

# the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

## “Organize to beat the devil...”

*Joel B. Green*  
*Asbury Theological Seminary*  
*Wilmore, Kentucky*

*Mark Lau Branson*  
*Fuller Theological Seminary*  
*Pasadena, California*

The contemporary church faces a smorgasbord of options for spiritual growth—each claiming

ness possible.

To write for a twenty-first century, urban, multiethnic, presbyterian church concerning eighteenth century, British, Wesleyan spirituality appears somewhat peripheral. However, the contemporary church badly needs new models for a holistic, integrated faith—a faith which brings together depth of spirituality, theological coherence, evangelistic fervor, active concern for marginalized populations and societal evil, and a program for growth in holiness. At the heart of the Wesleyan

*The contemporary church badly  
needs new models for a  
holistic, integrated faith.*

biblical support. “Meet God in the poor ... meet God in prayer ... meet God in Bible study ... meet God in relationships ... meet God in praise ... meet God in the sacraments ... meet God in silence ... meet God in reforming the society...” Is it our part, as consumers, to dabble in several, switch at will, and converse on occasion with other dabblers? The alternative, and a major value of binding our lives together in a church, is that we *corporately* inherit and choose traditions that make faithful-

revival there was such a model. And, with changes for our own context, much can be life-giving today.

A few historical notes can be helpful. Working within the Anglican Church, John Wesley, in 1738, helped form the “Fetter Lane Society,” which was essentially a preaching meeting in which forty to fifty members met to encourage and exhort each other. At that time, evangelist George Whitefield, a friend of Wesley’s, was having an enormously successful preaching mission in Bristol. Whitefield was in

## *In this Issue*

*Joel Green and Mark Lau Branson have been a part of an innovative United Methodist congregation. Their description (this page) of this late twentieth century ‘innovation’ shows it to have its origins in the tradition of John Wesley’s ‘class meetings.’ The congregation in view is one of a number being explored by the GOCN’s research project on ‘congregational patterns of missional faithfulness.’*

*Complementing that depiction is the report of Jeff Van Kooten (page 3) on his participation in an event held by The Ekkesia Project. That project has developed among people who have concern for theological depth and integrity in the church’s image of itself and its calling, and for that to be pressed into the tangible life and practices of the church. The ‘Principles’ of that project, drawn from its formal documents, are appended to Jeff’s report.*

*Rounding out the issue is a review of Phil Kenneson’s new book, *Life on the Vine* (page 5). The review is provided by Inagrace Diatterich in light of the book’s importance for the kind of reflection on the culture-encountering dynamic of the gospel that lies at the heart of the GOCN’s agenda.* —the Editor

desperate need of someone to organize the awakened multitudes, and with some hesitation, Wesley accepted the task and developed what became the basic structure for small group discipleship. These “societies” were open to anyone who had “... a desire to flee the wrath to come, so to be saved from their

about twelve persons each. Then an unexpected problem arose. While making the rounds each week, each class leader began to witness the everyday lives of the other members and it was discovered that some were not living as they ought. Wesley saw that this intimate contact offered a means for significant pastoring—many

to gain entry. It was expected that the initial profession of desire was, in fact, sincere. Class members were expected to convert their words into deeds. Wesley expected class members to avoid evil, do good, and attend upon all the ordinances of God. Those who did not do so were to be admonished; if repentance did not follow they were

*It was as hard to remain in one of Wesley's classes as it was easy to gain entry.*

sins.” The society was “a company of men [and women] having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in prayer together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”

Already in the Fetter Lane Society Wesley had instituted small, intimate groups known as “bands.” These met once or twice per week, and each meeting was characterized by mutual confession and accountability. Unreserved openness was expected. Wesley’s questions indicate those expectations: (1) What known sins have you committed since our last meeting? (2) What temptations have you met with? (3) How were you delivered? (4) What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not? (5) Have you nothing you desire to keep secret? Much to Wesley’s dismay, the bands were short-lived. The degree of intimacy was too great, so the bands were gradually replaced by the less intimate but equally demanding “Class meetings.” The classes began in a rather unexpected fashion.

