

Living and Thriving in a Post-Christian America

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As we rapidly move towards a post-Christian America, believers are struggling to adapt, not only to changing Court decisions, laws, and mores, but to changing cultural expectations both inside and outside the church, the place of religion in the public square, and the legitimacy of Christian belief.¹ I am increasingly convinced that as the initial shock of the last few months wears off, Christians will be tempted to follow one of three very different paths. The first will be to react stridently, to insist on further, more dramatic efforts to “fix” the political regime, and by so doing, return to normalcy. The second approach will be to deny that the political and cultural regimes in America matter, and thus, to retreat into isolated enclaves, protected from the corrupting world. The third approach will be to surrender to the new cultural norms in an attempt to make Christianity more palatable by making it less Christian.

Unfortunately, none of these approaches will work, but for different reasons, as I hope to make clear. I also hope to show an alternative solution that avoids the dangers of Constantinianism², as well as that of isolationism and despair, or conformity. This alternative approach begins by recognizing two seemingly paradoxical truths simultaneously. As Christians, our final hope is not in this world, and yet, this world, at this point in time, is our home; God has created everything in it, and Christ has claimed sovereignty over all of it.³ What that means for 21st-century Christians will be the subject of the latter part of this essay.

¹ There are many, many, sources for this. An incomplete list could start with: Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner, “How Christians Can Flourish in a Same-Sex-Marriage World,” *Christianity Today*, November 2, 2015; Sami Martin, “Franklin Graham Says End Times May Be Near Given Government’s Morality,” *Christian Post*, March 24, 2015.

² Here I refer to any attempt to put the church at the head of the state: see Constantine, aspects of the Holy Roman Empire, the early Anglican Church, or John Winthrop and the Pilgrims.

³ Jeremiah 29:7, Ephesians 1:21, Colossians 1:17. See also, Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1900) 186: “It is impossible, Bible in hand, to limit Christ’s Church to one’s own little

These first paragraphs set out an ambitious set of claims that need significant buttressing, starting with an initial assumption that we are moving toward, if we are not already living in, a post-Christian America. Ample social science and survey research suggests that the American public is moving away from both a belief in God and the practice of religion at an increasing rate, especially among millennials. The Barna Group has noted this in a series of surveys. For example, between 2013 and 2015 the number of “post-Christian” Americans rose from 37% of the population to 44%. Interestingly, Barna concludes this despite the fact that 78% of their respondents describe themselves as Christian.⁴ That affiliation, however, is largely skin deep. Barna has developed a 15-point metric that examines how people believe and practice, from assertions of belief in God or atheism, to Church attendance, Bible reading, and other related activities. In 2015 their research found that 44% of respondents met 60%, or 9 out of 15 of these criteria, thus qualifying as post-Christian by their analysis.⁵ Barna further noted that younger generations skew increasingly post-Christian, so much so that they estimate almost half of all Americans between 18-28 and 40% between 29-47 are functionally post-Christian.⁶

Other surveys have come to similar conclusions. The Pew Research Center has found that between 2007 and 2014, belief in Christianity among all Americans fell from 78.4% to 70.6%, and that the population of NONEs, or unaffiliated-to-any religious belief rose, from 16.1% to 22.8%.⁷ Among millennials, however, the change is much starker. Over one third of millennials do not identify a religious faith of any kind. As one Pew report notes, “It is possible, of course,

community. It is everywhere, in all parts of the world; and whatever its external form, frequently changing, often impure, yet the gifts wherever received increase our riches.”

⁴ Barna Group, 2015, “2015 Sees Sharp Rise in Post-Christian Population,” <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/728-america-more-post-christian-than-two-years-ago#.VjuELrerTrd> (accessed, 11/5/15).

⁵ Barna Group, 2013 “How Post-Christian is America?” <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/608-hpca#.VjuFLberRD> (accessed, 11/5/15).

⁶ Barna, 2013.

