

# The Church Before the Watching World

## Bearing Witness: Finding A Third Way Beyond Culture Wars”

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West Side Church of Christ  
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Nathan Guy

### Scripture Reading

*“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ” (2 Cor 2:14-17 ESV)*

### **CONTEXT & CULTURE MATTERS**

The question for this morning is this: What is the challenge for Christians when it comes to how we relate to our culture?

Well, we might ask “what is culture?” We sometimes equate “culture” with “the world” by which we mean “the bad things out there other people are trying to impose on us.” That’s when we sing “this world is not my home.” But we could also use “culture” in a positive, or at least a neutral sense, since “culture” is something we are a part of, something that makes up everything about our place in the world—the air we breathe, the habits we have adopted, the language we share. Not so much “they” vs. “us”, but the shared “we” that involves doing life together on this planet. That’s when we sing “this is my father’s world.”

So, which is it? Is this world not my home, or is this my Father’s world? The answer, of course, is yes. According to the Apostle Paul, this is god’s good world (3-x blessed world), marred by sin. Satan is the “prince of this world,” and yet God so loved the world that he died for it. We are supposed to “love not the world,” and yet we are called to become all things to all people so that we might save some, and they will know we are Christians by our love.

## HARD CASES

All of this to say we live in a gray world with some hard questions that don't admit of easy and obvious answers. Should we put our kids in public school? Should conservative Christians boycott Disney over sexual ethics? Should we support the bombing of another country?

These are not easy questions and there are no easy answers. I think we can all understand how conscientious Christians could come to different conclusions. And that is the dilemma. Christianity is supposed to mean something; it's supposed to do something; we are supposed to speak with one voice and stand with Jesus Christ. So...if good Christians can think so differently about all these cases, what are we—the church—supposed to *do*? Sometimes these questions are like a chess board with a hundred possible moves. So today, I want to call Christians to see the whole board.

## WELCOME

For some Christians, the “right” answer to how Christians should approach our culture is what we might call the way of *welcome*. Accept culture. Embrace culture. This is to put on rose-colored glasses and declare “culture good.” Maybe you know Christians like this—they seem to love what they see when they look at the world; eternally optimistic and committed to look for the good. As a Christian theologian, I want a biblical category before I consider something a Christian option. And I think you can find a reason to think this way in a robust appreciation of “creation” and a hopeful anticipation of God’s “new creation.” After all, in the beginning, God looked at his creation—all that would be part of “culture” you might say--and He called it “good.” In the New Creation which we anticipate, culture appears to be very good. The picture Revelation 21 paints is of the new Jerusalem with gates that shall never be shut, as the kings of the earth bring in their treasures. In this picture, creation (or what we call culture) is pictured as revealing the glory of God (Psalm 19:1). God often speaks—to the church, no less—through culture. Just think of how great music and skillful art reveal God’s glory and often brings people to their knees faster than any sermon could.

So, on this view, what is the relationship between Christ and culture? There just doesn't seem to be any perceived conflict. They agree on virtually all the important stuff, or at least you can look to culture to point out needed correctives. Paul appeals to culture in 1 Corinthians 5 when he tells the church “Shape up! Even your pagan neighbors could tell you that’s wrong!” Think about the great movements in history regarding abolition or human rights that began in the culture to open the eyes of the church. Instead of despising “worldly government,” you might let Romans 13 be your lens: God sets up

government; our legislators work for God; and we are called to be submissive to them. If any of you grew up in small, southern town, where being a good church member and being a good citizen were virtually the same thing, you might have experienced this perspective. If normal, everyday life for you involves prayer-filled lunches at a Chick-fil-A, or sitting in a classroom where the teacher—a deacon's wife—is both trustworthy and devout, then you might understand and even appreciate this lens. Culture is not something to be feared; it is something to be cherished.

