

MODERN REFORMATION

Missional Church or New Monasticism?

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Some of us remember the Tears for Fears song, "Everybody Wants to Rule the World." Yet the mantra today is more about changing the world than ruling it. Lots of younger Christians are tired of spiritual consumerism and evangelism pitches about inviting Jesus into your heart so you can go to heaven when you die. There has to be more to Christianity than "soul-saving." Isn't there something in there about "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting"? About a new creation?

Don't we sing "Joy to the World," anticipating the blessings of Christ's kingdom extending "far as the curse is found"?

Nevertheless, a legitimate question can be raised as to whether this newfound interest in creation redeemed is still guided by a paradigm that owes more to monasticism than to the world-affirming piety of the Reformation.

The New Monasticism

Medieval monasticism was divided between those who prized the contemplative life (spiritual ascent to heaven through private disciplines of the mind) and those who gave priority to the active life (spiritual ascent through good works, especially for the poor). Francis of Assisi—and the Franciscan Order named after him—emphasized the latter.

First, today we see a revival of contemplative spirituality. It is a traditional evangelical emphasis on personal piety: discipleship as inner transformation through spiritual disciplines. Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* (1979) introduced many evangelicals to the medieval mystics and contemplative writers. From *The Divine Conspiracy* (1998) to *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (2006), Dallas Willard has repeated this call to discipleship: inner transformation through the spiritual disciplines.

Willard presses pastors to ask themselves, "Is my first aim to make disciples? Or do I just run an operation?" (1) Discipleship has lost its coinage, Willard judges with insight:

Discipleship on the theological right has come to mean preparation for soul winning, under the direction of parachurch efforts that had discipleship farmed out to them because the local church really wasn't doing it. On the left, discipleship has come to mean some form of social activity or social service, from serving soup lines to political protests to...whatever. The term "discipleship" has currently been ruined so far as any solid psychological and biblical content is concerned. (2)

Whether in the form of "soul-winning" or social work, evangelicals are too activist; they need to seek inner transformation through spiritual disciplines, especially "solitude, silence, and fasting." These, Willard says, are the "keys of the kingdom." (3) He writes, "I almost never meet someone in spiritual coldness, perplexity, distress, and failure who is regular in the use of those spiritual exercises that will be obvious to anyone familiar with the contents of the New Testament." (4)

When asked to identify "the discipline that you think we need to be exploring more at this point," Foster answered, "Solitude."

Disciples are first of all those who gladly hear and embrace the indicative to which I have already referred. Like Mary Magdalene, they cherish every word from their Savior's lips and will drop everything that they are doing whenever they can learn from him—and then, as forgiven and renewed creatures, they bring their loving witness and good deeds to others.... When you are already justified, there is nowhere for your good works to go except out to your neighbors. God doesn't need them, Luther famously observed, but your neighbor does.

It is the most foundational of the disciplines of abstinence, the *via negativa*. The evangelical passion for engagement with the world is good. But as Thomas à Kempis says, the only person who's safe to travel is the person who's free to stay at home. And Pascal said that we would solve the world's problems if we just learned to sit in our room alone. Solitude is essential for right engagement. (5)

Second, we can observe in evangelicalism today a more "Franciscan" (active life) emphasis on true discipleship as social transformation, especially in caring for the needs of the disadvantaged among us. The spiritual disciplines and inner transformation are not completely left behind; in fact, many advocates of this model—especially in the Emergent/emerging church movement—recognize the impact of writers such as Foster and Willard. However, the prayer labyrinths, chanting, Celtic crosses, candles, and journaling are all geared ultimately to create community more than solitude and to propel the community into witness through service. Leaders in this circle like to quote that line attributed to Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary use words."

For all of their differences, the similarities between these two forms of monastic piety are as evident today as ever.

"Living the Gospel" vs. "Preaching the Gospel"

Both contemplative ("spiritual disciplines") and active (Emergent) writers tend to blur and merge commands and promises, indicatives and imperatives. That is, there is a strong tendency to identify the gospel with what we do rather than with what God has done for us—and the world—in Jesus Christ. We are active agents more than beneficiaries and witnesses of God's reconciling work, building his kingdom through our efforts more than receiving a kingdom that expands through preaching and Sacrament.