⁷ Pew Forum, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/> (accessed 11/5/2015).

that younger adults will become more religious with age.... Gallup surveys conducted over several decades indicate that as people age, they become more likely to say religion is an important part of their lives.”⁸ There has also been, however, a marked uptick in Americans without any religious belief in every generational category between 2007 and 2014, and no age group has become more religious in the last seven years, “as measured by self-assessments of religion’s importance in their lives, frequency of prayer, or frequency of church attendance.”⁹ Perhaps more importantly, from the perspective of the church, nearly one-quarter of all Americans raised in churches, and over 40% of those raised as Catholics, have abandoned religious belief as adults.¹⁰ Even worse, almost six in ten millennials who were raised “in Christian churches end up walking away from either their faith or from the institutional Church at some point in their first decade of adult life.”¹¹

In short, survey research suggests we are witnessing a trend in American public life of an increasing abandonment of religious belief, a wave that has not yet crested. As older, more religious generations of Americans pass away, they are being replaced by an increasing number of boomers that have shifted from occasional religious practice and belief to self-evaluating as NONEs, while millennials in particular are arguably the least religious generation in American history, and rapidly becoming more so.¹² In addition, even among Americans that still identify as

⁸ Pew Forum, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” November 3, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/> (accessed 11/5/2015). See also, Jeremy E. Uecker, Mark D. Regnerus, and Margaret L. Regnerus, “Losing My Religion: The Social Sources of Religious Decline in Early Adulthood,” *Social Forces* 85:4 (2007).

⁹ Uecker, et al., “Losing.” For yet further evidence of the decline of religious belief, in this case, among working class whites, see W. B. Wilcox, A. J. Cherlin, J. E. Uecker, & M. Messel, “No Money, No Honey, No Church: The Deinstitutionalization of Religious Life Among the White Working Class,” *Research in the Sociology of Work*, 23 (2012): 227–250.

¹⁰ Pew Forum, “Changing Landscape.”

¹¹ Barna Group, 2013, “5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church,” <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/635-5-reasons-millennials-stay-connected-to-church#.VktPInarTrd> (accessed 11/17/2015)

¹² Barna, 2013, “5 Reasons.”

religious, religious observance and practice is down sharply as Barna has identified with their 15-point metric of religious belief and practice.

Interestingly enough, at a time when many Christians are reaching a point of despair about the role of the Church and religion in modern America, some outside the Church are realizing that religion is not actually disappearing. Jeffrey Stout notes, “The notion that history is moving, by fits and starts, toward the de-divinizing of the world coheres poorly with recent history.”¹³ Stout says the assumption that religion was withering away was widespread in the academy in the late 1960s, but by the 1980s it should have been clear that religion was not dying off. He concludes, “The hope that religion will wither away now looks as unrealistic to serious students of religion as the Marxist hope that the state will wither away now looks to serious students of political economy.”¹⁴ Stout is concerned by this, not because he seeks to eliminate religious belief, but because he thinks that every attempt by secularism to force religion out has an unintended consequence. Because secularists cannot eliminate religion, their attempt to do so merely “gives them [religious people] reason to conclude that liberal democracies are essentially inhospitable to their concerns. Many of them then either retreat from public life into communities of like-mindedness, or attempt to use the electoral process to advance theocratic ends. Both tendencies spell trouble for democracy.”¹⁵

Stout recognizes something that many have missed. No matter how secular the government or culture becomes, neither can succeed in eliminating religious viewpoints. They can, however, succeed in turning religious believers against the culture and government. That is a dangerous thing to do in a liberal democracy. But it has been done, at least in part. And it helps

¹³ Jeffrey Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics,” in *Library of Living Philosophers* volume devoted to Richard Rorty, 5.

¹⁴ Stout, “Rorty,” 6.

¹⁵ Stout, “Rorty,” 7.

explain the desire of many Christians to react against the culture by seeking to conquer it, or by abandoning it, just as Stout fears.

The Response of the Church, Part I: Fight

The first temptation of the Church will be to respond by fighting back, to remake the culture through political means. In my view, this attempt will fail because it misdiagnoses the problem. America's contemporary political crisis is an effect, not a cause. The cause is both cultural and moral. And that cannot be fixed by elections, constitutional amendments, or judicial impeachments. That is not to say, the political is unimportant. It is vitally important. But as the dramatic transformation of moral beliefs on homosexuality in the last five years should show, the political world is largely *reacting* to cultural change, not creating it.