Seeing culture as something to welcome can be refreshing, calling us to look for the good that God has placed in everyone and everything. It would certainly strengthen and widen our sense of community. “Look for the good” and “live as community” are certainly theological goals. We might point to Matthew 11:19, where Jesus says to the leaders of the day,

*John came in the strictest austerity and people say, “He’s crazy!” Then the Son of Man came, enjoying life, and people say, “Look, a drunkard and a glutton—the bosom-friend of the tax-collector and the sinner” (PHILLIPS).*

In other words, “He seems to enjoy this world and seems comfortable with people in the world.” There is something to the “welcome” motif. When you see churches changing their tactics—or even their teachings—to fit better with where the culture is, you can see it as courageously missional and welcoming to the fact that God speaks through culture and creation and may be calling upon us to sometimes “get with the program.” But there is a danger to this approach, isn’t there? That danger, it seems to me, is rooted in Ignorance. Christians who simply welcome culture—full stop—without some nuance and caution forget that God broke into history to rescue us from something; that the struggle between flesh and spirit is real, and that the grace of God teaches us to say no to things. I mean, there is also a cross. The cross means there are things worth dying for (not to mention things that can kill us). There are teachings and lifestyles that Christians are called to which will never conform to the ways of the world—nor should they. Since we are told that in so many ways, we are not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed. And the fact that we await new creation might challenge us if we are all-too-cozy in this present world.

So the way of “welcome” is a mixed bag—something to consider and learn from, but something that can also be dangerous. Take this view with a grain of salt.

**WITHDRAW**

The second option is the way of *withdrawal*. Resist culture. Remove yourself from culture. This is to put on primrose glasses (since a primrose is a flower that only open at night in the midst of the darkness) and declare “culture bad.” The key theological category for this approach might be “the fall” (and, depending on what you have to give up as a result, the key theological category might be “the cross”). On this view, the relationship between Christ and culture is one of extreme opposition. Culture is hostile; it is “worldliness.” And Christians are to “come out from among them and be ye separate” (2 Cor 6:17). “Do not love the world or *anything* in the world,” writes John. “If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For *everything* in the world...comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 John 2:15-16). “You do not belong to the world,” Jesus told his disciples, “but I have chosen you *out* of the world” (John 18:36; 15:19). Think the Prophets—critiquing the culture and standing apart from it.

On this view, there is no desire or inclination to have one toe in culture; for culture is on the side of darkness, while Christianity is a counter-cultural alternative for the sons of light. Just think of your closest Amish community. Or think of the monastery or the convent. These are places where the idols of greed, consumerism, and the thirst for power go to die. Trying to play the game, working within the system to bring about the change you want—quenching your thirst for power by using the means of power in the name of Christ—is destined to failure. In fact, they might claim, it will only make things worse. It will cause people to confuse Christ’s non-coercive, bottom-up, invitational kingdom of heaven with a coercive, forced, top-down legislative kingdom of the world.

Culture is always shifting, and we will always live with it; but we can care about people affected by it. According to this viewpoint, we have about as much chance to change the culture as we do to change the weather. But we can help people. In the words of Frederica Mathews-Green, “God has not called us to change the weather, Our primary task as believers, and our best hope for lasting success, is to care for individuals caught up in the pounding storm.”<sup>1</sup>

In short, Christians should view culture not through the lens of Romans 13, but Revelation. The culture is Babylon, and we should let Babylon be Babylon. Our job is not to change it, overcome it, or welcome it. Our job is to simply reject it. Shelter away from it. Leave the world alone. And in this life, prepare yourselves for bitter disappointment. Let me ask you: Is it really outrageous to imagine Christians in Nazi Germany taking such an approach in how they viewed Christianity’s relationship to

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<sup>1</sup> Frederica Mathews-Green, “Loving the Storm-Drenched,” *Christianity Today* 50/3 (March 2006): 36-39.

culture? The confessing church may have appeared to the rest of the world like the Amish do to them and to us. What about the Christian church in China during the reign of Chairman Mao?

You don't have to choose the "all in" approach of the Amish, the Quakers, or the Nuns for this to be your instinctual home. Did you choose to home-school your kids? Do you support the local Christian academy rather than the public school system? Did your youth minister growing up offer an 'alternative prom'? This view simply says "Christian" stands in relation to "culture" as one of opposition. Embrace is impossible. Partnership is wrong-headed. Alternative is demanded.

