailed within Acts.

<sup>81</sup> Acts 15.39

<sup>82</sup> Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible

<sup>83</sup> Paul and Peter before Acts 15, and Paul and John Mark based on 2 Timothy 4.11

<sup>84</sup> Tertullian, *Against Heresies*, chapter 7.

<sup>85</sup> This is not to say that the nature of Christ was the only important issue at Nicea, it was not. The council decided how to set the date of Easter, ratified a set of twenty "canons" or church laws, and constructed the Nicene Creed.

Justo Gonzalez summarizes the Nicene formula: "One may affirm there was a great ambiguity... The creed, whose main purpose was to affirm the divinity of the Son, could also be interpreted as an affirmation of the divine unity."<sup>86</sup> Gonzalez recognizes that the ambiguity of the creed led to tension, however, tension seems preferable to the temptation to seek to define the divine exhaustively and completely. Too far in the direction of divine unity to be comfortable for some from the Eastern churches, but that simply added fuel for a future fire that would eventually destroy the unity of the East and West. The Council "condemned Arianism, that condemnation did not end the controversy, which lasted for more than fifty years beyond that."<sup>87</sup>

With the Council of Nicea reaching a consensus, even if uneasy, on the full divinity of Christ, the Council of Chalcedon eventually was convened to attempt to decide the question of the *humanity* of Christ. As a result of this council "The creed of the church would still be that of Nicea, although it was now to be interpreted as was proposed by the *Definition* of Chalcedon... But the unity that had been achieved was more apparent than real."<sup>88</sup> Gonzalez recognizes the building ruptures between East and West that would eventually come to mean mutual excommunication. But one also has to wonder if this is a case of hindsight, perhaps every unity is tenuous, apparent, and potentially brittle.

### *The Great Schism*

Though 1054 AD has been considered the date of the "Great Schism" of the Christian church, when the Roman Catholics went west and the Eastern Orthodox east, Roger Olson suggests that the schism began long before. Olson in "The Story of Christian Theology" discusses the "Great Schism" this way: "Perhaps the most fundamental cause of the schism was what church historian Jaroslav Pelikan calls 'intellectual alienation.'... Perhaps the immediate theological causes of the schism could have been overcome were it not for the deeper differences of culture, politics and mindsets between East and West."<sup>89</sup> It is always tempting to simplify causes and historical events, but Olson has a strong case that the split of the East and West in the church was not simple.

Essentially according to Olson the "schism" actually began with Augustine and came to full fruition in 1054 with the *filioque* controversy. This controversy centered on a Western addition to the Nicene Creed that stated that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father *and from the son*, rather than simply from the Father as the original had read. The Eastern Church rejected the West's

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<sup>86</sup> González, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity. Volume 1: The Early Church to the Reformation. Rev. and Updated [ed.], 2nd ed.* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 271.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 272

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 380

<sup>89</sup> Roger E Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 305.

unilateral change, and in 1054 both sides of the church mutually excommunicated one another.<sup>90</sup> Though there has not been a full reconciliation, and that may even be impossible, there has been significant warming between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches in recent decades. One sign of hope was that in December of 1965, the excommunications were mutually lifted and removed from the ecclesial memory.<sup>91</sup> This has led to a hopeful dialogue around the differences, and as Roberson points out,<sup>92</sup> this dialogue partially started with the more conciliatory tone of Vatican II. If relations continue to improve, then both sides of the Great Schism will owe significantly to voices like Hans Küng. Küng long advocated for dialogue and reconciliation between the two, often frustrating many within the Roman Catholic side of the schism. Küng boldly stated his position in *The Church*: "A division in the Church is a scandal and a disgrace. Anyone who did not actively try to prevent it, anyone who furthered it in any way at all must bear part of the blame."<sup>93</sup>

### *Protestant Reformation*

At almost the same time in history, 1517 and 1519 respectively, Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli began similar but also different critiques of the Roman Catholic Church. These could be considered the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation. Twenty years later John Calvin arrived in Geneva and also pushed reformation in the church. These three, plus many more, sparked what history calls the "Protestant Reformation" but that was not exactly their intent. Alister McGrath said it this way:

To speak of "the rise of Protestantism" is to offer a controlling narrative that links these potentially disparate events as part of a greater, more significant movement. So persuasive was this emerging narrative that many of the reforming groups scattered across Europe realigned their sense of identity and purpose to conform to it. As these movements began to locate themselves on a historical and conceptual map, each came increasingly to identify itself in terms of what was perceived as a greater overarching movement.<sup>94</sup>

McGrath is saying that though hindsight allows historians and theologians to label that movement "the Protestant Reformation", it was in reality many much smaller attempts at reform that eventually led to a full shift in perceived identity. As those groups recognized the larger movement, they seem to have more fully embraced the zeitgeist of which they were part. Each of these smaller pushes for

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 305.

<sup>91</sup> "Relations Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church," Ronald G. Roberson, accessed April 2, 2021, <https://www.apostolicpilgrimage.org/-/relations-between-the-catholic-church-and-the-orthodox-church>

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), 283.

<sup>94</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution-- a History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First*. 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 62.

reform would eventually add up to full Reformation where the Western church was split into Roman Catholic and Protestant. Though I believe McGrath is correct insofar as the mood and perception of the reformers and their groups, it also seems like this kind of violent reaction was inevitable based upon the abuses rampant within the Roman Catholic Church and their lack of ability to receive and internalize complaint from within. That is, because the Roman Catholic Church denied an escape valve for pressure of critique, explosion was inevitable. This was the beginning of repeated schisms leading, at least in part, to the multitude of denominations that exist today.

### *Racial Divisions*

A parallel division, but not necessarily independent of denominational division, has been racial division. One of the most obvious current divisions within the American Church is racial division, most prominently between black and white churches. It has become a common saying that the most segregated hour for Americans every week is the hour of worship on Sunday mornings.

Jemar Tisby in *The Color of Compromise* traces the division that arose between the black and white churches in America. "There would be no black church without racism in the white church."<sup>95</sup> Tisby came to faith and was raised in a white evangelical church, but as a black man felt a need to explore the roots of the Black Lives Matter movement and the historical roots of racism in the United States after the events in Ferguson, MO in 2014.<sup>96</sup> Though it seems Tisby overstates his case, there would be a tendency toward "birds of a feather" mentality regardless of what any group did, he does still have a strong point. One has to wonder how differently black and white Christianity would have evolved if the white church had embraced sooner?

Tisby points out that when Africans were kidnapped and forced into slavery, many were already Christians. Then, as they were forced into their roles in the Americas, they looked for ways to worship Jesus. If the white church allowed them to worship, they were treated as second-class Christians. This led to the black slaves forming their own times of worship, times when they were free from a slave master's eye. In 1865 as the Civil War ended, the United States made banned slavery and freed all slaves. After this abolition of slavery happened, many freed slaves attempted to worship with established white churches, but were again rebuffed. Based upon the deep desire to worship, but left with no recourse in the established white churches, black Christians largely began their own traditions and Christian communities.<sup>97</sup>

In *The Christian Imagination*, Willie Jennings has a different emphasis while still discussing the same division and telling the same story. Jennings begins to address the issue of racism within

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<sup>95</sup> Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2020)

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

colonialism and the devaluing of non-European peoples and nations. Jennings recognizes that the beginning of the slave trade largely inaugurated the idea that skin color determined a person's identity. Before they were taken from Africa, people belonged to a tribe and had their familial identity based on their place. However, after: "people would henceforth (and forever) carry their identities on their bodies, without remainder."<sup>98</sup> Jennings makes a powerful point, though each person is a complicated confluence of many different aspects, this demonstrates how racism was able to flourish by distilling all those complications and multiplicities to one simple factor for judgement: skin color. These events may not have been the beginning of racism or ethnocentrism, but they do seem to be a time of its ascendance.

As colonialism established a metanarrative that some nations were superior to other nations, this naturally led to a conclusion that people within those nations were superior to people outside of those nations. Then as those "superior" nations subjugated the "inferior", it was only a small step to diminish the humanity of those from the "inferior" nations and cultures. This then allowed the "inferior" humans to be objectified and classified solely based upon the color of their skin. Race signified WHICH humans were allowed to be made commodities, and also led to a value judgment about human worth based on skin color.

Race as a dividing mark is not only the case in the United States with black and white Americans, but also internationally anywhere there has been an imbalance in power. In Exclusion and Embrace, Miroslav Volf mentions this tension between Croats, Muslims, and Serbs in Bosnia: "Ask any of the warring parties in Bosnia, however, and they will tell you who the real barbarian is. You might be surprised to find on the Serb list not only Croats and Muslims, but also the whole West."<sup>99</sup> And the others believe the same in reverse. Volf would know, he was raised as a Croatian Pentecostal in Novi Sad, Serbia, where Serbian Orthodox was the primary faith.<sup>100</sup> Volf experienced and articulated the ability of any group to vilify and demonize other groups. Though many Americans may primarily see this as a local and national issue, Volf and others clearly show it is not isolated to the United States. This group dynamic seems unavoidable in places where there are different races and old animosities.

Jennings situates the racism of church within the disconnection of people and land, a natural progression of colonialism. But Jennings also suggests the beginnings of a way forward. In his conclusion he says this: "The story of race is also the story of place... There is no mystery to race. But until we reckon with its substitution for place and place-centered identity, its power will remain

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<sup>98</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2010), 59.

<sup>99</sup> Miroslav Volf. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation. Revised and Updated.* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019)

<sup>100</sup> Ibid



and remain mysteriously ever renewing with each generation of race-formed children.”<sup>101</sup> Jennings is early on suggesting a potential way forward, and that way forward will also be valuable for a study of neo-tribalism.

### *Political Divisions*

In most recent years, to keep track of the denominations and confederations of churches and loose alliances (based upon nuanced doctrinal statements) of churches is all but impossible. Some of this is due to the nature of an increasingly fragmented culture, and some likely had the seeds planted at the very beginning of the Protestant Reformation. McGrath says this: “Protestantism developed its sense of identity primarily in response to external threats and criticisms rather than as a result of shared beliefs. In one sense, the idea of “Protestantism” can be seen as the creation of its opponents rather than of its supporters.”<sup>102</sup> Meaning, that without an opponent, it is easy for protestants to lose their group identity. It would seem impossible to prove in every situation, but McGrath’s observation does seem to describe the world of the Church as it is now.

This is where political division has entered the conversation for church. Since many churches struggle to find an opponent to oppose, the political conversation has ably and readily provided that opponent. This is not necessarily new to the Church, but anecdotally pastors have reported a different tone and mood since the 2016 election. Michael O. Emerson, sociologist and American religion scholar, has said: “I’ve been studying religion and religious congregations for 30 years, this is a level of conflict that I’ve never seen. What is different now? The conflict is over entire worldviews – politics, race, how we are to be in the world, and even what religion and faith are for.”<sup>103</sup> Now, churches that would otherwise largely agree on doctrine have divided based upon their political positions and proclivities. There are liberal and conservative Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans.