It is important to note that I am not saying Christians should abandon politics. But we should not look to Washington for Salvation. That could never work, even when there was reason to think that Christians actually did represent a moral majority. Now that it is abundantly clear that they do not, it is even less of a solution. No, politics will not save us, though it is possible that by remaining politically engaged, we can limit some of the effects of the cultural revolution.

What might this look like specifically? Well, for starters, I am suggesting that Pat Robertson and others have been wrong. You cannot simply impose Christian values from the top. I do not mean that it is impossible to legislate morality. In fact, we legislate morality all the time. But the nature of Christianity is such that it has never worked well to attempt to put the crown on the head of the Church. That smacks too much of Constantinianism. It is important to note, however, that the religious right is not the only Christian group that has attempted to use the

power of religion to influence the state. After all, in many respects Falwell and Robertson's attempts to mobilize the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition were *reactions* to more mainstream Protestant denominations' support for the Social Gospel. And yet when we think of the tendency of some Christians to place too much emphasis on the political, we almost always focus on conservative Christians. Jim Wallis can write a book called *God is not a Republican*, and almost no one bothers to ask him why much of the book is dedicated to convincing the reader why God is really a Democrat.

And yet, there is a real problem when much of our culture identifies Christianity, not by its theology, but by its politics, especially given how many of those political fights are rather silly, in the big scheme of things. Consider the ridiculous social media controversy over Starbucks' red holiday cups. Evangelist Joshua Feuerstein put up an outraged video, claiming Starbucks was trying to take Christ out of Christmas in their cup design. His video garnered over 12 million views and led to a series of increasingly absurd arguments on social media.¹⁶ There are many perfectly valid and important political issues that Christians should care about, and can engage our culture in, from sex trafficking, to abortion, to marriage, but controversies like these do not help.

The Response of the Church, Part II: Flight

The second approach will also fail, not because it misunderstands the cause of America's cultural crisis, but because it underestimates its importance. A retreat from the corrupting effects of the world would be a repetition of the American Fundamentalist movement of the early 20th century at an earlier time of cultural crisis. This approach is governed by the assumption that in

¹⁶ Nathalie Tadena, "Consumers Aren't so Cheery About Starbucks Holiday Cup Controversy," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 2015.

the final analysis, the political and cultural are unimportant when compared to the spiritual—that the saving of souls is all that matters. This is wrong for two reasons. First, in our new, post-Christian cultural order, it will not be enough for Christians to cower in their corner and avoid the world. They will be expected to approve the changes in culture—in short, to deny essential aspects of what makes them Christian. Second, this view misunderstands Christ’s true claim and mission, not simply to claim souls, but to redeem the whole world. As Abram Kuyper argued, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”¹⁷

But for a significant portion of the American Church, Kuyper is wrong. The political and cultural world we live in are largely irrelevant. This might seem odd given the focus, and often blame, that is put on leaders of the Religious Right for giving a bad name to Christianity. But we forget that part of the reason Falwell had such a powerful effect on politics in the ’80s and ’90s was that the evangelical church had largely abandoned politics for 100 years until the after-effects of *Roe v Wade*. The American Fundamentalist movement of the early 20th century was to a significant extent a turning away from the perceived ills of politics. That approach failed on two fronts: It did not lead to a purer church, *and* it did not properly understand Christ’s kingdom—that He cares for all the world.

Nonetheless, the Flight option is an appealing temptation for many today. Rod Dreher, among others, has put a lot of effort into elucidating what he calls the Benedict Option. For Dreher, it is time for the Church to step back from politics and culture and focus on internal improvement within the Church. Dreher notes, “Given this post-Christian new ‘dark age,’ we (small-o) orthodox Christians must pioneer new ways to bind ourselves to Scripture, to our

¹⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *Sphere Sovereignty*, in *Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 488.

traditions, and to each other—not for mere survival, but so that the church can be the authentic light of Christ to a world lost in darkness.”¹⁸ Dreher has a number of thoughtful things to say about the nature and power of true Christian community. There are many appealing aspects of his Benedictine option. And on the level of daily life for the Church, I think he may be right. But he is overly optimistic about the response of the state and the culture to an attempt by the Church to “opt-out.” Dreher seems to think that intentionally creating internal “enclaves” of like-minded believers is a real possibility. I think it can be done, but I am less sanguine about the possibility of such communities remaining free from cultural and political interference. To take but one example, the supporters of same-sex marriage do not seem to see *Obergefell*, Justice Kennedy’s decision on same-sex marriage, to be the final victory, but rather an initial step that will soon be followed by many more. Churches will not be able to avoid this issue by merely promising to stay out of politics. They will have to either vigorously defend their right to practice their religious beliefs, even when they defy cultural and political norms, or they will have to assimilate.