Willard offers his own translation (more like a very loose paraphrase) of the Great Commission: "I have been given say over all things in heaven and in the earth. As you go, therefore, make disciples of all kinds of people, submerge them in the Trinitarian Presence, and show them *how to do* everything I have commanded. And now look: I am with you every minute *until the job is done*" (emphasis added). (6) Willard thinks the real problem is that there is too much emphasis on grace and justification: "If there is anything we should know by now, it is that *a gospel of justification alone does not regenerate disciples*." (7)

Willard believes that the heart of the gospel is inner renewal and that we are transformed in our character by "carefully planned and grace-sustained disciplines." (8) It is not so much through the gospel that the Spirit transforms us as it is through our own determination and effort: "What transforms us is the will to obey Jesus Christ from a life that is one with his resurrected reality day by day, learning obedience through inward transformation." (9) "Jesus is actually looking for people he can trust with his power." (10)

Similarly, Foster complains that an emphasis on God's grace has paralyzed the pursuit of inner transformation. Where Scripture teaches that the most important, most real, and most lasting work is Christ's objective work in history for our salvation, Foster writes,

The most important, most real, most lasting work is accomplished in the depths of our heart. This work is solitary and interior....It is the work of heart purity, of soul conversion, of inward transformation, of life formation....Much intense formation work is necessary before we can stand the fires of heaven. Much training is necessary before we are the kind of persons who can safely and easily reign with God. (11)

Although the Emergent movement reflects a more communal emphasis on social transformation, it shares the medieval, Anabaptist, and Pietist emphasis on deeds over creeds. Brian McLaren explains, "Anabaptists see the Christian faith primarily as a way of life," focusing on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount rather than on Paul and doctrines concerning personal salvation. (12) More than proclaiming Christ's finished work of reconciling sinners to the Father, the focus is on completing Christ's redeeming work of social transformation. Tony Jones, another leader in this movement, relates: "In an emergent church, you're likely to hear a phrase like 'Our calling as a church is to partner with God in the work that God is already doing in the world—to cooperate in the building of God's Kingdom.'" Trying to anticipate Reformed objections he notes, "Many theological assumptions lie behind this statement," although "the idea that human beings can 'cooperate' with God is particularly galling to conservative Calvinists, who generally deny the human ability to participate with God's work." (13)

According to McLaren, being "missional" means that we encourage Buddhists, Muslims, and Jews to become better Buddhists, Muslims, and Jews as followers of Jesus' example. It is not what we proclaim but how we live that transforms the world. McLaren writes, "To say that Jesus is Savior is to say that in Jesus, God is intervening as Savior in all of these ways, judging (naming evil as evil), forgiving (breaking the vicious cycle of cause and effect, making reconciliation possible), and teaching (showing how to set chain reactions of good in motion)." (14) There is no mention of Christ bearing God's wrath in our place—in fact, no mention of the cross having any impact on the vertical (God-human) relationship. "Then, because we are so often ignorantly wrong and stupid, Jesus comes with saving teaching, profound

yet amazingly compact: *Love God with your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, Jesus says, and love your neighbor as yourself*, and that is enough." This is what it means to say that "Jesus is saving the world." (15) Although Jesus called this the summary of the law (Matt. 22:37-40, citing Deut. 6:5) for McLaren it becomes the summary of the *gospel*.

First, "living the gospel" is a *category mistake*. By definition, the gospel is news (*euangelion*, "good news"). You don't "do" news; you do law and you *hear gospel*. Second, the specific *content* of this good news is the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ's saving life, death, and resurrection. We are beneficiaries of this action, not active participants. Scripture certainly teaches that we live in view of God's mercies, in a manner worthy of the gospel we profess, and so forth. However, it represents our lives and good works as the fruit of the faith created by the gospel, not as part of the gospel itself.

Third, the Scriptures teach consistently that faith comes through the proclamation of the gospel, not through good works. Christ himself was not arrested and arraigned because he was trying to restore family values or feed the poor. Even his miraculous signs were not by themselves offensive, except as they were signs testifying to his claims about himself. The mounting ire of the religious leaders toward Jesus coalesced around him making himself equal with God (John 5:18) and forgiving sins in his own person, directly, over against the temple and its sacrificial system (Mark 2:7). In fact, at his trial he was charged by the Jewish Council with announcing the destruction of the temple. When the high priest asked, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus answered: "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." With that, "the high priest tore his garments and said, 'What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?' And they all condemned him as deserving death" (Mark 14:53-64).

Jesus was never charged on the grounds of trying to bring world peace: quite the contrary (Matt. 10:34-37). Jesus' opponents never included a revolutionary blueprint for improving world conditions among the indictments against him. In fact, his mission was an utter failure for those who saw him as a leader of political revolution. He will return in glory to judge, to deliver, and to make all things new in a global political kingdom of righteousness and blessing. However, between his advents is the space in history for repentance and faith.