### *Volf and Exclusion*

In his aforementioned book about identity and otherness, Exclusion and Embrace, Miroslav Volf looks at the dynamics of the relationships between those that would be “other” from one another. Volf’s primary concern is for the “social agents” (individuals) but that concern is relevant and important for social groups as well. One issue Volf points out with postmodernity is it “creates a climate in which evasion of moral responsibilities is a way of life. By rendering relationships ‘fragmentary’ and ‘discontinuous’ it fosters ‘disengagement and commitment-avoidance.’ ”<sup>104</sup> Volf

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<sup>101</sup> Jennings, 289.

<sup>102</sup> McGrath, 63.

<sup>103</sup> Francis Wilkinson, “America’s Churches are Now Polarized Too,” *Bloomberg*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-02-21/after-trump-america-s-churches-are-more-polarized-than-ever>.

<sup>104</sup> Volf, 21.

is describing here what Maffesoli will describe later, that loyalty looks very different than it previously did. The lack of one central locus of identity (previously family, place, tribe) for each person leads to a diverse type of belonging. This leads to a feedback loop where belonging is less firm and more transient.

This lack of firm identity and belonging leads to more frequent exclusion of others. The process of "exclusion" as Volf labels it is the rejection of the "other" for any reason; from exclusion based upon a perceived injustice to exclusion based upon skin color.

The first pitfall of "exclusion" according to Volf is actually the over-emphasis on "inclusion" which becomes a lack of any boundary whatsoever. "Vilify all boundaries, pronounce ever discrete identity oppressive, put the tag 'exclusion' on every stable difference- and you will have aimless drifting instead of clear-sighted agency, haphazard activity instead of moral engagement and accountability and, in the long run, a torpor of death instead of a dance of freedom."<sup>105</sup> Differentiation and boundaries are not exclusion, they are actually an important bulwark against exclusion.<sup>106</sup> Volf here is seeking to elucidate and demonstrate that for an identity to thrive the identity must have distinctives from other identities. This seems to be the case because if every difference is negative, then identities instead become homogeneous rather than unique and distinctive. In other words, it can be oppressive to force sameness, because the unique identifiers are then evaluated and judged. Volf largely focuses on the status of an individual, but this is no less true for churches and church communities.

As a type of exclusion, Volf uses the text of Cain and Abel found in Genesis. "By his crime, Cain has robbed himself not only of a brother, but also the possibility of belonging... By his own act of exclusion he excluded himself from all relationships- from the land below, from God above, from the people around. No belonging is possible, only distance... Because belonging is home, and home is brother, who is no more."<sup>107</sup> The chief characteristics of exclusion are: "First, exclusion can entail cutting of the bonds that connect, taking oneself out of the pattern of interdependence and placing oneself in a position of sovereign independence."<sup>108</sup> Cain did that when he rejected God's judgment of his offering, and in the process rejected Abel's right to life. "Second, exclusion can entail erasure of separation, not recognizing the other as someone who in his or her otherness belongs to the pattern of interdependence."<sup>109</sup> Cain also did this by not seeing Abel as a whole being, capable of feeling and worship on his own accord and in his own right. This pattern of Cain

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 65

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 97

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 67

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 67

and Abel has also happened on a group level, as groups have decided that their identity before God must be the only true identity, and seeking to eliminate any different identities.

### *Racial Tribes*

One major realm of exclusion in the current American church is the previously mentioned racial segregation that is so prominent and obvious. Tisby traces that segregation to the days of slavery, and the continuation through the Jim Crow era and those institutional inertias have continued into the 2020s. Tisby describes a lack of courage from the white church in the United States throughout history that has bloomed into a fully segregated church in the modern world.<sup>110</sup> “Historically speaking, when faced with the choice between racism and equality, the American church has tended to practice a complicit Christianity rather than a courageous Christianity. They chose comfort over constructive conflict and in so doing created and maintained a status quo of injustice.”<sup>111</sup> Tisby seems correct, but that level of comfort does not seem to have been unique in the white church in the United States. Comfort seems to have been a powerful hindrance to the Church in any era which it is applicable. This has led to a further splintering in the loyalties of Christians in those churches, and a difficulty in identifying one another as belonging to the same community.

Tony Evans insightfully recognizes in Oneness Embraced that this division is a powerful tool of the enemy of God: “The great tragedy today is not so much that our society is still divided along racial, cultural, and class lines, but that God’s people, the church, are even more deeply divided. This disunity provides Satan with his most powerful tool for crippling the influence of Christianity.”<sup>112</sup> Evans goes on to suggest that a common mission or goal would be helpful in the effort toward reconciliation and reunification of the church along racial lines.<sup>113</sup> Exclusion based upon race seems to have been a large factor in the Church in the United States losing its ability to have a prophetic voice, so Evans seems confirmed in that.

As mentioned, Willie Jennings traces the theological roots of the racial division within the church to the removal of Africans from their land, which made their identity completely about the color of their skin. This then created identity solely on race, and created a category of “whiteness” which was viewed as good and correct, and made everything else inferior to that, or a reason for exclusion. Jennings contrasts the Christian commitment to other commitments:

This network of kinship (based upon Jesus) exists in abiding tension with other kinship networks that demand adherence... That is, these worlds see people only within the structures of cultural

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<sup>110</sup> Tisby.

<sup>111</sup> Tisby.

<sup>112</sup> Tony Evans, *Oneness Embraced Reconciliation, the Kingdom, and How We Are Stronger Together*, (2015), 69.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

belonging and its concomitant social and political commitments. They see people only through the binary adherence or betrayal of culture, nation, or people.<sup>114</sup>

In other words, kinship structures force people toward exclusion of those that do not conform. This is especially true within the topic of race. Jennings points out as well, one emerging hallmark of the tribes of the twenty-first century: a binary type of belonging. The social and political views are part of the package, it seems, in this type of belonging.

Jennings imagines a kinship that is not based on skin color (or other centers) but is instead centered on Jesus Christ. And that the new biracial community is not defined as black and white, but Jew and Gentile and would be “the basis for peace.”<sup>115</sup> He goes on: “Imagine a people defined by their cultural differences yet who turn their histories and cultural logics toward a new determination, a new social performance of identity.”<sup>116</sup> This is emphasized by going from *ethnoi*, to *laos*, according to Jennings:

Indeed, God sought to address exilic existence by bringing the people of God into the desert and through the wilderness that they might learn the truth of their existence- they are not *ethnoi*, but *laos*. The truth of this lesson required that it be repeated. There was a man, born of Israel, who faced the needs of all peoples for the sake of many and who offers to Israel and to the Gentiles a similar word, you are not *ethnoi*, but my *laos*.<sup>117</sup>

So Jennings imagines a people of God who have rejected the logic of exclusion based upon race, and done so based upon the center which is Jesus Christ. Jennings takes up a strand that Volf originally began, that identity requires boundaries and distinctives, but that it does not stop there. That there is the possibility that the people of God can exist with distinctives while also being one people. Jesus the place that can come to be the chief identity marker for the people of God moving forward.

### *An Age of Outrage*

While those snapshots help build a picture of where the Church in the United States has been, what is the current state? Ed Stetzer (pastor, church planter, missiologist, and Billy Graham Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism at Wheaton College) wrote a book seeking to look closely at that question, in Christians in the Age of Outrage. In it, Stetzer outlines some of the current milieu

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<sup>114</sup> Jennings, 273.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 272.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 272.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 285.

within church culture. Exclusion has become evident through the outrage and “cancel culture”<sup>118</sup> that is perpetuated by all sides of the culture wars. Stetzer believes that there are two primary causes of outrage: “The first cause of our outrage stems from the increasing polarization of American society, in terms of both religion and politics. The second cause lies in the unprecedented advance of technology that has completely altered almost every facet of our daily lives in less than a generation.”<sup>119</sup> What Stetzer identifies as a cause seems instead to be a symptom, that the polarization is actually a *symptom* of tribalism, rather than a cause of outrage. The second cause he identifies seems to be a cause of deeper tribalism, the ability of technology to entrench ideas.

It is increasingly easy to dehumanize others on the internet, and as Stetzer shows, this then leads to more anger, which leads to a deeper entrenchment with whatever “side” a person is on. Christians have perpetuated and participated in this culture of outrage, which has led to further exclusion, which has cycled to more outrage, and so on.

Part of the outrage and part of the exclusion at least stems from the correct and good Christian desire to see the world changed. James Davison Hunter details many of the methods and failures of that Christian desire in *To Change the World*. “...The reality is that politics is the tactic of choice for many Christians as they think about changing the world. Hunter shows how this has been most conspicuously true for Evangelicals, though it has also been as true of Christians in all the mainline Protestant traditions. Hunter sees the perception of churches this way: “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.*”<sup>120</sup> Hunter’s suggestion seems to show as true in the way Christians have been viewed and have engaged in recent elections.

The problem, though, according to Hunter, is “cultures simply do not change in these ways, or at least not in the way people think they do.”<sup>121</sup> Stetzer describes the symptom of outrage, and Hunter describes part of the sickness at the root: Christians have sought to change culture via politics, and that has failed, which has resulted in outrage and frustration.

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<sup>118</sup> Cancel culture is a difficult term to define, as it is a recent term, and it is also used in multiple contexts with seemingly a wide array of meanings. Generally it is used if a significant portion of internet users attempt to ostracize a public figure for inappropriate remarks, actions, or any other behavior deemed unacceptable. Ligaya Mishan wrote a fairly in-depth article for the New York Times here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/t-magazine/cancel-culture-history.html>

<sup>119</sup> Ed Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage: How to Bring Our Best When the World Is at Its Worst* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 2018), XV.

<sup>120</sup> Hunter, James Davison, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 18

In the book *Cynical Theories*, authors Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay seek to engage what they see as harmful practices of what they call “applied postmodernism.”<sup>122</sup> The authors believe that “a diverse set of highly politicized and actionable Theories developed out of postmodernism proper”<sup>123</sup> and that this group of ideas is harmful to society at large. It would seem, however, that Pluckrose and Lindsay view the deconstruction of the postmodern ethos as much more monolithic than experience seems to indicate. Pluckrose and Lindsay seem to believe that these cynical theories will harm society as society continues to embrace them.<sup>124</sup>

Pluckrose and Lindsay seem to adequately describe many thoughts and groups that exist in the current outrage culture, or “cancel culture” as it is often labeled. However, the authors seem to operate from a modern mindset, believing that these disparate groups represent an entire cultural movement. That does not seem accurate, as the groups that now exist in the current Christian and American cultures are not monolithic, in fact the only thing that seems monolithic is the lack of unity or conformity.

### *Maffesoli and Neo-Tribes*

Though Volf provides an accurate representation of what has been happening on an individual relational level, he does not fully represent or explain the discord and fragmentation that has been society wide. He himself points this out “I am not even sure that theologians *qua* theologians are best suited to have one (proposal)... Attending to social arrangements is essential. But it is Christian economists, political scientists, social philosophers, etc. in cooperation with theologians, rather than theologians themselves, that ought to address this issue.”<sup>125</sup> This is in large part due to the ubiquitous nature and effect of fragmentation. This fragmentation is largely a result of a paradigm shift that largely occurred in the mid-1900s.