Seeing culture as something from which to withdraw—even forgoing paths to power and comforts of this life to protect from entrapment—certainly takes sin seriously and it displays the cross as a way of life. In that way, this approach can be a powerful witness of what it looks like to be a suffering community (that follows a suffering Lord). It reminds us to emphasize the "not yet" nature of the Kingdom. But to what end? Jesus certainly did not participate in worldliness, and he often removed himself *in* the world (Matt 12:13; 14:13), but he was not removed *from* the world. Prostitutes and tax collectors flocked to his lunch table and enjoyed being around him (Luke 15:1-2). Paul did not advocate living a depraved and debauched life, but he called for us to be a sweet-smelling aroma as he lived among the tent makers and stagehands, reading their works, citing their poets, rubbing shoulders and eating at tables with them. It was he who said, "if we are not to associate with such people, we'd have to go out of the world" (1 Cor 5:10). It is useless to be sweet-smelling if there is no one to smell it; just as salt is meant to be tasted, and light is meant to be shown in the darkness. That, then, is a challenge for us to, shall we say, "have skin in the game"? There is an irony here. Even though many who have chosen the withdraw route have lived lives of suffering, there is a sense in which withdraw is also rooted in fear—fear that being in the world is only danger; fear that God's good world and following the example of Jesus in the world is too hard.

So the way of "withdraw" is a mixed bag—something to consider and learn from, but something that can also be dangerous. Take this view with a grain of salt.

## WINNING

The third option is the way of *winning*. Change the culture, transform the culture; use your means of power and conquer the prevailing culture. This is to put on safety glasses because you are going to go to work, seeking to change the culture around you. Culture is hostile, to be sure; but Satan may mean it for evil, while God means it for good. So irradicate the evil, and the world will be full of light. What our culture needs is a good

baptism. Christ finds the culture badly in need of change and calls on the church to join him in remaking it, as Christians fulfill the mandate to subdue the earth. In this category, cultural transformation is a key part of “kingdom activity.” The key theological category for this approach might be “redemption,” it might be “resurrection,” or, in its most violent moments, “judgment.” After all, some might say, God is involved in the rise and fall of kingdoms, and he brings judgment on unholy culture, using his people to do it. Think David. Think Solomon. Make the culture more like the Kingdom of God.

One form of this might be found in using political opportunity and the wheels of power for what you might call “democratic coercion.” This view looks at people like the Amish and they say “why would you tuck tail and run? Instead, you should put your name on the ballot and *run*.” You’ll hear language like “Take this country back for God.” Maybe you buy up all the stock in a company to have the voting rights, then put a Christian in charge of it; or take over a political party and make sure it mentions in its planks key phrases that can serve as a summary or stand in for “Christian values.”

Other might forgo coercion for something like massive-scale persuasion. Billy Graham once said one of his goals in his mass crusades was this: the best way to rid the world of communism was to make more Christians.<sup>2</sup> By doing this, the next generation would instinctively think in Christian ways.

Or maybe a combination approach would be helpful. Just think of Desmond Tutu in South Africa, MLK throughout the American South, or William Penn in the Northeast.

What Biblical support might this approach use? The gospel Jesus proclaimed in Luke 4 was also a call to transform some social structures. Slavery was abolished by a united effort to challenge the status quo and use the courts to do it. Force? Yes—but deservedly so, they would say. Consider William Wilberforce in the UK and Abraham Lincoln in the US. Spending money and shared focus can lead to a cure that eradicates a disease; protests or assuming leadership can lead to changed laws that can end corrupt practices and start just ones. And should we not be filling darkness with light? Culture isn’t just courts. It’s music and art. Imagine filling all areas of culture with Christian influence, until the truth becomes the dominant thing in every section of culture. We might borrow a great line from Abraham Kuyper: “No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not

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<sup>2</sup> David Aikman, “How Billy Graham Killed Communism with Kindness,” *Christianity Today* 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/billy-graham/how-billy-graham-killed-communism-kindness-iron-curtain.html>

cry, ‘Mine!’”<sup>3</sup> The goal of the church, then, is to create a Christian culture, in the name of Christ, for the glory of God.

The language of winning the culture, taking over or taking back culture for Christ, offers a helpful reminder that God doesn’t want to settle for less than every square inch of land and every ounce of space which he declares rightfully His. It keeps before our minds the demand that something must be changed, and it invites us to seek the power of the Spirit to change it. Jesus certainly wished to rid the world of demons, and once the leaders declared, “There is nothing we can do! Everyone in the world is following Jesus!” (John 12:19 CEV). In the ancient times, David and Solomon practically combined church and state. Moving forward in history, well past the New Testament, we see the results of a winning strategy yet again: there was a time when kings of the earth bowed to the religious leaders, not vice versa. Isn’t that what we would all love to hear?

