

# the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

## Tithing and Addiction

Thomas Boogaart  
Western Theological Seminary  
Holland, Michigan

Some people have one; others have six to a dozen; she had thousands. Imelda Marcos. Thousands of pairs of shoes, different colors, different styles, shoes for any conceivable situation—more than she could ever possibly

the media. We all laughed at her expense, but we laughed too quickly and easily. She is indeed a symbol of extravagance and addiction. She is only the extreme example of a disease that affects us all: consumerism.

*Imelda Marcos is only the extreme example of a disease that affects us all: consumerism.*

wear in a lifetime. Why? Why such extravagance? Is it not because Imelda Marcos was addicted. A bright, new pair of shoes had the power to rejuvenate her, to make her feel young and fresh again, and to give her a rush of joy and happiness. But the happiness did not last. There had to be another pair, then another, and then another until her addiction knew no bounds.

Imelda Marcos became something of a symbol in the West, for her extravagance was widely reported in

Consumerism warrants careful scrutiny. The manufacturing and the consumption of the world's resources is not just a matter of economics. The consumptive system we all share is a religion. It propagates its own truths and defines good and evil behavior in the light of those truths.

The first truth of consumerism is that *the material world is the only real world*. The world is not held together by invisible spirits, Christ's or otherwise, and we need not bother looking for them. The stuff that we can pass

### *In this Issue*

*The simplest of Christian practices may be the most subversive. And they may also be the most healing. Several of these are taken up in this issue of the newsletter.*

*Tom Boogaart, an Old Testament colleague of mine who prefers to call himself a "cultural archaeologist," exposes the compelling logic of consumerism and sees tithing in a new light as a way to break ranks with this "power" that has its grip on us (cover). Michael Plishka, a vigorous dialogue partner on the GOCN Chatline, shares a homily on prayer and mission, lending insights out of his Ukrainian Catholic tradition (p. 4). The third installment in my series on resources in Lesslie Newbigin for the pastoral agenda is about "community" (p. 3). A new "missional" model for Bible study is suggested on page 7. Tithing, prayer, community, Bible study—none of these is new. But in each case there is something crucial in the tradition that shows up now with new force and meaning.*

*This issue also contains notes on two new books. Longtime GOCN companion Marv Hoff reviews the latest book in the Gospel and Our Culture Series, *Confident Witness—Changing World*, finding it to be a practical complement to the earlier volumes in the Series. A publication announcement from Baker Book House provides a glimpse of Tom Sine's thesis in his newest book, *Mustard Seed vs. McWorld*.*

—Editor

through our senses and put under a microscope is the only real stuff, the only stuff of ultimate importance. What you see is what you get. When Paul said, "We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen" (2 Cor. 4:18), he revealed his ties to a primitive and moribund consciousness.

The second truth is that *life-giving power is found in the acquisition and consumption of material things*. Growth is the supreme good in the religion of consumerism. The more

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resources one can accumulate, the better off we are. Imelda Marcos accumulated shoes; we accumulate anything our financial resources allow. The newer the house the larger the closets, and none of them ever empty. The one who dies with the most toys wins.

In this religion, any talk of limits is un-American, a lie inspired by the evil one. Limits are a figment of our imagination, and one can break through imaginary limits like Roger Bannister broke through the mental barrier of the four minute mile. Carl Lewis won Olympic gold with a jump of 27' 10 3/4", but the AT&T commercial introduced during the Games suggested that we all can outjump Carl. While we watched an athlete jump across the Grand Canyon, a voice beckoned: "Imagine a world without limits, where anything is possible." With the technological aid of AT&T, we will apparently be able to break the limits of gravity.

Our politicians preach that the material world has unlimited resources, and the human mind

unlimited resourcefulness. "To know no boundaries" is the beatific vision of consumerism, as Merrill Lynch and others have portrayed it. Putting mind and material together, they promise to build a world so magnificent that we will forget the house that God is preparing in the heavens.

The third truth of consumerism is that *people who have accumulated material wealth are upright and intelligent and those who have not are the opposite*. Thus we evangelize poor people in soup kitchens assuming they are wanton and speak deliberately to them as if they are slow of understanding. In turn, we elect rich people to public office, assuming they are wise, and speak deferentially in their presence.