The goal of the flight mentality is almost complete isolation from the culture at large, and even from Christians whose understanding of culture differs. In order for it to work, it requires religious liberty protections which will not be maintained if all Christians retreat from the public arena. There are small scale examples of flight communities that have “worked.” The Amish are a prime example. But the Amish have minimal positive influence on the outside culture. They have survived because the broader, and until recently, largely Christian community, has tolerated them. If the broader Christian Church attempts the same thing on a larger scale, they are likely to have the same minimal impact on culture as the Amish, but they are very unlikely to be tolerated by the emerging secular consensus.

¹⁸ Rod Dreher, “Coming to Terms with a Post-Christian World,” *Christianity Today*, November 2, 2015.

The Response of the Church, Part III: Assimilate

The third approach, to surrender to cultural changes, will fail because it will turn Christianity into something else. It will turn churches into rotary clubs and associations that meet because people like each other or share common interests, rather than because they are motivated by the saving power of Christ. It will hope to make Christianity acceptable by making it uncontroversial. In his 1913 essay, "Christianity and Culture," Gresham Machen noted, "The Church is puzzled by the world's indifference. She is trying to overcome it by adapting her message to today's fashions."¹⁹ But, as Machen recognized, that was a fool's errand. Christianity proclaims a basic truth about the world we live in and about ourselves that will always be controversial. It cannot be made simple and convenient, without making it something less than Christian.

Machen was right a hundred years ago, and he is right today. Part of the problem with the Assimilation Option is that it misconstrues why Christianity is viewed with such distaste by so many today. It puts the blame squarely on the Pat Robertsons and the Jerry Falwells of the world. To be sure, Christian leadership in the past thirty years has had more than its share of faults. But if neither Christians nor Christianity said another word about marriage, abortion, or any other hot-button cultural issue, Christianity would still be just as inherently offensive and counter-cultural as it is today.²⁰

In some ways, America is no more post-Christian today than it ever has been. Consider for a moment the essential doctrines of the Christian faith: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. God created the world. Man sinned and fell so far that he could never repair the damage. God, through Christ, redeemed man through unearned, unmerited grace. And God has

¹⁹ Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," *The Princeton Theological Review*, 11 (1913): 8.

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:27-28.

promised to one day restore His creation. It is almost impossible to imagine a doctrine more at odds with our standard American views of individual freedom and license to do whatever we would like, of our ability to fully control our own destiny and earn our place in the world. Christianity is not offensive because Christians are offensive. It's offensive because it tells us we are broken, fundamentally broken, in a way that we are powerless to repair.

The second problem with the Assimilation Option is that the Church cannot go far enough in assimilating and still remain the Church. To work, the Church must abandon central Biblical claims because our culture has already abandoned them. Moreover, this option has been tried already, and it has already failed. I began this essay by reviewing some of the sad statistics on the state of the Church. But these numbers are far, far worse for the sections of the Church that have most tried to assimilate. People are leaving the Church in droves, but they have been leaving the biggest mainline denominations faster and for longer.²¹ You can never abandon or alter Christianity fast enough to keep up with the times. And for the more theologically traditional evangelical churches that attempt to partly assimilate—their problem is that the Christian culture will never be as entertaining as the larger pop culture—if entertainment is our only metric.

The Assimilation Option is based on the flawed belief that the culture is turned off to Christianity because they do not like Christians. I say it is a flawed belief, not because it is entirely wrong, but because it is not entirely right. There is ample evidence that many have turned away from the Church because of the behavior of Christians. That is a problem, of course.

²¹ In just seven years 5 million people, or roughly 1 in 8 members, have left the mainline Protestant churches. Only 45% of children raised in a mainline denomination stay in it upon reaching adulthood. Michael Lipka, "Mainline Protestants Make up Shrinking Number of U.S. Adults," Pew Research Center, May 18, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/18/mainline-protestants-make-up-shrinking-number-of-u-s-adults/> (accessed 11/17/2015).