Societal and cultural shifts are nearly impossible to pinpoint in time. Arnold Toynbee coined the term “postmodernism” in 1939 to describe the shift that occurred in his mind sometime between 1850 and 1875, though he later revised that to state that the shift occurred after World War I.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity-and Why This Harms Everybody*, First Edition. (Durham, North Carolina: Pitchstone Publishing) 2020, 46.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Volf, 21.

<sup>126</sup> Thomas Docherty, in a lecture archived here: <https://www.mty.itesm.mx/dhcs/deptos/ri/ri95-801/lecturas/lec030.html>

Some see the roots of postmodernity in the Dada movement,<sup>127</sup> others that it really took root in the aftermath of World Wars I and II<sup>128</sup>, and still others that the work of Jorge Luis Borges really inaugurated the shift.<sup>129</sup> David Foster Wallace famously remarked that “(Jorges Luis) Borges is the great bridge between modernism and post-modernism in world literature.”<sup>130</sup> Though the time of the shift toward postmodernity is difficult to pinpoint, the general ideas of it are less so. Postmodern is not a paradigm, as such, but a deconstruction and rejection of what has come before.

Philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Richard Rorty, among many others, were some of the prominent voices in that deconstruction. Postmodernity then rejected metatheories and metanarratives that were previously accepted to describe the world. This carried with it a rejection of the concept of universal truths. Michel Maffesoli sought to understand sociology in that world, and this confluence of thinking led him to say, “The black and white absolutism that has prevailed in criticism, offspring of the Enlightenment, and which continues to prevail in our discipline, is incapable of comprehending the conflict of values that underpins all social existence.”<sup>131</sup> In other words, this unique moment of deconstruction is particularly difficult for sociologists to understand.

The question philosophers had to ask was, “what comes next?”. But it seems possible that this era may require sociologists as much as philosophers. Sociologist Michel Maffesoli wrote The Time of Tribes in 1988, but later was translated to English in 1996. In The Time of Tribes Maffesoli seems to be indicating that the next paradigm is not so much a universal paradigm, or even predominantly a philosophical one, but this paradigm is marked by the schismatic nature of all, a sociological paradigm.

Instead of society embracing a meta-narrative, individuals simply exist within the “masses” and then temporarily join separate and distinct “tribes” or “neo-tribes.” These neo-tribes are marked by their temporary nature, and by “fluidity, occasional gatherings, and dispersal.”<sup>132</sup> Maffesoli essentially posits that all people in any given culture exist as part of the “masses,” and all people also exist as part of multiple “neo-tribes.” Each person will temporarily leave the masses to take part in the neo-tribal rites or rituals, then after will return to the masses. The masses are not unified, the masses are

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<sup>127</sup> An art movement localized in Zurich as a critique of culture after World War I: <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/dada/>

<sup>128</sup> Paul Crosthwaite, for example, in Trauma, Postmodernism, and the Aftermath of World War II.

<sup>129</sup> Edna Aizenberg in “Postmodern or Post-Auschwitz Borges and the Limits of Representation” seems to see Borges as a pioneer who started down the postmodern path as a result of the horrors of Auschwitz.

<sup>130</sup> David Foster Wallace, “Borges on the Couch,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/07/books/review/borges-on-the-couch.html>.

<sup>131</sup> Maffesoli, 52.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 76

almost just a holding pattern or even perhaps a static noise of people. Each person then chooses and participates in multiple tribes, which in turn influence the person's identity, values, and behavior.

Maffesoli describes a key aspect as the schismatic and fragmented reality of these tribes:

The emerging rationality is principally proxemic, intensive. It is organized around a mainspring (a guru, an activity, pleasure, space) which binds people together as well as liberates them. It is centripetal as well as centrifugal, whence the apparent instability of tribes: the coefficient of belonging is not absolute, and anyone can participate in a multitude of groups, while investing a not inconsiderable part of him or herself in each. This flitting about is surely one of the essential characteristics of the social organization which is becoming apparent.<sup>133</sup>

A critique of Maffesoli here could be that he seems to be taking both sides of each position, however, it seems accurate that he is describing the ambivalence of the age. It is an era of internal conflict, not least in the tribes themselves, and this seems evident as one observes the state of relationships in groups. All this together reveals much about the current world of the American church. People have less loyalty to denominations, theology, or other "ideals" and more loyalty to those close to them, a popular teacher (guru<sup>134</sup>), or worship style (activity<sup>135</sup>).

Neo-tribalism makes sense of the exclusion that is so ubiquitous in the 2020s. It makes sense of the outrage culture, it describes the "cynical theories" in a better way than Pluckrose and Lindsay demonstrated, and it shows why it is so difficult to bring racial groups together. Neo-tribalism describes well the lack of big stories that drive culture, as each tribe has its own big story that drives the tribe. Neo-tribalism shows why groups are so resistant to outside changes, as described by Hunter.<sup>136</sup> What has happened is that identity has become based upon the neo-tribe, and exclusion is now based upon transgression of those boundaries.

Part of the difficulty, as Maffesoli points out, is that the tribes of today largely have unwritten or unstated boundary markers,<sup>137</sup> including some physical boundary markers which will be briefly examined with proxemics below. Volf believes that boundary markers are important, and though they still exist, they are difficult to discern. This leads to more fluidity, more transition, and more

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 144

<sup>134</sup> From Maffesoli, gurus can be major tribal markers, and though the term was originally from Hinduism and Buddhism, it is now a generic term for popular spiritual teacher/leader

<sup>135</sup> Mutual activities are also major tribal makers in Maffesoli, and can be anything, such as simple preference for worship style, as was evident in the divisions and angst so many have felt about different styles of worship

<sup>136</sup> Hunter, To Change the World.

<sup>137</sup> Maffesoli.



exclusion. It also leads to frequent questioning by participants whether they are “in” or “out.” If participants are unsure of their position as within or outside of the tribe, they experience disorientation. These things then lead to increased anxiety and decreased security in identity.<sup>138</sup>

### *Proxemics*

Contemporary tribalism within the United States may also be amplified due to the effects of proxemics<sup>139</sup> as developed by Edward T. Hall in *The Hidden Dimension*. Hall elucidates that miscommunications between different cultures are sometimes, perhaps even often, a result of the ways different cultures utilize sensory information. This has led to poor city planning, because some cultures need more visual space, some need more sound dampening, some need to be close enough to smell other people and some need to be far enough not to smell others. In fact, much of the stress of modern life is because “we have consistently failed to accept the reality of different cultures within our national boundaries.”<sup>140</sup>

Hall demonstrates through experiments with rats and the parallels with humans, that, as human beings become more and more stressed by their environment, they become less empathetic toward others that do not belong to their “tribe.” In addition to that, oftentimes this stress can lead to fear, and “if men (and women) are made fearful of each other, fear resurrects the flight reaction, creating an explosive need for space.”<sup>141</sup> This seems to show that, as the world seems to get smaller and more global, many people can seem more agitated, fearful, and angry towards “outsiders.” In fact, this seems to also indicate that “outsiders” are sometimes recognized by the way they interact in and with space. The study of proxemics will also be fruitful in considering how to defuse tensions in the neo-tribal, twenty-first century world.

### **Synthesis and Conclusions**

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<sup>138</sup> Psychologists have believed that isolation can lead to decrease in cognitive ability, which leads to an increase in anxiety, but in recent years those who describe themselves as “isolated” has reached upwards of 40%, according to this APA article: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation>

<sup>139</sup> Proxemics is “the branch of knowledge that deals with the amount of space that people feel it necessary to set between themselves and others” according to the Oxford Languages Dictionary: <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>

<sup>140</sup> Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 183.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 186

Divisions within the universal Christian church are nothing new, beginning shortly after the resurrection event.<sup>142</sup> However, divisions of the church seem to be accelerating and seem increasingly driven less by biblical or theological issues and more by cultural expectations.<sup>143</sup>

Postmodernism “arrived” around the 1950s in the United States, though of course like anything there are a multiplicity of opinions and claims about the range of dates.<sup>144</sup> The exact date is beyond the scope of concern here, suffice to say that the United States moved away from a modern paradigm. The modern paradigm, among other things, claimed that objective truth could be ascertained with certainty by an individual. Postmodernism began as a critique of that idea, and a reaction to a perceived lack of progress from modernity, but is still shifting and changing.

The most compelling understanding currently of this new paradigm is that this is an era of “neo-tribalism,” as posited by Michel Maffesoli<sup>145</sup>, which some would say that is synonymous with “hyper-individualism.”<sup>146</sup> Each person determines truth in whatever way or manner he or she sees fit, with even that being highly dependent on context and social setting.

As this is all a relatively new phenomenon, the Church Universal<sup>147</sup> is still catching up. As a result, Christian churches have been “enculturated to the American ethos...(leading to) our loss of identity through the abandonment of the faith tradition.”<sup>148</sup> In other words, the culture of the United States in 2021 is more influential on Christian churches than might normally or historically have been. The Church has lacked an intentional response to the paradigm, and instead has had a multitude of reactions, including but not limited to: a strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the bible,<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> e.g., Acts 5.1-11, Acts 11.1-18, Acts 15.1-21, 36-41, Galatians 2.11-21, 1 Corinthians 1.11, 2 Peter 2, James 2.1-9, Revelation 2.14-16

<sup>143</sup> The recent divisions within the United Methodist Church over the ordination of LGBTQ ministers, while certainly a theological issue, are an example. Within my own church community, people have left because of our position on masks, COVID, and because I follow a politician on social media that they did not approve of.

<sup>144</sup> Some differences in views were mentioned above, here we are working with the common/popular perception for simplicity

<sup>145</sup> Maffesoli, The Time of Tribes.

<sup>146</sup> Though it's beyond the scope here, thinkers like Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman have suggested the idea of hyper-individualism.

<sup>147</sup> This term has a variety of uses, but here is simply used to denote any within the Christian church.

<sup>148</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination: 40th Anniversary Edition*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>149</sup> See further the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy from 1978

exhaustive doctrinal statements, harsh congregational position on theological minutiae,<sup>150</sup> social pressures within churches that enforce long lists of unwritten expectations and behaviors, and some simply avoiding anything close to difficult issues or texts or conflicts. These are just some responses, but each of these, instead of challenging and engaging the culture, seems to be reinforcing the neo-tribal ethos.

The Tower of Babel story in scripture from above can be illustrative here. The people of Babel embraced a new technology, and the technology led them to a refusal to “scatter.” Scattering was a fear, home was safe, so they defied the command of Yahweh and stayed local to their own tribe. But God confused their language and forced them into the world, to “be fruitful and multiply” and fulfill his expectation. In a similar way, a new technology now has allowed people to find a different kind of safety, a safety of their own opinions, prejudice, niche theologies, “tribes” in other words. The internet was just in its infancy when Maffesoli wrote about neo-tribes,<sup>151</sup> but now it has enabled a way for each hyper-individual to be affirmed in whatever fringe belief the person has, and to even build an entire community and identity around that belief. An example is that flat-earth belief is on the rise, despite overwhelming and obvious evidence that contradicts the view.