In 1742 Wesley sought a way to cover a building debt in Bristol. One of his lay leaders suggested a weekly contribution from each member of one penny, and he offered to visit eleven people each week. With others volunteering to seek offerings, the scheme was adopted. The society was divided into classes of

members were corrected in their sins and encouraged in faithfulness, and others were put out of the society. Since the home visits were too time-consuming, and the atmosphere was not always conducive to exhorting, comforting, or reproving, it was agreed that members of each class would gather weekly. An atmosphere of love and an attitude of mutual discipleship was quickly realized. Gaining entry to such a class was easy: one needed to profess “a desire to flee the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.” One should note, however, that it was as hard to remain in a class as it was easy

to be dismissed.

**Theology**

Several theological concepts are at the foundation of Wesley’s approach. First, Wesley emphasized the primacy of grace and the necessity of human response. With the Reformers, Wesley held to the twin ideas of original sin and the total dependence of men and women on God for salvation. However, he believed every person is the recipient of prevenient grace — that grace through which God initially makes himself known and by which

*Continued on page 4*

**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>

# Ekklesia: Something “More”

*Jeff Van Kooten  
The Outpost  
Denver, Colorado*

After a series of painful church experiences in previous pastorates, my wife and I walked around a park where I was articulating for her a missional vision of a church I wanted to plant. Wounded very deeply by the churches before, my wife turned to me with tears streaming down her cheeks and asked me pointedly, “if you want to plant a missional church and reach lost people, what do we really have to bring them to?” At first I thought it was a rhetorical question, one that could only be answered in the negative. Yet as we continued to walk we instinctively knew there had to be something “more” to the church than what we had experienced. But it seemed for us so ethereal, only an idea that if even whispered would fade away, something so precious it seemed beyond reach.

*We instinctively knew there had to be something “more” to the church than what we had experienced.*

Yet a group of people determined in 1999 to bring “more” to the life of our churches. “The Ekklesia Project” is led by a seven-person steering committee; its interim coordinator is Professor Michael L. Budde of DePaul University in Chicago. The project desires to gather scholars, pastors, congregations and individual Christians from a variety of church traditions (mainline and evangelical Protestants, Catholics and persons influenced by the Anabaptist tradition, and more) to intentionally explore together what that “more” is and how it can be translated effectively to the local church.

I was privileged to be one of 25 invited to participate in the inaugural gathering sponsored by the The Ekklesia Project this October (2000) in Chicago. The theme for the gathering was “Discipleship and Divided Loyalties,” a theme intended to delineate the struggle between a world filled with surrogate gods and “functional idolatries” (violent nationalism, consumer culture and the market, racial privilege, and more) and another that has to do with what it means to be a follower of Jesus. In that pursuit of “more” our conversation radiated around three “stirrings.”

**The church is a community called to reflect the Kingdom of God in our worship.**

Through the church, the wisdom of God is being made

known to the world (cf. Eph. 3:10). Yet we realized what a surprise this was to many, both inside and outside the church. The economic, political, and social structures of the contemporary era are so powerful that they frequently seem to eclipse God’s wisdom, substituting for it the “wisdom” of the world. And yet, we spoke of the church as “the body of Christ” and believe that Christians are called to make present the reality of Jesus Christ in the world. Hence, to “be the Church” is to declare that our allegiance to the God of Jesus Christ always takes priority over the other structures that compete for our attention during every hour of every day of our lives.

**There are many obstacles to living a life formed by the priorities and practices of Jesus.**

Christians from many walks of life feel the tensions among competing allegiances, and recognize that accommodation and compromise are woefully inadequate responses. What held these concerns together for us was the common

conviction that the Christian faith should play the decisive formative role in our day-to-day lives. We painfully admitted to each other that we are often asked to put other allegiances before what we owe to God and the community of faith, and that we too often are unwilling or unable to play this role if it means resisting certain powerful aspects of the existing order.