But consider the double-edged swords of democracy and freedom. We might rejoice at how the story of God can be shared in a free culture, but also be wary of the destructive idolatry that freedom and power can wield. These seemingly good things can be idolatrous traps. The left and the right offer you a package deal. And pretty soon, you only start to sound just like everybody else on your side of the political or cultural aisle, you start to let them do your thinking for you. For gospel-led people, these packages and the social structures tied to them can never be spiritual anchor points and must never be the center of our lives. We also must be careful not to repeat the mistake of Babel, sacrificing the challenge of diversity for the ease of conformity, and seeing difficult times not as an opportunity to suffer and sacrifice as a witness to the world, but as an unpleasant circumstance that must be eradicated by power, coercion, and control. And we have to watch our flank. As one preacher suggested, we can become critics of culture all the while we are consumers of culture and lose our credibility when we then try to conquer culture.<sup>4</sup> The way of winning can be rooted in pride, suggesting that we forget we are fellow strugglers, forget that we may have as much to learn from others as we do to teach them, and forget that we don’t know nearly as much as we think we know.

So the way of “winning” is a mixed bag—something to consider and learn from, but something that can also be dangerous. Take this view with a grain of salt.

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<sup>3</sup> James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Chandler of Village Church. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lir\\_-mvTWIE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lir_-mvTWIE)

## THE COMPLICATED MIDDLE

At this point, you might be saying to yourself, “There seem to be strengths and weaknesses in all these camps, and I don’t want to be wedded to one. After all, sometimes it seems this world is not my home; other times, that this is my Father’s world.”

I agree. Each position is a broad option for viewing and engaging culture; and each one can call upon some verse, or some context, where some Biblical example seems to fit. And each position can be the wrong one to employ in other situations. None of them represent a total explanation. None of them are unambiguously and obviously right. Real life is far more complex. Welcome to the dilemma.

The truth is that every approach has strength and weakness. Welcome can be refreshingly hopeful, but it can degenerate into naivety, opening the floodgates for evil, and prove to be a failure to carry a cross in the world. Withdraw can be healthy, or it can degenerate into a wagons-circled superiority that makes no difference in the world. Winning can be bold and transformative, or it can degenerate into theocratic Christian nationalism, treating the nation as if it was the church, and participating in syncretism of the worst kind.

Instead, to borrow the words of one Christian philosopher, “we must see Christ against *and* for, agonistic *and* affirmative, arguing *and* embracing. This is complex but, then, Christianity is no stranger to complexity.”<sup>5</sup>

## WITNESS

What if there was a fourth option? There is another way. This other way is sometimes described as a 4<sup>th</sup> option. But it can also be seen as a mindset to carry with you when you choose any of the three already listed. This fourth way is the way of *witness*. This is to put on bifocals as you seek to live in two worlds at the same time. It is to declare “culture is mixed, and I’m a citizen of two worlds.” The key theological category for this approach is also “creation” mixed with the fall. The call is to fulfill the biblical mandate to be good human beings working well in a world full of other human beings, most of whom are very unlike you. There is the kingdom of God, there is the kingdoms of the world. Every Christian has their foot in both worlds, called to live faithfully and

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, “With or Against Culture?” *Books & Culture* 12/5 (September/October 2006): 30. <https://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2006/sep/oct/20.30.html>

helpfully in both worlds. It recognizes serious tension between competing claims that both seem to tug at the Christian and concludes “this is how it will be, and it’s what God intended, until He comes again.” One advocate of this view titled his book “Making the best of it.” That pretty well sums it up. I’m not called to just accept and embrace culture as if what the world offers is the kingdom of God. No, I am called to do my part to make it better. But I recognize that I don’t always know what I don’t know, so “welcome,” “withdraw” and “win” all seem to assume too much on their own.

You are in fact part of the system. This view says start by admitting it. Sin is deep. And life in culture means we are inevitably part of it. And maybe being “part of it” is what God knew, understood, and designed all along. I’m not necessarily called to only live in a Christian culture through exiting the local school system, or to create a Christian culture by banishing atheists or Muslims from my local school board. But, instead, perhaps I’m called to work alongside them to find shared points of common humanity in a world that allows me the freedom to practice my religion, to persuade others when opportunity arises, and to live in a complicated culture that allows the same freedom and diversity for diametrically opposing views. It’s our shared humanity that is the point of contact for my cultural obligations, as we seek to make peace with (not against) our neighbors. We don’t treat Bible passages about Israel as if they apply to America or use church-focused laws as the basis of American criminal or civil law today.