The Church Universal stands in a place of requiring a response in relation to: the splintering of knowledge, the hyper-individualism of truth, and the ability for people anywhere to belong based on any particular fringe position.

Major thinkers, pastors,<sup>152</sup> and theologians<sup>153</sup> are in near unanimous agreement that the current state within the Church is fractured and fracturing. Niche communities, more sects, and less loyalty to communities of faith all seem to be symptoms of that fracturing. Church membership is diminishing within the United States, dropping below 50% of the population in 2020,<sup>154</sup> in part at least because many do not see value in it.

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<sup>150</sup> One example of this is the Cambridge Declaration, which itself denounces postmodernism, but also ironically denies that “any creed, council or individual may bind a Christian’s conscience”, <https://www.alliancenet.org/cambridge-declaration>

<sup>151</sup> The Time of Tribes was written in 1996, with the “world wide web” having been invented in 1989 with the first webpage being published in 1991

<sup>152</sup> Bill Sizemore writes about this in The Fractured Church, Ed Stetzer in previously mentioned Age of Outrage

<sup>153</sup> Alister McGrath details this to a degree in Christianity’s Dangerous Idea, Peter Leithart in The End of Protestantism

<sup>154</sup> Jeffery M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time”, *Gallup*, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

Though there is mostly consensus that neo-tribalism presents a problem to the Church,<sup>155</sup> there is very little agreement on what to do, or if anything even can or should be done. Some voices, such as Evans in Oneness Embraced would seem advocate that this becomes an individual problem, and therefore each disciple or Christian must make inroads to reaching out to other groups and other tribes. Others seem to indicate that existing as separate tribes is not a negative, but the pathos toward the other tribes is, so moving toward a more charitable mentality and dialogue with other tribes is important.<sup>156</sup> In a postmodern, neo-tribal world, it would seem consensus has all but disappeared. The question Christians and churches seem to need to reckon with is: will we need a consensus in order to move forward?

And this is where the major gap in voices appears to be between Evans, Tisby, Jennings who have sought a better Church racially and Hunter and Stetzer a church that engages better in the public sphere, but Church with character that embraces tribes in ALL spheres, with the recognition of tribalism as such. Some have sought to address particular parts of neo-tribalism, such as racism or the overly politicized church, not many have sought to investigate the “why” Christians are so susceptible to mimic the culture when it comes to this. This susceptibility requires further inquiry and examination via many disciplines and across many communities. Perhaps this propensity towards division has just always been so, but it seems a major blind spot that homogeneity is just taken for granted in the church today.

From the very first call of the disciples,<sup>157</sup> it seems clear biblically that Jesus was not founding a community of homogeneity. It is no stretch to believe that Simon the Zealot, Andrew the fisherman,<sup>158</sup> Levi the tax-collector,<sup>159</sup> and Mary Magdalene<sup>160</sup> would have each had unique views and unique loyalties. But they were united under the banner of Jesus as Messiah. As the *euangelion* spread from Jerusalem into the diaspora,<sup>161</sup> each of those would have had different views, and now different skin colors, different languages, and different loyalties. But still their primary call to loyalty

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<sup>155</sup> It is important to note the apparent lack of interaction with the specific term “neo-tribalism” that has been ascertained thus far and is worthy of continued search. The concern currently noted is about the aspects of neo-tribalism, such as racial segregation, denominationalism, and politicization of churches.

<sup>156</sup> The “Counterpoints” series of books from Zondervan is a positive move in this realm, thinkers and theologians seeking to improve dialogue and discourse.

<sup>157</sup> Matthew 4.18-22

<sup>158</sup> Luke 6.15

<sup>159</sup> Mark 2.14

<sup>160</sup> Luke 8.2

<sup>161</sup> Acts 2.5-12

and family was Jesus the Nazarene and his kingdom.<sup>162</sup> As Paul took the message to wider and wider circles,<sup>163</sup> the call was the same- a diverse community unified on Jesus the cornerstone.

Now in the twenty-first century, the Church Universal again has a unique problem but also a unique opportunity: will we allow the gospel message to wash us anew, to become a community that rejects the norms of our culture, norms that tell us to find groups to affirm each of our opinions, and rises to be a Church of diversity in race, in theology, in ethnicity, in political views, in socio-economic status, in music tastes? To be sure, God has used his providence to bring change and resurrection through failed relationships and a broken Church in each century since the first. While the primitive church faced pressures both external and internal, the modern church faces similar pressures. Where the first church had the challenge of bringing the gospel to the nations and welcoming them to the table, the modern church has a challenge with a different type of tribe. The admonitions and exhortations we can glean from Luke in Acts and Paul in his letters can give insight to the modern church, just as they did the primitive: an invitation to unity and peace even in the midst of struggle and strife.

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<sup>162</sup> Matthew 12.46-50, Mark 3.31-35, Luke 8.19-21- Jesus defines family around himself instead of by birth.

<sup>163</sup> e.g., Acts 13, 14

# Appendix C—Milestone 3 Design Workshop Report

## NPO STATEMENT

Christians and churches in the twenty-first century have confused and disjointed loyalties, and therefore need a way to evaluate and re-align their tribal loyalties with Jesus.

## NPO SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

One simple boundary will be the recognition that it will be impossible to completely “solve” tribalism for any person or group. There will be very few costs associated, as any of these can be done with minimal financial investment. It is non-negotiable that this will be a flexible and agile project that can work in my congregation, but also in a variety of contexts with large and small groups and people in various geographies.

## NPO CONTEXT

The ministry setting is in congregational life. This will be relevant to my church context, which is in Columbus, Ohio. This is a non-denominational church, with around 50-60 members. Generations are mixed, with representatives from all generations. The church is composed of conservative and liberal Christians. The church is mostly white, and mostly upper middle class.

## ROOT CAUSES

The most basic root cause of tribalism is the need to belong that is deeply embedded in the human psyche. As studies have shown, humans with a tribe were more likely to survive, and as a result it is a deeply ingrained part of what it means to be human. In addition, the current tribal manifestations in the American church often start with a lack of recognition and understanding of tribal life in the 21st century. This is exacerbated in church life because Christians have faced rejection based on secondary matters, or in other words, poorly defined tribal parameters for the Jesus tribe. One part of this is the simple use of time when it comes to various belongings, as many Christians today spend far more time in the formation toward other tribes (political, sports, etc.). An additional root cause has been the lack of emphasis and understanding of the kingdom of God within Christian communities, which has allowed loyalties to be mixed and mistaken for other kingdoms/tribes.

## DEFINITION OF “DONE”

Done will be a list of things that Christians and churches can stop, start, and continue to evaluate and re-align their tribal loyalties to Jesus and his kingdom.

## THREE BIG IDEAS

The three big ideas are: a daily devotional dedicated to identifying, deconstruction, and re-aligning an individual’s prior tribal loyalties, a curriculum for getting people around dinner and communion tables to discuss aspects of tribal loyalties, and a toolbox (which may include both other options) of sorts to help people assess and then shift their tribal loyalties.

### THREE CONCEPT PITCHES

*Big Idea:* A daily devotional to help people spend time reflecting on their tribal loyalties and ways they can re-align them to go with the Jesus Tribe.

- *Audience:* The average lay-Christian who has limited time to give each week, but also wants to know and follow Jesus in a better way.
- *NPO:* Christian loyalties are confused and disjointed, so Christians in our world need a tool to help evaluate and realign their loyalties.
- *Benefit:* This will benefit the user by keeping it on the front of his/her mind through the daily engagement.
- *Approach:* This is a recognition that for many Christians, they spend time each day building tribal loyalties to politics and others, but often do not consider their tribal loyalties to Jesus each day.
- *Risks.* This might fail for two primary reasons: first tribalism is a community issue, so working on it as individuals may not be the best approach. Second, because this is seeking to get more time from people than they currently give, so a change in behavior would have to be the starting point.
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test:* Can this work in isolation lead to a better Jesus Tribe loyalty, or will it simply help deconstruct the old tribal loyalties (which is a benefit if taken on its own)?
- *Benchmarks of success:* This would largely depend on talking with participants and seeing if they reconsidered any previous positions or loyalties based on this personal study.
- *Other Approaches:* I am unaware of any other approaches, outside of some talking here and there about it.

*Big Idea:* All on the Table. This would be a process for bringing groups together, having a meal, discussing a difficult topic, then having communion together.

- *Audience:* For Christians who are interested in considering difficult topics from a variety of angles.
- *NPO:* Christian loyalties are confused and disjointed, so Christians in our world need a tool to help evaluate and realign their loyalties.
- *Benefit:* The user benefits by discovering Christian community that is more than simply agreeing on every issue. I benefit because churches are stronger if they can have difficult discussions.



- *Approach*: This is a strong approach because people need antagonists/irritation to reconsider previous beliefs. The best way to do that is at a table with respectful dialogue.
- *Risks*. This might fail because the entire dialogue today is about soundbites and insults, which can be hard habits to break.
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test*: Would this be enough of an impact on people to significantly realign their tribal loyalties? This is something that can probably only happen once or twice a month.
- *Benchmarks of success*: I need to interview participants and see how this impacts them and their views. Are they more likely to be charitable to other Christians if they've actually eaten and had communion with them?
- *Other Approaches*: Some groups assemble people to discuss issues of disagreement, but as far as I know none of them do it around the dinner/communion tables.

*Big Idea*: A longer form book that includes a diagnostic kit and several action points to diagnose and begin to rebuild tribal loyalties.

- *Audience*: Leaders in churches that want to move away from neo-tribalism to Jesus Tribe.
- *NPO*: Christian loyalties are confused and disjointed, so Christians in our world need many tools to help evaluate and realign their loyalties.
- *Benefit*: The user benefits by having a whole identity aligned around Jesus.
- *Approach*: This is novel by giving several action points, as well as a thorough understanding of current tribalism and the unique issues it brings to the modern church.
- *Risks*. It may be a bit too comprehensive, and fail by needing too much buy in.
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test*: I will be testing attitudes of people and seeing if I can understand/diagnose them well through this tool, as well as seeking to adjust them with the tool, based upon discussion with them.
- *Benchmarks of success*: Likely just discussing with participants.
- *Other Approaches*: I am unaware of others approaching this in this way.

## DESIGN WORKSHOP STAKEHOLDERS

Each stakeholder is a contributing member of my church. We had two teachers, one nanny, a pharmacist, a carpenter, a hospitality worker. Each is white, because that is representative of my current congregation. We had three male and three female. Four are parents and two are not. Five married and one engaged.

## ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

The role of the first interview is a pastor in the pacific northwest. The role of the second is head of missions at a Baptist association in Texas. The role of the third is author and thinker within the missional church movement.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Clark, Cory J. Brittany S. Liu, Bo M. Winegard, Peter H. Ditto. "Tribalism is Human Nature," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 28, 1, (2019): 587-592, SAGE: [sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions) DOI: 10.1177/0963721419862289

The authors demonstrate that tribalism is not particular to the conservative party in the United States, but that people of all persuasions are susceptible to the influences of tribalism on thought. This is an academic paper in a psychology resource. The intended audience seems to be Americans that are concerned with the tribal nature of politics. But this applies to churches and Christian leadership because politics has become consuming in that realm as well. So, psychologically it is reasonable to conclude that there is no alternative to Christians being tribal, but instead should seek to sift the way Christians view their tribe and loyalties there. The authors also indicated the extent to which tribalism influences a person's belief of what is true or false.

Levine, Saul. "Belonging is Our Blessing, Tribalism is Our Burden," *Psychology Today* (February 24, 2019): [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/our-emotional-footprint/201802/belonging-is-our-blessing-tribalism-is-our-burden](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/our-emotional-footprint/201802/belonging-is-our-blessing-tribalism-is-our-burden)

Saul Levine argues that tribalism is simply the negative side of belonging. He affirms the positive value of belonging for the human psyche, but notes that when it verges into tribalism it becomes detrimental. This indicates that having positive position markers for Christians that are NOT tribal markers would be a beneficial piece of helping to shift the Christian tribalism away from the standards used in this world. Of particular note were the human anecdotes demonstrating the destructiveness of tribalism, leading to dissolving established marriages based on old racial divisions. This was written in view of popular psychology, but becomes particularly poignant after the divisions around COVID-19 and the 2020 presidential election. Those two events led to many dissolved relationships and animosity.

McNeal, Reggie. *Kingdom Come*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum Publishing, 2015.

This is a book that argues instead of trying to "fix church" that Christians should shift to a Kingdom mindset. I believe this is a good way forward and would help to define some of the parameters of a healthy Christian tribe. McNeal is a Christian thinker and pastoral in his mindset. The intended audience is for churches and church leaders. If McNeal is placed in dialogue with the other two, it would seem that one aspect of addressing tribalism in the world today would hinge upon helping Christians identify more with the kingdom of God than with the kingdoms of this world. Emphasizing the Christian belonging that comes by grace and is open to anyone.

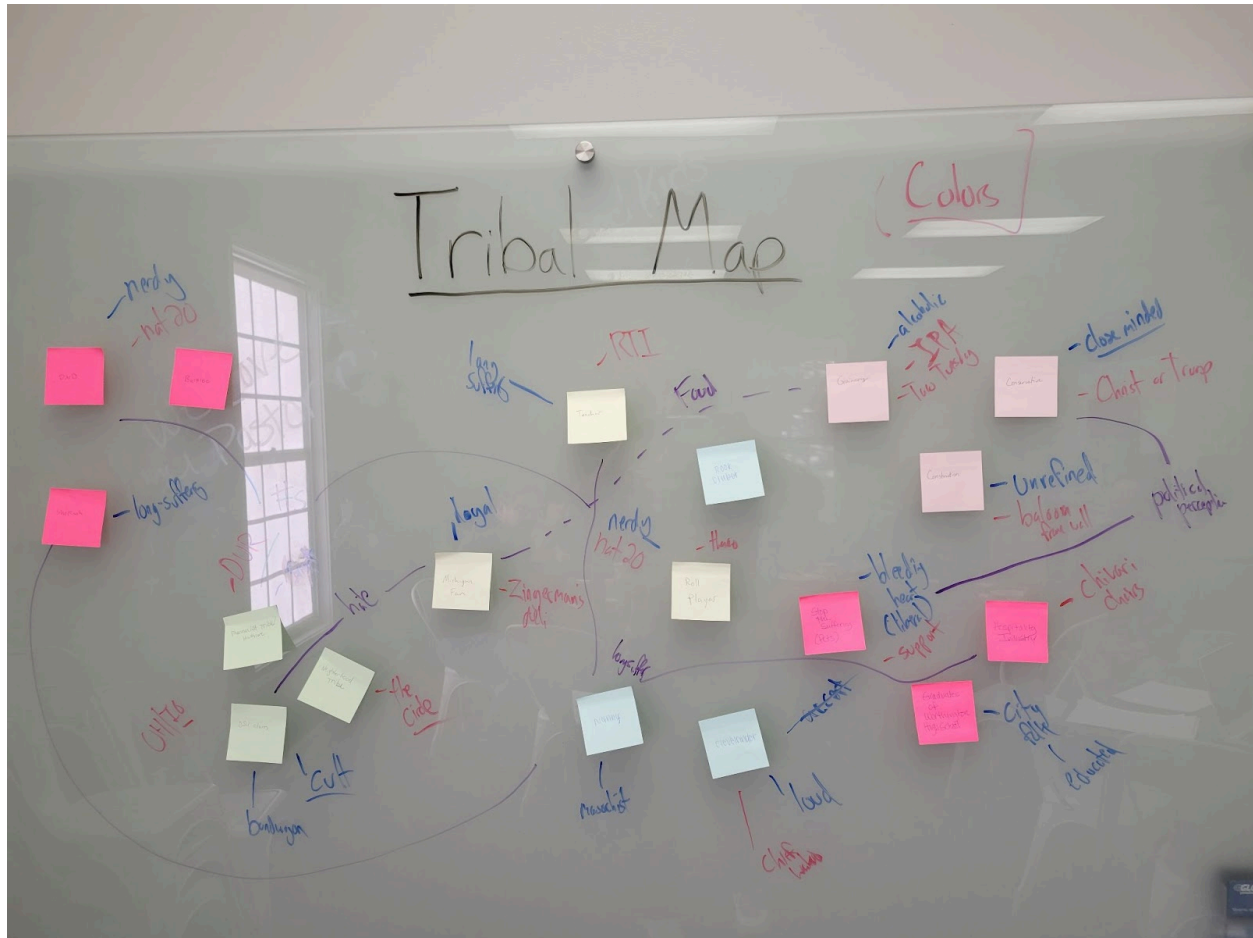
## APPENDIX

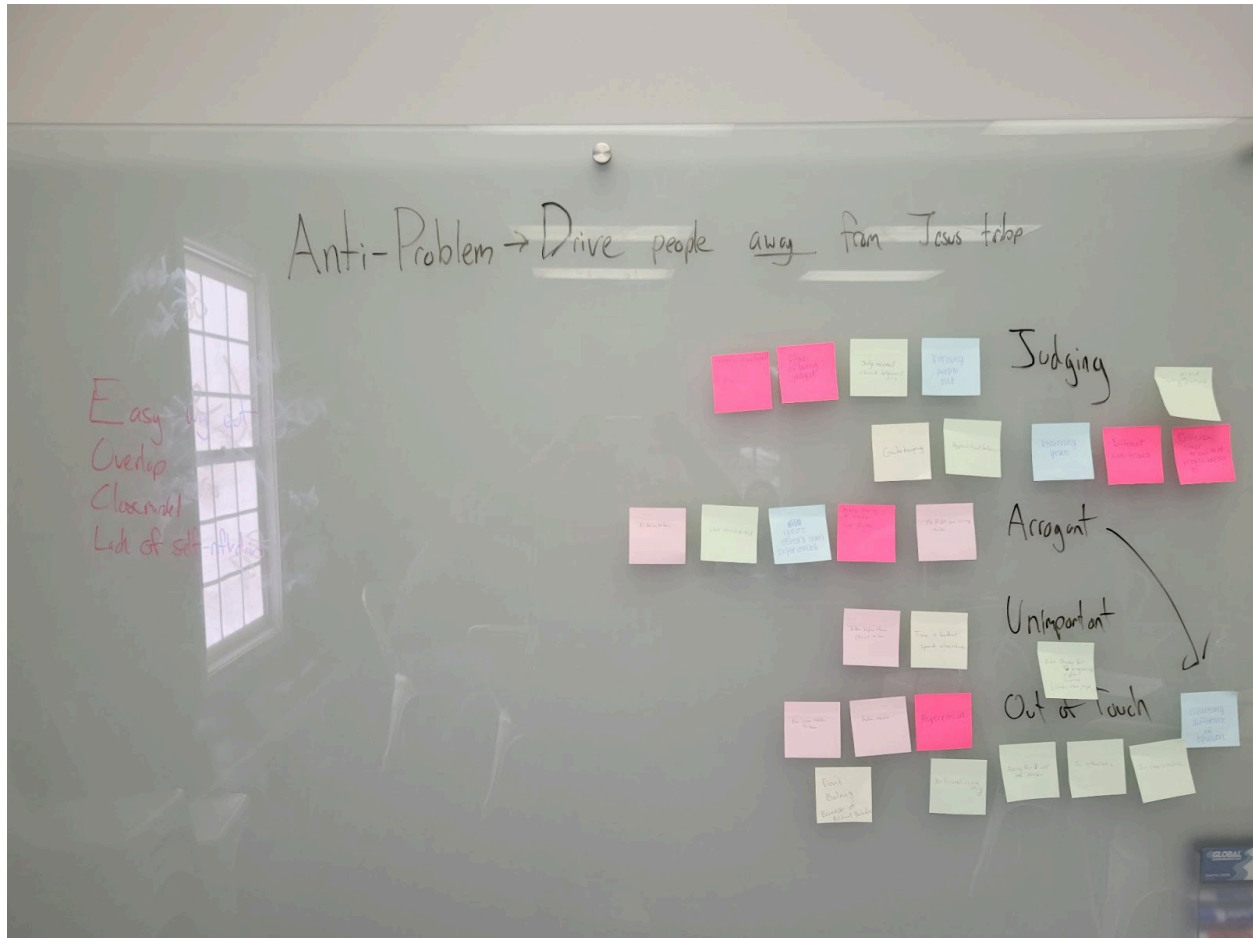
### *Design Workshop Description*

On Saturday, November 6th at 9 am six people that are fairly committed to my church community gathered in one the cafe at Christian Fellowship Church. Participants included: an early 20s, unmarried, nanny, white, female, recent college graduate; a mid-20s, white, male, married, college graduate teacher; an early 40s, white, male, married, father, college graduate teacher; a mid-40s, white, male, father, high school graduate carpenter; an early 50s, white, female, college graduate, married, mother in the hospitality industry; a mid-50s, white, female, college graduate, married, mother pharmacist. We had five main activities to assess and describe the problem. Then we worked on three big ideas that would seek to solve the problem of mixed tribal loyalties. One of the major needs identified is to help others identify what tribal loyalties are and how to correctly understand them. On a scale of one to five, I would rate the success around a three. I wish I would have spent more time on practical, concrete actions. However, because of the nature of tribalism and how it is not very well understood, that was an important part of being able to help people see and understand it.

### *Design Workshop Documentation*

The following are images taken from the problem discussion part of the workshop:





Why are some most loyal to JT?