**There are radical ways in which Christian tradition and our fellow believers can help us to live the gospel more faithfully.**

We celebrated those congregations and groups whose allegiances to God and the body of Christ make discipleship a lived reality in the world. There is such a rich storehouse of resources from the Christian tradition and holy scripture to draw upon to be “more” for ourselves and the world. We realized that we need to challenge communities and practices that have minimized or diluted the church’s obligation to be a “light to the nations” and a foretaste of the promised kingdom of God. Those of us who gathered in October hope and expect to be held to the same level of accountability by our brothers and sisters in Christ.

I traveled home with these stirrings, committed to bring

*Continued on page 7*

**“Organize to beat the devil”**  
*continued from page 2*

women and men are stirred to repentance. There follows a circular pattern, whereby men and women are continually enabled to respond and keep responding further to God by his grace. This is Wesley’s view of sanctification — the interaction of God’s initiative and our response — which differed from the quietism (passivism) of some Moravians and from the “works righteousness” of medieval Catholicism.

Second, and required by the need to organize “to beat the devil,” Wesley’s group structures were not to supplant the church but to undergird, enliven, and evangelize it. Christian mutuality was most effective at the level of the small group, but Wesley refused to negate the larger, more inclusive church. Wesley envisioned “*ecclesiola in ecclesia*”— the little church in the big church. With this formula he was able to hold in tension his belief in a universal church whose unity was visible and the necessity of small groups focusing on intimate Christian association.

Third, Wesley took seriously the Reformation theology of the “priesthood of all believers.” Class leaders served as informal pastors. It was their business to maintain a constant awareness of the spiritual condition of each of the class members, to help each to grow spiritually, and to receive offerings for the poor. The non-ordained were given vital responsibilities and an area in which to test their gifts and graces.

**At Rockridge**

At Rockridge United Methodist Church we are employing a contemporary adaptation of Wesley’s approach. The national United Methodist Church has developed materials and training to assist churches in creating “covenant groups” and utilizing “class leaders.” We have three types of covenant groups: Exploring Membership and Covenant (a four to five month course of study, experiences

and interaction to prepare participants to decide about church membership), Listening Covenant Groups (a short-lived group to assist members in “hearing” what their missional focus should be) and Mission Covenant Groups (each one having a clearly stated mission).

Each group consists of two to seven persons who agree to meet around the covenant for at least one hour each week. (Additional times are scheduled for ministry work.) The sessions are neither legalistic nor judgmental. But they are firm, and above all they are realistic about the task of discipleship. We know that being a Christian disciple means sharing in Christ’s ongoing work of salvation in the world — a world which is certainly not neutral territory. The task of discipleship therefore calls for the binding together of those with like mind and purpose, to watch over one another in love.

To avoid wrong expectations we are clear on what covenant groups *are not*. They are not the primary place for prayer, counsel, pastoring, personal “support,” Bible study or conversational reflection. However, these weekly gatherings are to insure that all of that is happening — that members are held accountable to the means available to them personally and in the church. Covenant Groups function in the context of other primary relationships: church worship, group studies, pastoring, families, households, friendships, outreach activities, socials, organizational meetings, and spontaneous gatherings. Covenant Groups undergird and strengthen these other gatherings, providing rhythm, contact, focus, and discipline — some minimal foundations for empowering the whole church.

So the primary reason is that of accountability — for the covenant, for being

**Rockridge United Methodist  
Church Covenant**

Knowing that Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection, offers salvation in this life and for the future, I commit myself to be his disciple.

Desiring the gracious initiatives of the Holy Spirit, I acknowledge my need to yield to God. In faith I pledge my time, my skills, my resources and my strength to seek God’s will for me and to obey.