Consumerism is the religion that has won the hearts of those of us in the West, whether we admit it or not. This is the reason why the forgotten Biblical tradition of tithing is of paramount importance to the church

today, taking on a significance that has become more important in our day than it was in ancient Israel.

Tithing confronts out material addiction. Giving 10 percent of our income would demand a fundamental change in our level of consumption—fewer meals in restaurants, fewer vacations, fewer shoes, fewer of the items we have come to see as necessary for the good life.

Tithing is a counter-cultural act. It is meaningful for those who understand the world in the categories of giver and gift. Tithers, both ancient and modern seek the company of the invisible giver and not the visible gift, "for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). In the company of the Holy giver, they await the transfiguration of their lives into a white-robed gift. ■

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## The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter

Editor and Coordinator: George R. Hunsberger

georgeh@westernsem.org

Administrative Assistant: Judy Bos

judy@westernsem.org

Information concerning this publication or the network can be obtained by contacting:

## The Gospel and Our Culture Network

at Western Theological Seminary

101 E. 13th Street

Holland, MI 49423-3622

Phone: 616-392-8555

Fax: 616-392-7717

Website: <http://www.gocn.org>

# Cultivating Ways of Christ in the Postmodern Transition

## Resources for Pastoral Leaders

George R. Hunsberger  
GOCN Coordinator

*In the latter years of his life, it was Bishop Lesslie Newbigin's purpose to open Western culture to a missionary dialogue with the gospel. In the course of that effort, he was essentially cultivating ways of Christ for people living in the midst of the cultural transition from a modern to a postmodern world and in what had already become a post-Christian social era. His cultivation of ways of believing, of witnessing, of being community and of living in hope anticipates the daily and weekly preoccupations of pastoral leaders sensitive to the demands of the present day. For these crucial elements in the renewal of the church, important resources are to be found in Newbigin's approach. Here the third of these elements is addressed.*

### Ways of Community

If Newbigin has been an apostle of faith and witness, he has always been an apostle on behalf of the church. It is the church's faith, the church's witness, that he is concerned to nourish. Christian existence is fundamentally corporate, and Christian calling is a corporately shared calling. While not denying the individuality of each person's experience of Christ, he warns against the individualism of belief and identity that so strongly shapes Western forms of Christian life and cuts short the corporate nature of God's salvation. For Newbigin, the church is the chosen witness that bears in word and deed the witness of the Spirit.

This theme has always been a strong one in Newbigin's thought. He presents it with special relevance in his most recent writings and thus helps to form a postmodern, post-Christendom way to understand that the very existence of the church as a community of Christ and the character of its life together are already critical features of its whole witness to Christ and the reign of God he announced. The church is the "sign, foretaste and instrument" of the reign of God, he so often has said. It is the firstfruits of the new creation in the Spirit.

His stress in later years on understanding the congrega-

tion to be a "hermeneutic of the gospel" forms an important answer to another of the authority questions postmodern people have, "Why the church?" By what authority, and on what ground, is there a rationale for the church to exist at all? The authority to witness is its authority to exist: the only adequate witness is one that iterates what is visibly and truly embodied in a community of people embraced by the message. The presence of the Christian community functions as a hermeneutical key, an interpretive lens through which onlookers gain a view of the gospel in the living colors of common life. The Christian congregation offers itself to be a community within which one can grow into faith in the gospel, put on the garb of its followers and join

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oneself to the distinctive practices that mark the community as God's own people.

This is refreshing good news in light of the identity crisis which has seized so many churches in these days beyond a church culture. In an earlier day, it could be assumed what a church is for. It served the chaplaincy needs of a Christianized civic order. But that day has been passing away. Churches can still seem to thrive by providing for the populace the religious goods and services it seeks. But even in that role the church finds uneasiness. What are we for, when stripped of those things that used to give us meaning?