Nor were Jesus' followers indicted before Jewish and Roman tribunals on the charge of building meaningful community and "living the gospel." They were persecuted for *proclaiming the gospel*. In a letter written to Emperor Trajan about A.D. 112, Pliny, governor of Bithynia (central-northern Turkey), explains the elements of their subversive worship:

(1) Hymns about Jesus sung as part of early Christian worship; (2) prayer to God "through" Jesus and "in Jesus' name," and even direct prayer to Jesus himself, including particularly the invocation of Jesus in the corporate worship setting; (3) "calling upon the name of Jesus," particularly in Christian baptism and in healing and exorcism; (4) the Christian common meal enacted as a sacred meal where the risen Jesus presides as "Lord" of the gathered community; (5) the practice of ritually "confessing" Jesus in the context of Christian worship; and (6) Christian prophecy as oracles of the risen Jesus, and the Holy Spirit of prophecy understood as also the Spirit of Jesus. (16)

Pliny was concerned about the rapidly spreading faith in Christ, as we see in his complaint to Caesar that the pagan temples were "almost deserted," and as a result, the enormous economic trade in the various cults and sacrifices was suffering. What stood out to Pliny, however, was the intractability of these "criminals": all they had to do in order to be sent home freely was to curse Jesus and offer incense to the emperor. Yet this they would not do, even up to the moment of their execution. (17)

Throughout the New Testament, believers are said to suffer specifically "because of me [Jesus] and because of my [Jesus'] name" (Matt. 10:18, 22; for the same phrase, see Acts 4:17-18; 5:40; 6:8-8:1; 9:14, 21; 26:9, 11; 2 Cor. 11:22-29). This charge of blasphemy indicates not only the central charge of their opposition but also the central conviction of the earliest Christians: Jesus Christ as God and the only Savior. The Romans accused the early Christians of atheism and of undermining the civil religion by refusing to participate in the cult of the emperor. Roman senator and historian Tacitus relates that "an immense multitude," upon acknowledging they were Christians, was arrested on the charge of "hatred of the human race." (18) Yet these martyrs even used their trial as an occasion to articulate, explain, and defend the gospel (besides the many examples in Acts, see 1 Pet. 3:15-16).

So the law tells us what God requires of us; the gospel tells us what God has done for us. Precisely because the gospel is not about us but for us, there is community deeper than any natural bonds or affinities and a wider impact than occasional "ministry projects." The gospel is the announcement that a life has already been lived perfectly for us, surrendered for us, and taken back up as the firstfruits of the new creation. Believing this good news, we then offer ourselves not as sacrifices of atonement but as "living sacrifices" of thanksgiving, spreading the aroma of Christ (2 Cor. 2:15). We live obediently "in view of God's mercies" (Rom. 12:1-2).

The central mandate of the Great Commission is to "proclaim the gospel to everyone." "So faith comes from hearing, and

hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). Faith is expressed through love and good works, but it does not come from them. Peter says that we are "born again...through the living and abiding word of God....And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pet. 1:23, 25). Our lives may attract people to or repel them from the word of the gospel. However, Dan Kimball is simply wrong when he (like Jones above) invokes St. Francis's advice about a wordless preaching of the gospel, saying, "Our lives will preach better than anything we can say." (19)

Ironically, when we are seeking Christ rather than a generic social and moral impact on the society that we could have apart from him, something strange happens. A communion emerges around the Lamb, drawing people together "from every tribe, kindred, tongue, people and nation" into "a kingdom of priests to our God" (Rev. 5:9). From a justifying and sanctifying communion with Christ that they share together, there emerges a foretaste of genuine peace, love, and justice that can orient our ordinary lives and animate our activity in our worldly callings. The Great Commission is a specific mandate with manifold effects.

To see the church's focus as delivering God's forgiveness of sins to the world is not due to any Platonic soul-body divide. Many of us were raised in churches that were interested in "soul-winning" rather than "saving the world." Emergent folks are right to point us toward the wider horizon of God's redemptive purposes. Reformation theology, however, has always generated a piety different from "Left Behind" end-time scenarios. Christ has already redeemed the world—securing blessing "as far as the curse is found." Yet only when he returns will this kingdom be consummated; for now, it is inaugurated and expands by proclaiming the Judge's forgiving, justifying, and renewing grace to the ends of the earth.

Ironically, Emergent theologies share uncomfortable similarities at this point with the prosperity gospel. Both are right in their expectation of Christ's universal reign in blessing, peace, justice, and love—beyond the reach of sin, death, and sorrow. God cares as much for the body as for the soul. But both movements jump the gun, thinking they can usher in the consummation of this kingdom by their own action.