Instead, the Christian is called to be at work planting seeds, shining light, and smelling sweet. What James Davidson Hunter calls being a “faithful witness” in a complex and complicated mixed bag we call “culture.” The Welcome option may allow you to be present, but often require cultural entanglement that challenges the purity of faithfulness. The Withdraw option may help you stay faithful, but it makes it hard to be a present witness. And the Winning option (if it involves using power to ban or coerce) can, at times, feel less like a witness, and more like judge and jury (which are posts only God should fill). No, says Hunter, “*in* the world but not *of* the world” is best described as “faithful witness.”

One of my favorite images that fits this language well comes from the Ukraine in 2014.<sup>6</sup> It was a cold January morning in Kiev. A Sunday mass preceded three long nights of violent clashes between demonstrating protesters and the Ukrainian special forces riot police that had led to multiple deaths. There were rumors that the Molotov cocktails were about to get even more dangerous, with containers of liquid sodium. And on this

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<sup>6</sup>Image: <https://i.imgur.com/MynAOT9.jpg>; see, for example, Carol Kruvilla, “Orthodox priests in Ukraine step into line of fire to stop deadly protests,” *New York Daily News* (Jan 23, 2014). <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/ukraine-priests-brave-line-fire-stop-deadly-protests-article-1.1588893>

Wednesday morning, a group of black-robed Orthodox priests decided what they took “faithful witness” to mean. Together, they grabbed the large congregational Bible (read from each week to people on both sides of the clash), along with the icons that symbolized their shared national identity and their shared religious identity, and a large cross on a wooden pole. Then they marched out into no-man’s land between the warring parties. Amidst the thick clouds of black smoke from gunfire, and braving single-digit temperatures, they stepped right into the line of fire where they could look into the eyes of their congregants standing before them and behind them. They stood with their hands raised, chanting familiar songs, and saying “My congregation is here.” They had been invited to join the side of the protestors (“the side of the people” as they called it). But these priests “entered the arena as peace-makers, and not in support of one side or the other... As they placed themselves between the warring sides, they began to pray, calling both sides to stop their fighting and repent.”<sup>7</sup> They stayed there—rotating when they had to, standing in shifts, until Protesters and police agreed to a fragile 2-day truce, while the government called an emergency session of parliament to see if they could find a peaceful resolution.

Faithful witness.

The image of faithful witness, living within the tension, walking faithfully with one foot in two worlds, sounds really good, seemingly the best of both worlds, calling for a balanced appreciation of how ‘kingdom’ is used in Scripture, appreciating both the “already” and the “not yet.” But there is a tremendous danger in this approach as well—a danger toward rationalization, in which any moment that might call for making a bold move of resistance or the use of transformative power can be swept under the rug for a meaningless mediocrity. It could be the place the cowardly hide.

I don’t have all the answers, and I don’t want to pick an approach and claim it’s what God calls everyone to do in every case. I’ve lived long enough to know that for a variety of reasons—where you were born, how you were raised, what you’ve experienced in life, and how you read Scripture—Christians will likely disagree about which road to take in any given situation.

And the Bible offers guidance at different times that seem to fit into each of the scenarios. Philip Yancey describes it this way:

“Kings such as David and Solomon virtually combined church and state. Prophets often denounced the surrounding culture—yet even while the prophet Elijah was violently opposing Ahab’s regime, ‘a devout believer in the Lord’

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<sup>7</sup> <https://orthochristian.com/67776.html>

named Obadiah ran Ahab's palace while sheltering God's true prophets on the side. Amos and Hosea thundered against the state; Isaiah acted as a kind of court prophet. Daniel held high office in two different pagan governments and Nehemiah led a detachment of Persian cavalry."<sup>8</sup>

So what I want to do is to offer three hopefully helpful principles for moving forward in not only a diverse and divided world, but a diverse and divided *church* on the question of how to engage the world.

### **AWARENESS THAT LEADS TO A BROADER PERSPECTIVE**

To counter the painful consequences of ignorance, the first suggestion is to pay attention to our aims. May we cultivate awareness that might lead us to a broader perspective.