Both the content of what is preached and the manner in which preaching addresses the Christian community week after week are crucial for the recovery of the church's identity. Preaching first has to know that it shapes communal identity, for good or for ill. Then it has to wrestle with what sense of identity has faithful roots in the gospel and rebirths the church's reason to exist in the present circumstances in the U.S. Finally, it has to discover what posture of preaching cultivates such identity. For all these, the vision Newbigin has for the church's vocation is an invaluable resource. ■

[Reprinted from *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 1998]

# Prayer in the Heart and in Community

## Touching the Missional Heart of God

*Michael Plishka*  
*Immaculate Conception Ukrainian Catholic Church*  
*Northbrook, Illinois*

Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there with them.” (Mt 18:20) This simple promise by Jesus is foundational to missional communities. Where Jesus is, there is the Trinity and the Kingdom. Gathering together in Jesus’ name forms a door into the missional heart of God. This portal to the Trinity exists not only in our church communities and families, but our hearts. Because the Kingdom is both within and among us, missional communities are supported through this encounter of God at both the communal and individual levels.

Community prayer is vital to missional communities in that it fortifies and sustains a common vision for the

prayer. Prayer allows us to Witness and say with John, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 1:1-3).

Thus, personal prayer not only gives us first-hand knowledge of the Living God but also empowers and

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community. If a community is going to establish priorities and become a force for social and cultural change, the impetus should come from the heart of God, the desires of God. The community must stand at the door of the Trinity and knock as one cohesive body.

This gateway into the center of the missionary dynamo also exists within each of us. It is accessed through a descent into the heart made in the quiet of one’s room (cf. Mt 6:6). Those who enter into the Royal Throne Room can only do so with true humility, a realization that they are only instruments propelled by God’s love of all creation. They must not be seeking glory, but instead seeking to humble themselves, all the while whispering: “Lord have mercy on me a sinner” (cf. Lk 18:9-14). Personal, humble, heartfelt prayer, not only makes people holy and different from the rest of the world, but it turns them into pure theologians, pure missionaries.

There is a saying attributed to Evagrius of Pontus, “The one who prays is a theologian and a theologian is one who prays.” Prayer immerses us into the heart of the Trinity giving us experiential, theological knowledge of the moving dynamism of God. This experience of God is key to mission. “For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:12). Scripture is clear that personal experience of the Living God is a requirement before one can witness. Seeing with one’s own eyes and touching with our own hands gives credibility to our witness, a credibility that can be achieved through

legitimizes a proclamation of Jesus Christ. The goal of this kerygma is fellowship—fellowship with God and with people. Personal prayer can and does bring unity. Just as Jesus’ final desire was that all may be one (John 17:11, 21, 22), the personal prayer of the missionary and any subsequent proclamation of Christ died and risen, has within it the seeds and means of creating that unity. As God desires that all be saved, so our praying concretizes this desire in our hearts, convincing and convicting us of the all-encompassing love of God.

This love is ever making all things new in Christ. We who are called to be “perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect” (Mt 5:48) participate in this charism-carrying activity to the extent we realize that benefits derived from prayer are not only for us, but indeed for the edification of others. In fact, there are times when our actions, and especially our prayers, are the only way to address a situation that seems totally out of our hands (cf. Mk 9:29).

Our prayers should be like rain, falling upon the good and bad alike. In this way prayer is the means of loving. This sweet labor is the task of all missional Christians, in community or in the privacy of a room. We should take the apostle Paul as an example and listen to his encouragement to “pray without ceasing” (1 Th 5:17). He knew, as a missionary, as one who loved God with all his might and said, “Not I, but Christ in me lives” (Gal 2:20), that not only is praying without ceasing possible, but it is vitally necessary to the spreading and living of the gospel. ■

## BOOK REVIEW

# ***CONFIDENT WITNESS—CHANGING WORLD REDISCOVERING THE GOSPEL IN NORTH AMERICA***

Edited by Craig Van Gelder (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999). Paperback, 313 pages.

*Reviewed by Marvin Hoff*

*Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia  
Holland, Michigan*

*Confident Witness—Changing World* is the fourth volume in the Gospel and Our Culture Series published by Eerdmans. *Confident Witness* is an excellent extension of the first three volumes, though one does not need to have read them to receive rich benefits from *Confident Witness*.