1	Belonging	Community	Shared values	Positive	Self-interest	Personal gain
2	Common goal	Shared values	Shared values	Caution	Shared values	Personal gain
3	Self-interest	Shared values	Shared values	Positive	Self-interest	Personal gain
4	Community	Shared values	Shared values	Shared values	Self-interest	Personal gain
S	Solution	Shared values	Shared values	Peace	Self-interest	Personal gain

The following are photos of the workshop created projects:



# Concept Pitch Worksheet

Use this template to solidify an idea. Gain clarity on how to execute and pitch your idea. A good idea can be communicated simply, often on the back of a napkin.

Create a concept pitch for each concept you propose to address the NPO.

WHAT IS THE BIG IDEA?

A 'toolbox' to help assess, understand, and re-align modern tribal loyalties. (likely including a full book)

WHO IS IT FOR?

Christians and leaders of churches

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Christians have disjointed loyalties and need a way to align with Jesus.

HOW DOES THE USER BENEFIT?

The user benefits by a clearer understanding of the world and their place in it.

ILLUSTRATE OR DESCRIBE HOW IT WORKS

First it helps people evaluate and understand their own positions. Then it gives several tools and ways of shifting and re-aligning the person's loyalties.

WHY MIGHT IT FAIL?

People are good at self-deception

WHAT SPECIFICALLY ARE WE TESTING?

if the assessment works and if that is a good starting point

HOW MIGHT WE MEASURE SUCCESS?

If people feel like they gain self-awareness

WHAT MAKES THIS STAND OUT FROM OTHER APPROACHES?

This is a more comprehensive approach, and also illustrates and explains tribalism, which many do not understand.

Adapted from Luma Institute's Concept Poster  
Innovating for People | Activity Templates | Concept Poster

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# Concept Pitch Worksheet

Use this template to solidify an idea. Gain clarity on how to execute and pitch your idea. A good idea can be communicated simply, often on the back of a napkin.

Create a concept pitch for each concept you propose to address the NPO.

WHAT IS THE BIG IDEA?

Gather people over food and communion to discuss contentious issues and relation to Jesus Tribe.

WHO IS IT FOR?

People Christians who desire primary loyalty to Jesus

WHAT IS THE NPO?

Christians have disjointed loyalties and need a way to align with Jesus.

HOW DOES THE USER BENEFIT?

The user benefits by giving and receiving grace.

ILLUSTRATE OR DESCRIBE HOW IT WORKS

Tribalism thrives partially because of echo chambers. This program helps remove people from echo chambers and places them in dialogue with Christians about important issues.

WHY MIGHT IT FAIL?

Immature dialogue / argument  
Fear of disagreement

WHAT SPECIFICALLY ARE WE TESTING?

If people perceive this as beneficial and if it expands their view of Jesus-Tribe

HOW MIGHT WE MEASURE SUCCESS?

Do people sense a greater kingdom loyalty after?

WHAT MAKES THIS STAND OUT FROM OTHER APPROACHES?

This requires others, which deviates from the isolated spiritual approach in many churches.

Adapted from Luma Institute's Concept Poster  
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# Concept Pitch Worksheet

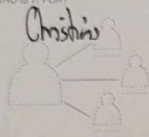
Use this template to solidify an idea. Gain clarity on how to execute and pitch your idea. A good idea can be communicated simply, often on the back of a napkin.

Create a concept pitch for each concept you propose to address the NPO.

WHAT IS THE BIG IDEA?

A personal devotional to guide Christians in evaluating their tribal loyalties.

WHO IS IT FOR?



WHAT IS THE NPO?

Christians have disjointed loyalties and need a way to align with Jesus.

HOW DOES THE USER BENEFIT?

The user benefits by seeing and identifying their tribal loyalties.

ILLUSTRATE OR DESCRIBE HOW IT WORKS

This would be a deliberate path of readings to challenge the reader in his/her own preconceptions and to re-construct a grace oriented view of the Tribe of Jesus.

WHY MIGHT IT FAIL?

Tribalism is communal, so I think the solution can't be individual.

WHAT SPECIFICALLY ARE WE TESTING?

If a personal devotional/reflection time can help loyalty to Kingdom.

HOW MIGHT WE MEASURE SUCCESS?

Discussion with participants.

WHAT MAKES THIS STAND OUT FROM OTHER APPROACHES?

This is likely easier to use and faster to begin implementing.

Adapted from Luma Institute's Concept Poster  
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### *One Page Message to Stakeholders*

Hi everyone,

First, thanks so much for your presence and involvement yesterday. Each of you brought a unique take and perspective to our conversation, and I believe it has helped me immensely as I'm organizing the next steps of my project.

Based on our conversation, there are a few potential projects that I will develop next semester that I will test in a small capacity, with the idea that I would expand that and deliver it for a full doctoral project in 2022-2023.

In seeking to address tribalism within the American church, I have three tentative ideas:

1. A daily devotional/personal reflection time to help people work through their tribal loyalties in their daily lives.
2. A strategy and model for bringing people together to have them help one another develop their tribal loyalty around a table and questions.
3. A "toolbox" for assessing and aligning Christian loyalties including an explanation of tribalism and including specific strategies churches can use.

Our definition of "done" is being able to correctly identify and then indicate things a Christian should "stop", "start", and "continue" in order to re-align their tribal identity.

Either way, the project is very broad and challenging at the moment. Will take some work to narrow it down some.

If you don't mind, could you email your reflections on these questions:

- A) What should I be sure to examine in light of our conversation?
- B) What are potential blind spots I should explore?
- C) What are potential pitfalls I should avoid?
- D) What MUST I research before I begin prototyping?

These are ways to help me continue to evaluate the best way to help address this issue. Thanks again for your help, I'll be getting a brief reflection on our findings later on this week.

Thanks!

Chris

*One on One Interviews Documentation*

Interview #1 on November 11 at 1 pm:

- Said that might disagree with church being “judgy” and that is a gift we’ve given to the world. It’s easy to point that out with Church, but we’re aspiring to be different.
- From a webinar with Andy Stanley- the whole vibe was that we should seek to “stay in the middle”, but is not sure the middle ought to be a goal.
- For a long time, people said Jesus was “relevant” but, are we going to ask people to watch 3 hours of Jesus in an evening? But with their tribal loyalties they get 3 hours each evening.
- Church can’t form spiritually the same as the world does. They form by fear, etc. Tribalism may be a signal to learn some from the Amish or Mennonite groups.
- Maybe part of moving away from tribalism is killing the idol of relevance.
- For project, likes the idea of not doing something that relies on individualism. That reinforces tribal thinking.
- Comedy is one of the unifiers, Colbert Report seemed to do well with liberals and conservatives.
- Denomination is talking of merging- from fear of losing people.
- Political religions of today have convinced that American mission matters.
- One aspect of our tribalism is we aren’t often convinced that our mission matters.
- Model and training are all about training and motivating Christian people. But, maybe we should be focused on other areas.
- Recently had issues in his church, many conservatives left “because my wife is black” and he requested to be quoted on that.
- His church has become much more diverse through this season.
- Conservative congregations have doubled, and the “rainbow church” has grown, it seems the ones who have tried to avoid easy polarization have struggled the most.
- Andy Stanley got shot from both sides.
- People who have lived in the tension have had it harder.
- Boomer churches made church homogenous for a long time
- Talking about racial issues will cost.

- Tribalism is reinforced, and many young ministers are trained to reinforce tribal ethos
- Solutions have been a fear of hell, but that's not working anymore
- People have viewed identity formation as a function of the state, but it is a function of the church.
- We have to re-order the lenses through which we see the world. Many start with politics and eventually get to Christianity. Should be the other way.
- No one can be an individual, we're all shaped by relationships.
- Secular organizations- does meetings with cons and libs, like them, we need a broader orthodoxy right now
- Identity formation shouldn't be "in" vs "out" but should be a centered set.

Interview #2 November 16 at 10 am:

- Context is a difficult tight rope- the vast majority of pastors are conservative. They call GOP- "us" and is intertwined with Christian identity
- Sitting with pastors- "we've got to win the midterms"
- No distinction between party and faith
- One of the primary issues is that people do not see it as a problem.
- We are always being disciplined, it's just a question of who is discipling you.
- Our hearts are formed 6-7 hours per day, how can we bring an awareness. For this reason does not like the individual approach, as it is easy to be blinded
- Younger and younger pastors need a toolbox to understand and can use to assess tribalism.
- We're coming out of the "moral majority" generation, but the younger don't know how to go forward
- Decisions can come out and seem partisan, even if it's not a partisan issue.
- Biggest burnout he's seen is pastors with technology.
- Favors a toolbox approach that might simplify some of this difficulty
- For younger pastors- "How do I recognize and approach this?"
- Before you talk about a problem, you have to show it is a problem



- People need a positive vision of God's kingdom, that must be first, and then you might have an entry to talk about barriers to it.
- Get people asking questions, that would help.
- Jesus-Tribe could be showing what kingdom is, and inviting people to a whole commitment
- Pastors also need a place to share their struggle together, most pastors want people to be healthy, and politics are hurting it.

Interview #3 November 15 at 11 am:

- Tribalism is something important that needs to be addressed.
- Don't know if people have enough self-awareness, and they can't have self-awareness without others
- For that reason would not suggest anything that is primarily individual
- Need to create situations with other voices.
- Have to be some kind of tribal mix to have some intentional cognitive dissonance and think through their stuff
- Create some space to identify tribal identity.
- This is an aspect of spiritual formation itself.
- Could be a good side door into the conversation.
- Many pastors and lay people don't know what spiritual formation even is
- This may be a strong beginning conversation.
- Never occurs without pain or challenge.
- Getting people to see that, never occurs in isolation
- Single most important change in addiction is support of group for 2 to 3 years
- Jesus-Tribe, may prefer Kingdom tribe.
- If people could image in kingdom- more kingdom tribe
- Kingdom tribe change center of gravity, then suddenly references change
- Evangelicals and Trump, Churches having the most trouble are the ones refusing to participate in that tribalism

- Change center of gravity- people need to see their intended purpose, ways to point people to the kingdom, hope in that
- Move from "how connected am I to church" to "how much kingdom work do I do?"
- 3 things to shift: 1 the story of life has to change, 2 scorecards has to be updated and shift, life as mission trip, 3 stewardship, clergy won't enjoy that
- Stewardship means taking care of the neighbor, poor, tragedy.
- Church focuses on church practice, emotional health.
- Different rhythm is- practical environment, more project oriented.
- Project orientation
- The way we're churching helping school
- Identify and recruit from out of the church.
- So ingrained in the modality of a weekly rhythm that we should try envisioning another rhythm
- Ask- where are you going to be 24 hours from now- that's where you meet God

## Appendix D—Milestone 4 Design Research Report



## PROTOTYPE(S) SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

### *Prototype 1 description*

This is a low-fidelity prototype of a daily devotional that will help Christians to intentionally reflect on their different group loyalties in a strategic and particular way. This guides people from a sense of “arrived” in their tribal loyalty, into a “liminal space” of allowing themselves to detach from loyalties, and back into “Jesus-Tribe” thought space.