1) Each day I will pray, read the scriptures, and reflect on my reading and my life as a disciple.

2) I will participate weekly in worship and education.

3) I will seek to know and develop my spiritual gifts, to be a minister with the Rockridge church, and to listen for missional call.

4) I will strive against sin, nurture the fruit of the Spirit, and seek to be an agent of God’s reconciling work in the world.

5) I will give at least a tithe of all I receive.

Trusting in the grace of God, I hereby commit myself to this covenant.

As we gather weekly for reflection on the Word and the direction of the Spirit,

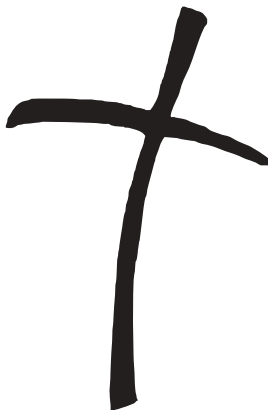
I request the loving help of those charged to provide accountability.



responsive to Word and Spirit, for faithfulness in church and world. Class Leaders help keep the Covenant Groups on track, pray for and meet with members on occasion, and keep the pastor informed through a monthly check-in.

All of salvation and sanctification comes to us solely by God's grace. Our receptivity — putting ourselves where the grace is available — is essential. We have named ourselves "disciples," and we now name our need for assistance. Wesley stressed the abundance of God's initiatives, including the prerogatives of the believer to resist or to surrender. It is hoped that Covenant Groups will assist us in perceiving God's work and encouraging each other to surrender. ■

*This article was written for the GFCC Journal of Grace Fellowship Community Church of San Francisco, a Presbyterian congregation (Mar/Apr 1994). It was written at a time when both authors were a part of Rockridge United Methodist Church in Oakland, California.*



## LIFE ON THE VINE: A REVIEW

*Inagrace T. Dietterich  
The Center for Parish Development  
Chicago, Illinois*

Philip D. Kenneson has made a major contribution to the discussion regarding the identity and vocation of the church within our contemporary cultural context in the book *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999). While not a quick or easy read, this book is an excellent resource for adult study

the fruit of the Spirit as testimony to God's continued presence and work in the world." The church is not called to discover more effectively or efficiently how to meet the culturally-defined needs of religious consumers (self-interested seekers), but "to embody visibly before the world the reconciliation that God requires for all of creation." Rather than asking "Is the church bearing fruit?" central to

***The church is called "to embody visibly before the world the reconciliation that God desires for all of creation."***

groups. Those groups who take the time to read and discuss this book will find that it more than fulfills the author's stated aim: "to call the church to serious reflection and faithful embodiment."

Declaring that "the church in the United States is seriously ill," Kenneson offers both sharp judgment and profound hope. The judgment focuses upon the way in which the church has allowed its life and ministry to be shaped by the dominant culture. This approach is wrong-headed because American culture bears so little resemblance to the reign of God inaugurated in Jesus Christ. Therefore mimicking its values and attitudes has the practical effect of inhibiting the faithful witness of the church. The problem with the church is not that it needs more members, or more money, or more influence. Nor is it that the church needs better leaders, better programs, or better marketing efforts. Kenneson's judgment is at base theological. The problem is that the church has fundamentally lost its way, has forgotten its true mission: "to bear

Knesson's analysis of what ails the church is the question "Is the fruit that the church is bearing the fruit of the Spirit?"

The profound hope comes from the biblically grounded understanding of the shape and purpose of the church. Using the metaphor and images of horticulture ("Life on the Vine"), Kenneson lifts up a compelling vision of the church as a culture—a way of life or set of expectations, beliefs, commitments, and behavior—which is always being cultivated. As an "embodied argument about what reality is like," cultures encourage us to "construct our identities according to assumptions embodied in their stories, practices, convictions, and institutions." The fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, Gal. 5:22) indicate the cultural characteristics of faithful and fruitful Christian communities. Embodying what corporate life in the coming reign of God entails, each fruit of the Spirit is a specific manifestation of God's love and therefore embodies a

steadfast other-directedness. These are thus not merely admirable or commendable virtues. Kenneson argues that “these dispositions reflect the very character and mission of God.” It is God’s redemptive purposes, uniquely embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, that continue to be reflected, even if imperfectly, in the life of Christian communities animated by the Holy Spirit.