The essays in this volume were first presented at a 1996 major conference organized by The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) with the same title. One of the great strengths of most of the essays comes from the refinements which must have taken place through the dialogues at the conference. The purpose of the conference, and of this volume, "...was to 'translate' the gospel and culture discussion into terms that would make this conversation more readily available to pastors and church leaders..." (p. xv). Both the conference and this volume "...provide practical examples on how the church can live out specific application of the analysis and theses presented..." (p. xv) in the first three volumes.

*Confident Witness* is organized into five sections: Understanding the North American Context as Mission Field; Understanding the Church in the North American Mission Context; Understanding the Gospel in the North American Mission Context; Relating the Gospel to Ministry in the North American Mission Context; and Rethinking the Church in the North American Mission Context.

Although the twenty one essays are each unique in style and approach, they are consistently well-written and very clear. Let me whet your appetite for *Confident Witness* through presenting highlights from three of the essays.

Craig Van Gelder, the editor, has contributed an essay entitled "Reading Postmodern Culture through the Medium of Movies." Van Gelder identifies the postmodern condition, provides a short history of the cinema, describes the malleability of the medium of movies, presents the postmodern culture through interpretations of five movies, and concludes with three excellent insights on presenting the Gospel to the postmodern self. For example: "A focus on earth keeping and on stewardship of resources within the postmodern also finds points of convergence with Christian thinking" (p. 62). "Unless we can feel the brokenness of other people, it is unlikely that we will be able to present the Gospel to them. The medium of movies offers all of us a profound way to enter into the angst of the postmodern condition and to increase our capacity for empathy with postmodern people as we seek to invite them into God's redemptive reign" (p. 63).

In "The Prophetic Voice of Poverty" George D. Beukema introduces the reader to the Church of the Good News, a Reformed

Church in America congregation in Chicago. Having presented the mission and vision statements of the Church, moving testimonies by members and the pastor of the Church, and inspiring descriptions of several workcamps sponsored by the Church, Beukema concludes: "It is very fulfilling to bring non-urban, non-poor folk into our community and see them witness the deeper dimensions of the life and spirituality of our community, while at the same time expanding their understanding concerning the causes of poverty" (p. 229).

In his essay "The Church in a Postmodern Context" Alan J. Roxburgh uses his pastoral work "to share...the ways in which *this* pastor, *as a pastor*, is trying to think, feel, and work his way into the issues of how a church might be formed with both integrity and missional identity in a postmodern context" (p. 242). Roxburgh uses a brief meeting in a coffee shop, a lunch with a woman whose third husband is dying of cancer, a preparation for a Bible study group, and reflections on a TV ad to articulate basic dynamics in our postmodern culture. Two tremendous insights from these explorations conclude his reflections: "The postmodern church is forever embracing the new in the name of reaching the unchurched, and therefore is in danger of losing the gospel" (p. 252). "But, is this what the 'beginnings' mean by 'apostolic?' Does the narrative of the New Testament permit us to make this argument...? In the postmodern church...the 'apostolic' congregations are contemporary, high expectation, innovative, purpose driven, and user friendly." (p. 254). He concludes the essay by "...describing the contours of a church in postmodernity..." (p. 255).

A gap exists because the essays do not include bibliographical suggestions for continued, deeper wrestling with the crucial themes of the essays.

Dr. Henry Bast, who was my professor of preaching years ago at Western Theological Seminary, saved this recommendation for the very best books he recommended to us: "Sell your bed and buy it." Sell your bed and buy *Confident Witness*. ■

## AN ANNOUNCEMENT FROM BAKER BOOK HOUSE

# Futurist's New Book is Wake-Up Call to Reinvent Lives, Families, and Churches for New Millennium

An evangelical Christian futurist has written a new book to challenge other believers to reinvent their churches and organizations to be more socially responsible. "Christians have allowed the American dream [of acquisitiveness] to shape our lives and trivialize our faith," author Tom Sine claims in *Mustard Seed vs. McWorld: Reinventing Life & Faith for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House). His book depicts the contrasting futures envisioned by America's materialistic culture (McWorld) and that of orthodox Christian faith (the mustard seed of Matt. 17:20-21, which Christ compares to the kingdom of heaven)

"McWorld envisions increased consumption ... a one-

*We cannot practice discipleship over the top of materialism, individualism and consumerism...and wind up with anything that bears resemblance to Jesus.*

world consumer culture in which the shopping mall replaces the church as the center of devotion and all of life is reduced to a commodity. The Mustard Seed ... future has more to do with making a difference than with making a dollar." The impact of a global consumer culture on the middle class means more young people start life with a \$20,000-\$60,000 college debt from schooling, then pay half of their future income to housing. They become pressured to work harder and longer to keep up with a consumer culture in which corporate entities like Wal-Mart are destroying their communities.