### *NPO Statement*

Christians and churches in the twenty-first century have confused and disjointed loyalties, and therefore need a way to evaluate and re-align their tribal loyalties with Jesus.

### *Research question*

How much impact can an individual activity have on neo-tribal behavior?

### *Assessment Benchmark(s)*

The participants will give me information about their experience with the devotion and let me know if they reconsidered previous loyalties and what that looked like. Because loyalty is so subjective, it is highly dependent on reporting of feelings and thoughts revealed in the devotion.

*Participant description. Include demographic information or other relevant factors to your research. Be sure to exclude personal identifying information.*

Each person is a committed Christian and regular attender of church activities. Some are married and some are single. Two are retired, the others are employed. Each is white and from the United States. There are residents of Oregon, Ohio, and Texas in the group.

### *Summarize what you learned:*

What worked?

I received very good feedback on the content and direction of the devotional. The exercises and readings were beneficial for participants. They thought that the general direction, as well as the Venn diagram activities, were particularly helpful.

What could be improved?

It would be helpful to define some of the terms ahead of time for the participants. Some would have benefited from the primer I sent to the book/toolbox group. But, others might have benefitted from a blank slate perspective, so it might be helpful to consider definitions as an appendix or in a glossary. In addition, it will likely help to include a primer/overview of what tribalism and neo-tribalism are for the participants.

What matters to the participants?

Clarity seems to be the biggest thing. There were some areas that were not clear to them, so likely sending something like the neo-tribalism primer along will help. The participants enjoyed it, but at times struggled with feeling in between, liminal. That is to be expected, but perhaps helping walk them through the discomfort some ahead will help as well.

*What was your important discovery?*

The most important discovery is that something like this is an important aspect of helping congregations refresh and re-examine their group loyalty, but that a practice that is individual in nature is not sufficient. To move communities toward better loyalty to the Jesus tribe they will need communal exercises as well.

*Prototype 2 description*

This is basically a book about tribalism, neo-tribalism today, and a way for churches to move forward in a tribal/neo-tribal world and culture. However, I am conceiving of it as a toolbox, in that it will not be necessarily linear, and it will have assessments and strategies that can be adapted and adjusted for church leaders to use to address tribalism.

*NPO Statement*

Christians and churches in the twenty-first century have confused and disjointed loyalties, and therefore need a way to evaluate and re-align their tribal loyalties with Jesus.

*Research question*

Do church leaders see a need and would this format meet the need to address neo-tribalism?

*Assessment Benchmark(s)*

This will be subjective feedback from other clergy and church leaders spread throughout the United States, but basically asking if this is a good direction and if something like this would be useful in their congregations.

*Participant description. Include demographic information or other relevant factors to your research. Be sure to exclude personal identifying information.*

These are male and female clergy members. They are in various states, including: Texas, Oregon, Tennessee, and Ohio. They are different denominations, including: United Methodist, Baptist, Mennonite, and Evangelical Conference of North America. Each is white, though each has a multicultural church setting. The ages are from early 30s to 50s.

*Summarize what you learned:*

What worked?

It seems like the overall outline is good. Each believes there is a strong need for this particular vision and work. Several commented on the usefulness of assessments in their communities.

What could be improved?

Mostly more in-depth on certain matters, which makes sense since this is merely an outline at this point. Each had some unique concerns for their particular setting, which will be something to look at and consider how to speak to the various settings, such as rural Texas or small town Oregon.

What matters to the participants?

The biggest thing that matters is helping busy clergy sort a lot of information, and giving them helpful steps in moving forward in a tribal world. It is also important to be sure to help clergy themselves deconstruct their own bias a little bit, to step back and ask which beliefs and values are societal and tribal in their own hearts. So it will need to be cognizant of the bias that each person brings to the reading, and seek to be as delicate as possible in deconstructing those biases.

*What was your important discovery?*

The important discovery was that church leaders and clergy across the United States have a deep need in helping think about this issue, though many have a very limited understanding of the issue. So, there is a great benefit to sharing information and sharing suggestions for working forward. I believe that eventually an online forum for helping with this will also be a secondary consideration after this is complete.

*Prototype 3 description:*

This was called "We Need to Talk." It was an activity that we did once a month at the church I served in Oregon. The format was: people gathered around circular tables, 8 or so to a table. We asked certain people before the evening to be "table facilitators" and they helped keep the conversation on track. Then we had a few different presentations about a particular topic or issue and the tables had questions that led them to discussion. Then we had communion, and shared a meal that was prepared.

*NPO Statement*

Christians and churches in the twenty-first century have confused and disjointed loyalties, and therefore need a way to evaluate and re-align their tribal loyalties with Jesus.

*Research question*

Does this format help increase unity in church while discussing contentious issues?

### *Assessment Benchmark(s)*

We discussed with one another and with participants after each group, what worked, what didn't, and what we wanted to improve. The people that participated found a deeper community and were empowered to have disagreement in a better way as a result. The benchmarks were again subjective.

*Participant description. Include demographic information or other relevant factors to your research. Be sure to exclude personal identifying information.*

In the actual monthly events we had several hundred people participate. Nearly all were white (small town Oregon is limited in that regard), and nearly all were Christian. Ages ranged from early 20s to 80s. Married and single. Higher socioeconomic status and lower. Education would have mostly been high school, though some college graduates and graduate degrees were present.

For feedback for this project I gathered data from participants and people that helped facilitate those events.

*Summarize what you learned:*

What worked?

The format worked great. It worked very well to make sure people did not sit with their spouses at the table. The questions worked, though we needed to clarify to facilitators that they did not need to answer every question. The meal and communion were very important, though cost could be prohibitive for the meal, so if other churches implement something that would be worth considering cost-effective options.

What could be improved?

We had staff lead the presentations, ideally you would have outsiders that could be more candid and say more difficult things. More extensive vetting and training for facilitators. They would need to go through some really challenging dialogues in a smaller group leading up to it, in order to really work through it better. I think I would also start with a liturgy ahead, a way of affirming the human worth of the others and their duty to seek understanding.

What matters to the participants?

Safety and being heard. Everyone wants their point of view to be heard and understood, but they also want to know they belong. They also enjoyed it if it was a tasty meal.

*What was your important discovery?*

If a church wants to seriously work on unity in difficulty, this is an amazing tool. It is also very adaptable to a variety of circumstances and topics. However, it is vital that it is started in a time of relative peace, and that the early topics are not too emotionally volatile. For example, near a

presidential election would be a bad time to start this. And a topic like abortion would be a terrible first topic. In addition that, there was a great hunger for this kind of forum. We hardly advertised, and had quite a few visitors each time we did it. We wanted to trial it with our community for a bit first, but amazingly people just kept showing up. The room was very full every time we did this.

## BACKGROUND RESEARCH ESSAY

### *Introduction*

Neo-tribalism is a term used by Michel Maffesoli to describe the way people interact with groups and the way their loyalties are expressed.<sup>164</sup> Among the distinct and unique traits of neo-tribalism, in contrast to regular tribalism, are: neo-tribalism is less permanent and often almost ephemeral, people choose and select their neo-tribes rather than being born into them, and neo-tribes are seldom exclusive to one another. Neo-tribalism is one result of a hyper-individualism that has been attained in the twenty-first century.

### *Causes*

Several different causes seem to be at the root of the neo-tribal fragmentation in the United States. "Future shock" is one, where technology, society, and lifestyle are changing exponentially fast.<sup>165</sup> When people see change happening too quickly, they can disengage from learning and growing, and instead embrace a type of "social heuristic" that allows quick decision making and avoids the unnecessary pain of having to deal with complicated issues. Alvin Toffler saw that "future shock" was a type of culture shock in one's own culture, based on the speed of that culture changing.<sup>166</sup> His words seem to have become increasingly prescient.

Post-materialism is another, the idea from Ronald Inglehart, that once society has enough affluence then its values shift from survival to self-expression.<sup>167</sup> As the culture of the United States has become more affluent, each person has spent less time meeting basic needs, but now each person wants to be seen and recognized and to express their own opinions and thoughts. This leads to seeking groups that validate and reinforce those opinions in order to be free to fully express those

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<sup>164</sup> Maffesoli, Michel. *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society. Theory, culture & society.* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 1996).

<sup>165</sup> Toffler, Alvin. *Future Shock.* (NY: Bantam Books, 1970), 10.

<sup>166</sup> Toffler, 10, 11.

<sup>167</sup> Inglehart, Ronald and Christian Welzel. *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2-4.

ideas.<sup>168</sup> In an internet age, there is a group and a niche that will believe and reinforce any type of belief, even leading to an unironic "Flat Earth Society".<sup>169</sup>

Within the church, sorting, denominationalism, and subsequently the rise and power of the religious right have also contributed to the current milieu of neo-tribalism. Sorting is a process that Bishop describes where people naturally seek homogeneous communities, "(The Big Sort)... is the way Americans have chosen to live, an unconscious decision to cluster in communities of like-mindedness."<sup>170</sup> As Bishop points out, this is particularly pronounced in the "church growth movement" initially conceived by McGavran but later perfected by Rick Warren and others.<sup>171</sup> These churches found large numerical growth by having a very specific niche of people they sought to bring in.

Denominationalism has also been a sorting, but resulted from people seeking to worship within theologically homogeneous communities. This is an understandable value, and to be sure, there are many theologies that are essential to the health of the Christian church. But, as Leithart correctly observes, these divisions are contrary to Jesus' prayer for unity in the church, as "Jesus prayed that we would be 'perfected in unity.'" <sup>172</sup> While denominationalism may have been the best temporary solution, Christians must work toward a total unity in the body of those that proclaim Jesus as Lord.

One aspect of denominationalism and the sorting that has occurred in other ways is the centralized power and clout of the religious right that Collins traces to the perceived cultural attack on Christian values and truth. This group has injected an emotional pathology into the conversations among Christians, to the point where many see political adversaries as incapable of genuine Christian faith. As Collins says: "Having set out to change the world, the worldly evangelicals had been transformed by American culture."<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> It will be worth exploring the effect of generations born in the 80s, 90s, and 2000s that are less affluent than their parents, and how that influences their desire for self-expression. So far, it seems these generations have an even higher value on self-expression, so it may not be related to relative affluence, or there may be other mitigating factors. This is beyond the scope of this project, but will be worth consideration going forward.

<sup>169</sup> See: [theflatearthsociety.org](http://theflatearthsociety.org)

<sup>170</sup> Bishop, Bill. *The Big Sort*. (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company), 2008, 15.

<sup>171</sup> Bishop, 160-170.

<sup>172</sup> Leithart, Peter J. *The End of Protestantism*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 114-115.

<sup>173</sup> Collins, Kenneth J. *Power, Politics, and the Fragmentation of Evangelicalism*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press), 2012, 95.