Those who would follow Jesus Christ and embody a way of life shaped by the Holy Spirit, must be liberated from bondage to the clashing voices of the dominant culture. This liberation requires that Christians become both more discerning about the characteristics of their host culture and more articulate about the alternative culture of the

each fruit of the Spirit, each divided into four parts: (1) a biblical exposition of the character of the particular fruit which brings substance and depth to the discussion, (2) an illuminating explanation of the ways in which the dominant culture inhibits the cultivation of the fruit, (3) a consideration of resources the church has for overcoming the obstacles for cultivating the Spirit’s fruit in this culture, (4) questions for reflection as well as practical suggestions for steps the church might take to minimize the impact of the obstacles and begin to cultivate an alternative culture which nourishes and expresses the Spirit’s fruit.

My criticisms of the book are minor in comparison with the insight and richness offered by Kenneson’s discussion of

*Kenneson calls for the church to become bilingual,  
to speak both of theological truths and cultural realities.*

church. In order to bear witness to God’s gracious character and reconciling mission in the world, “each generation in every culture must take up the hard work of discerning the opportunities for and the obstacles to embodying the gospel faithfully in that place and time.” Rather than offering a set or pat solution for all to follow, Kenneson’s goal is to offer a model of Christian discernment, a method for identifying obstacles to the living of the Christian life and for discovering a faithful way forward.

At the heart of the proposed method of discernment is exploring the culture of the church in the context of concrete traits of the wider American culture. All too often books offer either an abstract theological vision which floats in the clouds, or a practical sociological analysis which is theologically tone deaf. Kenneson calls for the church to become *bilingual*, to speak both of theological truths and cultural realities. Thus the cultivation of love is considered in the midst of market-style exchanges, joy in the midst of manufactured desire, peace in the midst of fragmentation, and patience in the midst of productivity. Kindness is explored in the midst of self-sufficiency, goodness in the midst of self-help, faithfulness in the midst of impermanence, gentleness in the midst of aggression, and self-control in the midst of addiction. This approach brings a realism and a practicality to the discussion without losing the positive and visionary aspects of God’s promise and presence. It is also this approach which makes the book a challenging read. While written in a very accessible style, Kenneson attempts to make connections between many things which are usually considered separately, i.e. the biblical witness to God’s character and purpose, the biblical vision of faithful and fruitful Christian life, the challenge of contemporary cultural obstacles, and the opportunities within congregational life for participation in God’s redemptive mission in the midst of the world.

The pattern of the book involves chapters devoted to

the challenge and the opportunity of cultivating communities of the Spirit in the midst of the self-interest, materialism, and consumerism of the dominant culture of the United States. While the subtitle of the book is “Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community,” the communal aspect is not as strong as it could be. In the context of talking about the church in terms of “culture,” the opportunity to focus upon the church as a “demonstration community” or a “contrast society” is frequently missed. For example, the character of particular fruit is often discussed in individualistic terms, i.e., “one’s relationships,” “one’s life.” And while the community gathered for worship is lifted up as “the single most important venue for cultivating the fruit of the Spirit,” at times the life and practice of the church seems almost instrumental to the cultivation of faithful and fruitful individuals. The questions and practical suggestions usually relate to the individual reader and his/her behavior rather than calling for an examination and change in the communal life and practice of the church. Kenneson is currently at work on a book on ecclesiology, and so perhaps we can look forward to that writing for a fuller communal orientation. ■



## ***Ekklesia: Something “More”*** *continued from page 3*

“more” to my church planting. I realized that too many of the resources available to me in North America are inadequate in our missional context. It’s not that they aren’t useful, they just don’t go deep enough; the cures look too much like the disease. So I resonate with the radical dimension The Ekklesia Project is bringing to the broader conversations on church transformation. We must help one another to narrow the gaps between what we Christians profess and how we live.