But the deeper cause of the separation of the Church and culture is that the Christian message is inherently counter cultural and offensive.²²

The Response of the Church, Part IV: Renewal

I think that a different approach can be charted, one that will be both difficult and whose success is uncertain. Its strength lies in the fact that it properly understands the Biblical doctrine of the importance of Christ's sovereignty over all, including the political and cultural, while simultaneously recognizing that modern America has a primarily moral, not political, problem. This fourth approach recognizes two seemingly paradoxical truths simultaneously. As Christians, our final hope is not in this world, and yet, this world, at this point in time, is our home; God has created everything in it, and Christ has claimed sovereignty over all of it.

Because our final hope is not in this world, we should not expect salvation from governments, culture, or economics. But because God has created everything in this world and claims it as His, we can find something redeeming, something worth preserving and restoring, in each of these things. This means that, as tempting as the Fight response is, we cannot perfect the culture through the ballot box. But, as tempting as the Flight response looks to many now, we cannot avoid a cultural crisis by deliberate retreat into enclaves. Finally, as tempting as the Assimilation response is, we cannot bend enough to fit in with the changing culture. Living as a Christian requires a backbone.

At this point, however, it is fair to say, this is all very well and good, but rather vague, isn't it? True enough. I do not have a ten-point plan to cultural renewal. I do not think it exists. That said, I think we must start with a better understanding of God's purpose in the world, as I have mentioned, and then begin to work from there. I think we need to recognize that we are

²² 1 Corinthians 1:23, among others.

living in exile—not in exile from America, but in exile from the Garden of Eden. In other words, in some important respects, our position in 21st-century America is not unlike the position of God’s people at any other point in time, that is, living in the world that God made and called good, and yet, through our own sin, is no longer our home. The book of Jeremiah is largely about exile, and in it God gives the Israelites some pretty specific and surprising instructions on how to live in exile in Babylon. Keep in mind, they are living not just in a country that is somewhat hostile to public expressions of faith, but in a country whose government has slaughtered their people, razed their God-given homeland, and enslaved many of their best and brightest and brought them back as hostages to ensure the good behavior of the rest of their population. And in this environment they are told by Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.²³

I don’t have space in this essay to do a thorough exegesis of this passage, but at least two things are worth clearly noting. One, this is a real exile for the Israelites. This is not something to celebrate, it is punishment. It is not inherently good to be living in a fallen world; in fact, it makes our lives as believers much more difficult. But it is not a unique problem to our time. Two, they are clearly called to not retreat into enclaves, but to actively seek the welfare of the cities they are in.

I think that this passage gives us some small, but clear, and hopefully concrete steps to think about how to prepare to thrive in a Post-Christian America. Specifically, there is a clear

²³ Jeremiah 29:4-7, ESV.

command here to pray for the community we inhabit, to build and grow strong families, and to seek the welfare of the city. What might that look like?

Thriving in a Post-Christian America

I. Prayer

Our family has recently started attending Grace Anglican Church, a church rooted in the historic Anglican tradition. As children of the American evangelical, non-denominational church, the liturgical structure of prayers, readings, sermon, and communion in the Book of Common Prayer was at first quite alien to us. But we are growing to genuinely love and appreciate them. One of the things that I particularly appreciate about the collects, or prayers, in the Book of Common Prayer is that each Sunday as a community of believers, we pray for our country, our world, our community, and our church leaders. We intentionally see ourselves as belonging to a church community, but also as being a part of a larger community that we cannot control, but that we can care for and seek its welfare.

We are actively trying to develop habits of prayer as a family as well, and encouraging our children in this. For example, my wife has a little jar on our kitchen table. In the jar are popsicle sticks. On each stick is a person, group, or thing to pray for. Every night at dinner our children, ages 4 and 2, pull a popsicle stick out of the jar and pray for whatever is on it. They pray for their baby brother, for their grandparents, for Daddy's students, for their own obedience to their parents, and for persecuted Christians in Egypt. For six months my daughter has regularly prayed something like this, "Dear Jesus, please protect the Christians in Egypt from the bad men in Egypt that want to hurt them. And please help the bad men to come to know you, and obey you. And help me and Elise and all the children in the world to obey their mommies and

daddies.” This I think, is part of what it means to seek the welfare of the city through prayer. We are actively teaching our children to think beyond the walls of our house to the broader world.