## Prototypes

In order to address the ecclesial issue of neo-tribalism, I have examined three different prototypes that would approach it with three types of tactics. The first is a low-fidelity prototype that examines the effect of a personal devotional on the neo-tribal predilections of those that utilize it. The second is a low-fidelity prototype that provides a “toolbox”; background information to clergy and church leadership, and then multifaceted methods and assessments in order to address neo-tribalism at the local church level. The third is a high-fidelity prototype that was executed over a series of months in 2018 and 2019. This was a monthly church event centered around table fellowship and communion, in which our leadership guided tables of people through conversations about contentious issues.

In evaluating the goals and needs of this particular problem, it has come to be obvious that the first and third prototypes will be important facets of a way forward, but because the problem itself is multivalent, the solution also must be multivalent. Because of the communal nature of neo-tribalism, the way forward also must be congregation-centered and community-oriented. In addition to both of those, the solution must build a positive type of “tribe” in order to replace the other tribes that vie for Christian loyalty. Jesus himself pointed out that even the spiritual life abhors a vacuum (43 “When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. 44 Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. 45 Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.”).<sup>174</sup>

The following are some of the qualities that have been identified as important and essential to a strategy to assess and address neo-tribalism within the church in the United States:

### *Kingdom Focus*

The solution must begin with a kingdom focus. Reggie McNeal has correctly identified that, “the church-centered narrative has drawn the circle tighter and tighter around who can be included in ‘us’.”<sup>175</sup> In order to begin deconstructing the neo-tribes that have harmed the witness of the Church, churches must shift focus from their particular expression of Church back to advancing the Kingdom of God. McNeal says that this way: “Kingdom people can afford to be inclusive... because the Kingdom is not at risk.”<sup>176</sup> While it is important to invest in and build individual expressions of the

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<sup>174</sup> Matthew 12.43-45, an emptying spiritual practice invites evil to occupy it, unless the Holy Spirit inhabits our spaces we place ourselves in danger.

<sup>175</sup> McNeal, Reggie. *Kingdom Come*. (Bonita Springs, FL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), 79.

<sup>176</sup> Mcneal, 78.

Church, it is more urgent that church leaders focus on the Kingdom, which will then allow the priorities of their particular church expression to come into focus.

As the solution begins with kingdom focus, the church leaders must look to the global church, and particularly the movement of the Holy Spirit in the global Pentecostal movement. Both David Bosch<sup>177</sup> and Peter Leithart make strong cases in their work that the church must seek to understand and emulate the good work of the global Pentecostal movement.<sup>178</sup> Looking and understanding how the Holy Spirit has moved so powerfully abroad will help the church of the United States to break free from our colonialism and superiority complex and find a humble faith that can remind us of our first love.

While the solution must have a global view, the solution must also be congregational and locally centered. Leithart, in arguing for a new ecumenicism, has said, "The local church was always the best place to pursue unity and catholicity... It is the only place where one can engage in real face-to-face debate, dialogue, and worship and common prayer on a regular basis."<sup>179</sup> The major drivers in this, again according to Leithart, must be clergy. "Pastors are crucial... they are more critical than theologians... Pastors are crucial because the reunion of the churches will take place primarily at the local and metropolitan level. That is where interdenominational relationships are already developing."<sup>180</sup> Which is seemingly the only way forward, as clergy are often the expected drivers of nearly all programs within local churches.

### *Church Practices*

The solution must have buy-in from the leadership of the church. Because of that, it will be most effective if it also includes some liturgy and guided readings in the public worship service of the church. When Alvin Toffler wrote about the concept of "future shock", the future shock was barely beginning. Now, fifty years later, it is much more pronounced. One of Toffler's main ideas in dealing with future shock, however, is as necessary now as it was then: "stability zones." For Toffler, a stability zone is a place or a thing that acts as an anchor in an ever-changing world. The stability zone helps individuals feel grounded and centered.<sup>181</sup> I would suggest that certain parts of Christian worship and liturgy should act as stability zones in the effort to reverse the neo-tribal shift. For this particular problem, the stability zones would be things that emphasize the entire church, like the Apostles'

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<sup>177</sup> Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 1991.

<sup>178</sup> Wolfgang Vondey's work Beyond Pentecostalism will figure heavily in explaining and detailing this aspect.

<sup>179</sup> Leithart, 178.

<sup>180</sup> Leithart, 178.

<sup>181</sup> Toffler.



Creed or the Lord's Prayer. It would even be helpful to recite those then discuss a little what they have to teach us about our tribes of today.

The solution must have a community aspect. Belonging is one of the most primary indicators of what a person will believe and the way they will behave. In a hyper-individualized culture, it is important for a counter-cultural type of belonging to be a part of the way forward. Leonard Sweet emphasizes the importance of sharing table fellowship in *From Tablet to Table*. "The table is where tribal values are haloed by habit... The table is where you *learn* your second nature."<sup>182</sup> And one aspect of that second nature, according to Sweet, is "a diverse body of Christ."<sup>183</sup> I agree with Sweet, learning that seems reinforced by the earliest church which broke bread together daily. This is one of the major components of what it means to be one people. The table is the top place where community is born, but as Bill Bishop points out, the tables we sit at are increasingly homogeneous.<sup>184</sup> This means that there must be an intentional effort to create tables that are full of different kinds of people. And we must also create communion spaces with similar diversity.

The solution must involve personal contemplation and consideration time. When a person's time from week to week is evaluated, their time reinforcing their own neo-tribes vastly outweighs their time in formation to the Jesus tribe. An argument could be made that every hour watching Fox News or CNN is a personal, private worship of the tribes of politics in the United States, which serves to reinforce our neo-tribal tendencies and undermine genuine Christian spiritual formation. Because of that, one aspect that will be strongly suggested is a period of a "political fast" for participants, in which they disengage intentionally for a specific time in order to evaluate their own emotional attachments and commitments.

### *Artisanal*

The process of homogenization and "McDonaldization" has demonstrated the necessity of a multifaceted but also flexible approach to making progress on the neo-tribal nature of the church in the United States.<sup>185</sup> Because of that, the clergy and church leaders who help drive the solution must have a working understanding of the forces that drive neo-tribalism in the nation and in their churches. A synopsis of background readings and statistics will help them understand those movements without needing to invest the time to dive deep on each of them. They will then have

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<sup>182</sup> Sweet, Leonard. *From Tablet to Table*. (Colorado Springs, CO. NavPress), 2014, 97.

<sup>183</sup> Sweet, 115.

<sup>184</sup> Bishop.

<sup>185</sup> John Drane uses this term in *The McDonaldization of the Church* based upon George Ritzer's original use in *The McDonaldization of Society* to denote standard, mechanistic processes.

the ability to tailor their approach to their specific congregation's needs and values: an artisan approach rather than mass production.

### *Toolbox Approach*

For those various reasons, I believe a *toolbox* approach will be the most valuable in addressing neo-tribalism in the local church. In this approach, I will help give background and theological understanding to the neo-tribal forces of the present moment, with more in-depth sections that can be accessed as they are needed. I will also provide a list of tools for church leaders to assess and address the neo-tribalism that is simply part of the American way of life at the moment. Within that, there must be a strategy for developing the positive side of perhaps- a Jesus tribe of sorts- in order to provide a community that reinforces a primary loyalty to Jesus and his Kingdom. A *toolbox* approach allows church leadership to understand, and then from an informed position decide on which steps to take and in what order all based upon their own assessment and understanding of their church context.

### *Assessment*

The first tools important in helping church leaders develop a solution for their community will be three ways to help assess the neo-tribal proclivities of the people and the communities themselves. There will be an individual assessment that will be something that individuals can utilize to get a view of their own personal neo-tribalism. There will also be a strategy for surveying and polling their particular congregation in order to better understand the community as a whole. And then there will be a Venn diagram activity that small groups can work through in dialogue to try to understand the values of their various tribes, and also to provide some immediate feedback in an honest way.

### *Tribal Formation*

One necessary tool will be a daily practice for Christians to engage in that will help them reflect upon and build a more intentional loyalty to Jesus and his kingdom. This will take the form of the devotional activity that I have completed, though reworked and polished in some ways. Many of the current neo-tribal reinforcers (partisan news channels, AM radio, internet message boards) take a large amount of time for Christians, and those must be replaced with something beneficial.

However, even though personal, private practices build and reinforce neo-tribal behavior, personal and private practices alone are not sufficient to build a better kind of tribal loyalty to Jesus. Churches and church leaders will need activities that can assist in that kind of tribal formation.

The first of these will be a list of liturgies and sermon topics/scriptures that can serve as a worship format for developing loyalty to Jesus' tribe. There must be an emphasis that Christian belonging needs to move away from a perfect conformity and homogeneity and a move back toward a more scriptural unity that is based on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The second will be the strategy that was executed at South Albany Community Church. This is a strategy for identifying helpful table leaders, finding presenters, and formulating questions to spur

discussion and even dissent. It will be necessary for church leaders to understand their community so that they can use discernment in building discussion that is not uniform, but is also not so volatile that it will harm relationships. It will take a particular wisdom and light touch in order to facilitate these conversations. The benefits, however, are immense. Churches will engage in a training for accepting one another, and also a training in participating in difficult conversations, rather than simply breaking fellowship or the sometimes easy “agree to disagree” without taking the time to fully understand the other point of view.<sup>186</sup>

Beyond those things, there will be a few other, less developed strategies that can act as starting point tools for church leaders to engage in. Social media training for disagreement, small group strategy for finding difference and commonality, and places and times to engage with people who are not like them are all examples of this.

### *Conclusion*

Though I believe that the personal devotional prototype that I developed and the table discussion prototype (named “We need to talk”) that we executed at South Albany are both important tools in the work to form a Jesus tribe loyalty, I do not believe either is sufficient in isolation. Because neo-tribalism has many roots and causes, I believe working at shifting and relocating Christian loyalty in a neo-tribalism world must have many strategies and many tools. In order to do that well, I believe the most viable prototype for me will be to summarize and simplify research about the causes and results of neo-tribalism, and then to help church leaders conceive of ways to work toward greater Christian loyalty.

### MOST VIABLE PROTOTYPE

Based upon the needs of approaching neo-tribalism within the current local church in the United States, and based upon my skillset and position within the local church, I believe that the *tool/book* prototype is the most viable for my project. I believe that the toolbox/book approach will be a significant way to share important information and important techniques with other church leaders, and also help me communicate insight and methods to leaders within my own congregation. While I believe a personal devotional is an extremely important piece of developing a more healthy Jesus tribe mentality, I do not believe something done in isolation will be sufficient. In addition, while I believe a discussion format like the “we need to talk” program we utilized at South Albany will be beneficial to a congregation looking to improve their communal/tribal loyalties, the lack of personal reflection time and a lack of deeper understanding by leaders would leave it vulnerable as well if it was done in isolation. Because of those things, I believe a

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<sup>186</sup> There are times and places for the phrase “agree to disagree” but, in my estimation, it is often used as an evasive tactic to disengage discomfort. If two sides understand one another, but cannot find common ground, then there is a place for this phrase. However, it must be earned and cannot be given easily.

toolbox/book format will be helpful to leaders to tailor and curate and create their own methods of building a stronger, and more loyal Jesus tribe.

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