Being part of a new global world while battling its many values contrary to faith calls for foresight and creativity from religious leaders who now have "got discipleship dead wrong," Sine says. "We cannot practice it over the top of materialism, individualism and consumerism ... and wind up with anything that bears resemblance to Jesus." Christians have bought the message that yesterday's luxuries are today's necessities in a world which takes 12.2 acres of land to supply the needs of an average American and only a single acre to supply a citizen of India. It would take three planets to support the present world population with our American lifestyle, Sine writes.

Sine offers creative ways to enable parents, pastors and Christian leaders to reinvent their lives, focus their missions and create new possibilities for the new millennium. Among hundreds of such possibilities for "putting first things first," Sine calls on religious leaders to:

- ◆ help churches provide affordable child care for single moms coming off welfare and the working poor.
- ◆ create ways to use the growing volunteer capability of graying boomers, while preparing for their economic impact after 2010.
- ◆ steward resources to do more with less.
- ◆ experiment with political, environmental, governmental and mission organizational cooperation.
- ◆ develop building-free networks in which growing numbers of people work bivocationally, in ministry and salaried employment.
- ◆ encourage people to increase interdependence and self-reliance by reducing debt, increasing savings, and planting gardens.
- ◆ establish forums to strategize ways to deal with the new ethical and theological issues created by technology that are changing the character of human community and faith.
- ◆ advocate the free flow of information and reduce the influence of powerful political elites whose agenda is not conducive to healthy communities.
- ◆ support the strengthening of local businesses and communities. ■

The authors of *Missional Church* declare that “the way to the formation of missional communities begins and ends in our confrontation with and by the Scriptures” (p. 246). If that is true, we will need to learn a new way of placing ourselves in front of the text. Bible study guides and methods that focus on each individual’s relationship to God will not be enough. We will need to learn to read the Bible together as a community that is called and sent by God.

“Missional Bible Study” is a pilot effort to sharpen the questions we ask when we come to the Bible together, seeking for it to shape us as a community of witness. Groups that are willing to field test this model are invited to sign on as co-developers. They are asked to do three things:

1. *Use the questions in at least five Bible study sessions.* There might be a variety of texts used—daily or weekly common lectionary texts, a succession of texts in a particular book of the Bible, texts related to a particular theme in the Bible, etc.

2. *Experiment with a variety of ways to use the questions.* They may simply be posed in the order they are offered. Or a group might want to move more freely among the questions, based on the text being considered or the issues the group faces in its life situation. Or a leader might use the questions as a guide for developing particular questions that connect elements of the text with the issues the questions raise.

3. *Report what is learned about this way of living with the text.* Groups should indicate what texts were studied, how the questions were used, what insights were gained through their use, how they assess the value of using such questions as these, and what suggestions they have for improving the questions or the format.

Groups that want to join this pilot project should indicate their interest to George Hunsberger at the GOCN office. ■

# MISSIONAL BIBLE STUDY

## Discerning and Following God’s Call

### MISSION

How does this text *send* us and equip our witness?

### CONTEXT

How does this text *read* us and our world?

### GOSPEL

How does this text *evangelize* us with good news?

### CHANGE

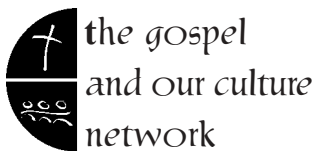
How does this text *convert* us in personal and corporate life?

### FUTURE

How does this text *orient* us to the coming reign of God?

Western Theological Seminary  
101 E. 13th Street  
Holland, MI 49423-3622

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*I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross?*

*I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.*

*I am, of course, not denying the importance of the many activities by which we seek to challenge public life with the gospel—evangelistic campaigns, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences, and even books such as this one.*

*But I am saying that these are all secondary, and that they have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community.*

*--Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 227*