II. Families

We need to recognize that our assumption that the most important thing in society is the individual is just that: an American cultural assumption that is wrong. Individuals and individual rights are important. But life and welfare happen in community, and the building block of any community is the family. We need to start by seriously considering the welfare of our families. Churches can be much more intentional about family ministry. For example, my in-laws have recently started a Sunday school class at their church for parents of teenagers. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, no one has ever done this at their church before. They go to a large church, but they had no idea of how great the response for this class would be. A month before it started, they had over fifty families registered. A week before, over a hundred had signed up.

Christians are justifiably concerned about the legal redefinition of the family. That is a significant problem that will have long-term repercussions. It is not something we can ignore, or pass off as though it will not affect the Church. It will. But the redefinition of the family has been going on for a long time culturally, in and out of the family. Politics is often downstream from culture, and in this case, that is quite obviously true. We have culturally defined marriage as a way to produce happiness between two people, and nothing more. We need, within the Church, to recognize that marriage is not simply a contract for happiness; it is a covenant for life, for a family, that normally includes children. That carries much higher expectations, duties, and responsibilities, and a central task of the Church is to help preserve the families in its body.

III. Welfare of the City Through Education

A greater emphasis on prayer and families are aspects of seeking out the welfare of the city. There are many others that I could talk about. But since I am a professor at a small Christian college, it makes sense for me to focus on education. One way we can live well in exile is to rethink the importance of Christian higher education, which is in many ways uniquely equipped to prepare students to engage a post-Christian America.

This might at first seem paradoxical. After all, some might claim that Christian colleges represent flight from the culture, an attempt to hide from the world in isolated enclaves. But I think this is wrong. There is a distinction between an attempt to run away and hide from evil, and a sincere desire to find a place to work out one's faith and its implications to society in fear and trembling, *in order to reenter* the world better equipped to respond to it as a Christian. There is, thus, a real justification for multiple avenues, whether through Christian higher education, home schooling, or church life, to name a few, where Christians can be better prepared to engage the broader culture.

Christian higher education is ideally placed to help a rising generation of Christians understand that cultural crises are not unique to the modern era, that the Church has weathered them before, and that a deeper understanding of Christ's lordship over all of creation can both shield us from despair at every political loss and point us toward a way forward.

Moreover, I think that Christian colleges, and especially the faculty in those colleges, are also well placed and well equipped to help churches better train lay people to understand the times they live in and act with courage and conviction. The Church desperately needs thoughtful leadership; and pastors and priests may well find that they are unprepared to think through and lead their congregations in the current crisis. This is an opportunity for Christian faculty and

colleges to not just fulfill their scholarly mandate, but to serve the broader church community in a meaningful way. Sometimes faculty may do that directly, through their involvement in their local church and community, but more typically, our impact will be felt in the long-term, through what and how we teach our students.

William Deresiewicz's book *Excellent Sheep* takes dead aim at elite institutions in American higher education.²⁴ He notes that far too many of our top students are excellent at memorizing information and regurgitating it. If you tell them to "jump through hoops," they will merely ask "how high." But they do not know how to learn, and they do not know what they are jumping through hoops for. They are merely following along. They are excellent sheep. There is a great deal of truth to this critique at all levels of education. I want to teach my students to be more than sheep—to not simply learn and regurgitate data in class, and to not simply go with the flow of culture in their lives. But I also do not want them to be lions, rampaging around and trying to forcefully solve the cultural crisis.

This may sound strange, but I want my students to be dragon-slayers. I want them to be clear-eyed, discerning men and women who know what the good, the true, and the beautiful are, and who have the courage and conviction to defend the good, the true, and the beautiful against what I think are the inevitable difficulties that will come in a post-Christian America. This is a dreadfully difficult expectation to put on students. But I think it is necessary because the world that they are about to enter is a dramatically different one than the world of their parents.

This is a task that students need careful help to be properly equipped to carry out. There is no ten-step plan to living and thriving in a post-Christian America. And while I can probably adequately predict some future problems, I cannot even begin to predict all of them. What I can

²⁴ William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2015).

do, if I am very intentional and deliberate about it, is prepare my students to engage their culture not merely as 21st-century Americans, but as 21st-century Christians living in exile.