Carrying out this mission requires a common vision and a good deal of mutual support. This is part of the mission of the local church to which all Christians must remain committed, and one upon which The Ekklesia Project is focused. But congregations and other Christian organizations find it difficult to live a life of discipleship in the midst of competi-

tion from the thousands of objects, images, and ideals that vie for our allegiance and attention on a daily basis. Living the Christian life in the midst of such competition requires nourishment and strengthening from the Holy Spirit, carried out through *koinonia* (communion, fellowship) with other persons who find themselves similarly called.

The Ekklesia Project recognizes the fact that we are “called out” of the world into a different mode of life in order to be “more” for the sake of the world. The group is experimenting in Christian formation and radical discipleship in order to provide that “more.” ■

*For more information on The Ekklesia Project, including its “A Declaration and an Invitation to All Christians,” visit its web site at [www.ekklesiaproject.org](http://www.ekklesiaproject.org) or contact its leaders at: The Ekklesia Project, c/o Prof. Michael L. Budde, 2320 N. Kenmore Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614, phone (773) 325-1974, fax (773) 325-7337.*



## **The Stated “Principles” of The Ekklesia Project**

*From “A Declaration and an Invitation to All Christians.”*

Our principles are simple and straightforward:

1. We believe that the triune God is the origin and the ultimate goal of all things; and that, through Jesus Christ, we are called to give our allegiance to God and to make the Church our true dwelling place. We believe that the claims of Christ have priority over those of the state, the market, race, class, gender, and other functional idolatries. “You shall have no other Gods before me” (Ex. 20:3).

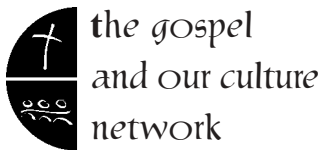
2. We believe that communal worship is the heart of the Christian life. We seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to bring our everyday practices into greater conformity with our worship, such that our entire lives may be lived to glorify God. Similarly, we pledge to give and receive counsel about how we might better embody the Gospel in its individual and communal expressions. “Praise the Lord; praise the name of the Lord; give praise, O servants of the Lord” (Psalm 135: 1).

3. We believe that the church undercuts its own vocation when it compromises with the institutions, allegiances and assumptions that undergird the “culture of death” in our world. We remind all Christians that, in rejecting the sword and other lethal means to advance His goals, Jesus set an example for all of us who seek to follow Him. While accepting rather than imposing death may still be foolish and scandalous in the eyes of non-Christians (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23), it remains central to what it means to follow a crucified and risen Messiah. We believe that the process of renewing the church in our day requires Christians to rethink all those values and practices that presume a smooth fit between killing and discipleship – no matter how disturbing or divisive this reappraisal may be (cf. Matt 10:34-8). Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

4. We do not accept the ultimacy of divisions imposed on the Body of Christ — whether they be national borders, denominational divides, cultural and social stereotypes, or class divisions. We seek to restore the bonds of ecclesial unity and solidarity that are always under threat from the powers and principalities of the present age. “For I am sure that neither death, nor life, . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).

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

NON PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
HOLLAND, MI 49423  
PERMIT NO. 120



***ADVANCE NOTICE***  
**GOCN 2001 Consultation**  
**October 18-20**  
**Techny, Illinois**

This past October's GOCN Consultation on *Missional Systems* will be followed by the 2001 consultation on the theme *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*. The theme draws its inspiration from the title of Darrell Guder's new book in the GOC Series. Guder will give the keynote address, and a vision will be forged for "converting patterns" in the church's life.