Awareness is both the great need of the church (in every age) and the great Achilles heel in much of our discussion of culture. When we hear a siren call (by a famous leader on TV, or the preacher in my congregation, or just our gut instinct) to any of the approaches laid out here today, it is worth asking "what is the theology behind the call? When I do what this person is asking me to do, what story will I be telling the world?"

### **COURAGE TO LIVE A FAITHFUL STORY**

And this "story" that brings me to my second point. To counter the paralyzing effects of fear, the second suggestion is to pay attention to our character. May we cultivate the virtue of courage that will lead us to live out a faithful story.

My actions are not just piecemeal. Every interaction we have becomes an element in the story they tell about how people treat one another, about what church people are like, about what Christians care about, and who you remind them of. So it's worth asking, what story do my actions tell?

Even if the final answer in any given situation is neither "withdraw" nor "win", I think the impulse in these two approaches is to show courage and take action. Sometimes we might need courage to withdraw. And sometimes we might need courage to try to win. But it also takes courage to neither withdraw nor seek to win as you stand to witness. We could imagine engaging the culture in winsome ways. But being salt and light in a dark and tasteless culture calls for courage and action—but only if it is bathed in humility and coupled with deep awareness.

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<sup>8</sup> Philip Yancey, *Vanishing Grace*, p. 242.

We all want to emulate the light of the world. But to tell the right story, in this situation, or that one, should I be a street light or a flood light? Context matters, and discernment is required to know what is good, honorable, and praiseworthy in each new circumstance.

### **HUMILITY THAT LEADS TO DEEPER WISDOM**

Finally, to counter the sinful temptation of pride, the last suggestion is to pay attention to our attitude. May we cultivate a spirit of humility that leads to deeper wisdom.

In a culturally diverse environment that is quickly becoming post-Christian, we must re-evaluate our assumptions about “them.” Simply quoting a Bible verse or suggesting certain values are “obviously” right or wrong will yield precious little fruit. We must build from the ground up, showing what concepts like truth, love, justice, meaning, and peace actually are—in Christ.

And we need to take a better look in the mirror when it comes to “us.”

Like those who choose the “withdraw” route, we need to recognize that sin is real, it is devastatingly sinister, and it is all over the place. The fall happened, and we fell hard. But before everyone jumps in their buggies to escape all the sin “out there,” we should also recognize the sin “in here” (my own head and heart). The gospel always calls us to look inward before ever looking outward, and it is a fairly standard counseling principle to assume this rule: you can’t change others; you can only change yourself.

But even that is incredibly hard. If we go back to the garden, we find that the first sinful temptation led to a blurred vision of God. “Did God say?” was the question on the serpent’s lips. The original position behind what has been called “the veil of ignorance” was that only God knows what is best, only God is judge of the earth, and when God points I follow. But a blurred vision of God led inevitably to a blurred vision of ourselves. The very idea that you and I could be “like God” is a sticky matter. More than anything else in creation we are “like God” because we are his image-bearers. But once we kicked God off the throne, we began to imagine ourselves in his place, though our shoulders are not big enough to handle the weight of the job. Both a blurred vision of God and a blurred vision of ourselves—the first results of sin—come from a lack of humility. I believe it was none other than C. S. Lewis who defined the first sin as pride. And this blurred vision led to an unreconciled world, which, in turn, led to our complicated place living in two worlds and having to deal with divided loyalties. And this whole saga is rooted in forgetting that He is God, and I am not.

I am completely dependent on God, and I understand that more and more as I come to realize just how far sin has affected and infected my life. The sin “in here” is not just in my commissions (the things I do wrong); it’s in my omissions (“the things I fail to do or fail to do right”). And it’s not just in my actions and doings; it’s also in my thoughts and reasoning. So what if we started with this premise: “I don’t know nearly as much as I think I know. I could be more wrong than I realize.” It might temper our over-the-top responses, as well as our expectations. It might foster a desire to listen and reflect. I think a healthy biblical dose of humility would help a Christian shine the light of Christ much brighter in any of these scenarios.

Humility includes a recognition that fallen humanity will always be a factor in the equation. As Lewis points out, the problem with “us” and “them “ means that our inner selves—our moral selves—will remain a crucial element regardless of what route we take.

So, regardless of which avenue you tend to use (or which ones you don’t), you and I might take a healthy dose of humility, recognizing these really are complex issues, people will continue to be part of the problem as well as the solution, and sometimes we are doing the best we can with what we have. We are called to be servants and called to be salt and light.