We *can* make things better in this *passing* evil age, but it's still "this passing evil age" rather than the consummation of the age to come. Doctors cannot conquer death, but they can be instruments of God's common grace in delaying it. Deacons were appointed in the churches to care for the temporal needs of the saints, even though the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and discipline bestows every spiritual blessing in Christ. We can fix the roof of our fellow image-bearers, even if they are atheists, but we cannot give them a secure home beyond the ravages of poverty. That's what it means to be "salt": it preserves things from decaying as quickly as they might. The salvation Christ has won for us is not just "going to heaven when we die." It isn't a matter merely of saving souls. We will be raised bodily at the end of the age, and the whole creation along with us in Christ's train (Rom. 8:19-21). Yet, this second act awaits Christ's return. "But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (v. 25).

"Going to Church" vs. "Being the Church"

If we build the kingdom by "living the gospel," then it would make sense if we stopped going to church and instead practiced our discipleship in community or in neighborhood service projects. Willard comments, "It is a tragic error to think that Jesus was telling us, as he left, to start churches, as that is understood today....He wants us to establish 'beachheads' or bases of operation for the Kingdom of God wherever we are....The outward effect of this life in Christ is perpetual moral revolution, until the purpose of humanity on earth is completed." So this is the real question for true disciples: "Will they break out of the churches to be his Church?" (20)

Similarly, Kimball writes, "We can't *go* to church because *we are* the church." (21) From this Kimball draws the familiar contrast between evangelism (mission) and the marks of the church (means of grace). Kimball thinks that things went wrong at the Reformation.

The Reformers, in their effort to raise the authority of the Bible and ensure sound doctrine, defined the marks of a true church: a place where the gospel is rightly preached, the sacraments are rightly administered, and church discipline is exercised. However, over time these marks narrowed the definition of the church itself as a "place where" instead of a "people who are" reality. The word church became defined as "a place where certain things happen," such as preaching and communion. (22)

Ironically, identifying the church as "'a place where certain things happen,' such as preaching and communion" is *contrasted* by such writers with a missional perspective, even though Jesus himself instituted these means of grace as the Great Commission.

The shift from proclamation of the gospel to conversation about the gospel as the community's world transforming is evident in the worship gathering. Jones describes Jacob's Well, a pioneering Emergent community in Kansas City: "To the classic Presbyterian sanctuary with dark-stained pews and a choir loft, JW has added the requisite video screens and replaced the pulpit with a band. All of the speaking takes place at the floor level—*only the musicians are on stage*" (emphasis added). (23) (One might wonder how exactly this differs from the model pioneered by the megachurches.) As

the predominantly white audience gathers, he says, there is a table off to one side with a quote from the contemporary Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder suggesting that "the visible church is not to be the bearer of Christ's message, but to be the message." (24)

Similarly, Jones's own church, Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis (led by Doug Pagitt), transforms the traditional service into a conversation. "The point is to jettison the magisterial sermon that has ruled over much of Protestantism for five hundred years," Jones explains. "Here the sermon is deconstructed, turned on its head. The Bible is referred to as a 'member of the community' with whom we are in conversation, and the communal interpretation of a text bubbles up from the life of the community." (25) Bread and grape juice and wine are offered in "a loud, party atmosphere, and an optional quiet meditation room."

[But] this aspect of the worship is not guided by a clergyperson....As such, communion is introduced by a variety of persons—one week it will be with a poem, another week with a testimony about "what the Lord's Supper means to me," and another week with the traditional "Words of Institution" from the Book of Common Prayer. [After this] we sit down again for announcements, and the kids then begin to fight over the leftover communion bread, since it's usually cinnamon raisin or chocolate chip or cheddar jalapeño sourdough. [It's messy] but true worship of God is a messy endeavor. I make no bones about that. It's not meant to be done "decently and in order," but messily and with only a semblance of order, and with a great deal of joy. (26)

None of this is really new. Pietism made the marks of the church identified in our Lord's Great Commission (namely, preaching, Sacrament and discipline) secondary to a host of spiritual disciplines that he did not command. Revivalism extended this trajectory. Charles Finney, the notorious preacher of the Second Great Awakening, wrote that the Great Commission just said, "Go....*It did not prescribe any forms*. It did not admit any....And [the disciples'] object was to make known the gospel in the *most effectual way*...so as to obtain attention and secure obedience of the greatest number possible. No person can find any *form* of doing this laid down in the Bible." (27) This may seem like an odd interpretation, since the "form of doing this" *is* given explicitly in the Great Commission—after the "Go" part! Nevertheless, this was the practical outworking of Finney's human-centered theology. Consequently, the church is not God's embassy, entrusted with the ministry of Word and Sacrament, but "a society of moral reformers." Like Finney himself, revival leaders do not need special training for their calling, since it is deeds rather than creeds that propel the church's mission in the world. A pretty messy endeavor indeed. Catholic historian Garry Wills observes,