Their exile will look different because our culture is different. Some of my students may have a significant impact in the political world, akin to Daniel in Israel's exile in Babylon. Some may impact the cultural world or the business world in ways I cannot anticipate. But at least for a time, I want all of them to think seriously about what it means to live in exile, and what might be required of them. I want them to think through the possibility that they may have to offer civil disobedience to fundamentally unjust laws. I want them to understand that though they can try to slide along on the periphery of conflict and avoid "divisive issues," they cannot do so forever. I want them to be intentional about engaging their peers when they finish their education. I want them to have courage to live well in exile and hope for their future.

Because that is the thing about our exile. It is not permanent. Jeremiah 29 gave the Israelites instructions on how to live in exile, how to seek out the welfare of the city. But God also gave them a future hope of a return from exile:

For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.²⁵

We are living in exile as the Israelites were, and that has all manner of difficult connotations. Our exile is not the same as theirs, and it may not be of the same 70-year duration. Who knows, it could be longer. But we also have a future hope, not for a return to some mythical golden age in American history, not for a man-made kingdom of heaven on earth, but for Christ's kingdom. And while we are called to seek out the welfare of the city we live in, we are not ultimately

²⁵ Jeremiah 29:10-13.

responsible for our final hope, which, incidentally, is a good thing because if we were responsible, we would not be up for the challenge.

Conclusion: *Nice and Warm*

I was talking to a colleague at work recently and he mentioned that he had enjoyed having my daughter participate in children's education at church the previous day. Apparently, the class had talked about the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and my colleague asked the children what Narnia was like when Lucy first stepped through the Wardrobe. Predictably, and sensibly, all of the other children who were familiar with the book said that it was "cold." My daughter, however, said that it was "*nice and warm.*" My colleague was curious about this, and asked her, "How was it warm?" In the way that only a small child can, my daughter, with complete confidence, answered, "Mr. Tummy's house was nice and warm by the fire, and he had warm tea for Lucy."

I left the conversation smiling, and thinking about how to tell my daughter, yes, Mr. Tumnus (Mr. Tummy), had a nice warm house, but he had to keep it nice and warm with a large fire because all of Narnia was so cold. But then, suddenly I was struck with the realization that my daughter was more right than I was. In a way that only a child, or someone with a childlike heart, can see right through the world around her to a deeper, more important truth, my four-year old daughter had recognized, as I had not, even as I read Lewis' great story to her, that the most important part of Narnia to Lucy, and thus, to my daughter, was not the cold, or the White Witch, or the Battles, or perhaps even Aslan; it was Mr. Tummy, because he was Lucy's faithful friend.

And the most important thing to know about Narnia, if Lucy and Mr. Tumnus were the most important people in it, was that even if it was bitterly cold outside, it could be *nice and warm* where true friends lived in fellowship. This is a deep truth.

And it is true, despite the fact that initially Mr. Tumnus only befriended Lucy and invited her into his home to betray her. We are all betrayers. We have all failed in our tasks before God and man. And we are all living in exile, in a country that is no longer fully our home, just as Mr. Tumnus was no longer living in a Narnia that he recognized. The important thing, Lewis reminds us, is that Mr. Tumnus changed his mind, that he repented and protected Lucy at great personal risk.

This is a deep truth, indeed, the deepest truth, that Aslan himself speaks of after the breaking of the Stone Table. For what truer friendship can there be than for a man to lay down his life as a willing victim, a sacrifice for another.

This story should, I think, give us some hope in our present situation. We are living in exile, in a country that is increasingly difficult to recognize, in a nation that often seems quite cold. And it is hard to see when Christmas will come again. But while we wait for Aslan's return, we can take solace, and even hope, in the knowledge that where we have true community, in the body of Christ, we can be nice and warm despite the increasing cold and bitterness of the culture we live in. And that, just perhaps, by creating a community together of friendship and encouragement, of courage in the face of challenges, a community that shows it has not only orthodoxy but ortho-praxy—that is, living the Christian life well, in the Church and outside of it—the world will see the Christian life well lived as nice and warm and want to take part in it.