The camp meeting set the pattern for credentialing Evangelical ministers. They were validated by the crowd's response. Organizational credentialing, doctrinal purity, personal education were useless here—in fact, some educated ministers had to make a pretense of ignorance. The minister was ordained from below, by the converts he made....*The do-it-yourself religion called for a make-it-yourself ministry*. (28)

Wills captures here the connection between the message and the methods: turning the gospel concerning Christ into our good works leads logically to the downplaying of God's means of grace in favor of our methods of inner or social transformation.

Putting the pieces together then, just as the new monasticism collapses the gospel into law and going to church into being the church, it also collapses the church-as-gathered into the church-as-scattered. Or, to borrow Abraham Kuyper's helpful categories, *the church as organization* is dissolved into *the church as organism*. There are many things that *Christians* are called to do in the world as parents, employees, employers, citizens, friends, and neighbors. Like all human beings created in God's image, believers are called to obey the Great Commandment: love of God and of neighbor. Yet *the church* as God's official embassy of grace gathers guests from the highways and alleys for the feast. Or, to change the metaphor, the church-as-gathered is the re-salinization plant, so that forgiven and renewed sinners can be scattered into the world as salt each week. Without the Word and Sacraments, the salt loses its savor and is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

The New Reformation

Renewing our response to the Great Commission begins with the right understanding of discipleship. Paul reminds us that works-righteousness is our vain attempt to ascend into the heavens, while the righteousness that is by faith receives Christ as he descends to us through the Word preached: sending ambassadors with his Word (Rom. 10:5-16). Faith does not come from works; works come from faith, and "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (v. 17).

Disciples are first of all those who gladly hear and embrace the indicative to which I have already referred. Like Mary Magdalene, they cherish every word from their Savior's lips and will drop everything that they are doing whenever they can learn from him—and then, as forgiven and renewed creatures, they bring their loving witness and good deeds to others.

Challenging the whole monastic paradigm, the Reformation is a good historical example of this approach. Whether climbing the ladder of spiritual disciplines or good works, the medieval monk was seen as a super-saint who performed these offices on behalf of the rest of the believers who were engaged in the lower realm of secular work and family life.

The Reformation dismantled this scheme, first by emphasizing that salvation is from start to finish God's work for us, not our work for God. Nothing that we do can contribute to Christ's perfect righteousness, so God is not pleased by works that we perform for special notice or credit. Second, as the Reformers observed, these works performed for our own salvation do nothing for our neighbor—especially when the monk is ensconced in a cell busily engaged in services that have no real benefit to others. When you are already justified, there is nowhere for your good works to go except out to your neighbors. God doesn't need them, Luther famously observed, but your neighbor does. Third, all Christians are saints and therefore equally justified and renewed, with the same obligations to grow in their relationship with God and to love and serve their neighbors.

That's why the Reformers translated the Bible into the common languages of the people from the original tongues, wrote family worship guides, prayers, liturgies, catechisms, psalters and hymns for singing around the dinner table as well as in church. It is why newly evangelized Christians, instructed in the faith, were encouraged and empowered to be "salt" and "light" in their secular callings. The impact of that "work ethic" in quality craftsmanship, medicine, legal and political theory, science, family life, and the arts is well attested by historians. To suggest that Reformed theology encourages passivity out of fear of "cooperating" with God's purposes (as Jones does above) is neither historically nor theologically well informed. We do cooperate with God in his delivery of his gifts of common and saving grace, but not in his redeeming work. Redemption is accomplished and is therefore a victory to be announced rather than to be achieved by us.

Disciples are first of all learners, like Mary who had "chosen the better part," as Jesus said, by sitting at Jesus' feet to be instructed while Martha was vexed "with much work." Those who are forgiven much love much. In view of God's mercies, loving God and neighbor now becomes our "reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1-2). And since "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Ps. 24:1), by right of creation and redemption, we can let go of our controlling and feverish agendas—liberated finally simply to love and to serve those particular neighbors whom God loves and places along our daily path. The good news is not the mark we leave on the world but the mark God leaves on us in baptism. Because "salvation is of the Lord" (Jon. 2:9), we are liberated to become active participants in the world and lovers of our neighbors, who are sinners like us in need of our good works and God's good news.

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28 [[Back](#)] Garry Wills, *Head and Heart: American Christianities* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007), 294. Emphasis added.

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