

Christians and Contemporary Culture: Interviews With Paul Louis Metzger

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Introduction

This is a transcript of interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International. We have more than 120 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at www.gci.org/YI.

In ordinary conversations, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In the following transcripts, we have removed occasional words that did not seem to contribute any meaning to the sentence. In some cases we could not figure out what word was intended. We apologize for any transcription errors, and if you notice any, we welcome your assistance.

Grace Communion International is in broad agreement with the theology of the people we interview, but GCI does not endorse every detail of every interview. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees. We thank them for their time and their willingness to participate.

We incur substantial production costs for these interviews and transcripts. Donations in support of this ministry may be made at www.gci.org/donate.

Our guest in these interviews is Dr. Paul Louis Metzger, professor of Christian Theology and Theology of Culture at Multnomah Biblical Seminary at Multnomah University in Portland, Oregon. Dr. Metzger is founder and director of New Wine, New Wineskins. He is author of the following books:

- *Connecting Christ: How to Discuss Jesus in a World of Diverse Paths*
- *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church*
- *Evangelical Zen: A Christian's Spiritual Travels With a Buddhist Friend* (co-authored with Kyogen Carlson)
- *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (co-authored with Brad Harper)
- *The Gospel of John: When Love Comes to Town*
- *New Wine Tastings: Theological Essays of Cultural Engagement*
- *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (editor)
- *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular Through the Theology of Karl Barth*

The interviews were conducted by J. Michael Fezell, then Vice President of Grace Communion International, now adjunct professor at Grace Communion Seminary.

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Relationships and Evangelism

JMF: We're talking with Dr. Paul Louis Metzger, professor of Christian Theology and Theology of Culture at Multnomah Biblical Seminary at Multnomah University in Portland, Oregon. Dr. Metzger is founder and director of New Wine, New Wineskins, and author of several books.

He also serves as the editor of a forthcoming multi-volume series on the Scriptures for InterVarsity Press, for which he is writing the volume on John's Gospel. His newest book is *Exploring Ecclesiology*, co-authored with Dr. Brad Harper [2009]. Dr. Metzger's passion is integrating theology and spirituality with cultural sensitivity. He is a member of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, New Jersey, and developed a strategic ministry partnership with Dr. John M. Perkins called, "Drum Majors for Love, Truth and Justice."

Thanks for joining us today.

PLM: Thanks, it's great to be here, Mike.

JMF: I'd like to begin by finding out what led you into the study of theology.

PLM: I was in Northwestern College, St. Paul, Minnesota. In my junior or senior year I was interacting with a couple of professors and one, Walter Dunit, introduced me to the discipline of systematic theology and how it's all-encompassing. While there's the descriptive element in talking about what the church has believed in the past, there's also that prescriptive element, about what do we believe and present today for the church and the society at large. I always had a desire to bring theology into the present context. So that was very intriguing to me in terms of that all-encompassing enterprise that also has present-day import. That's what led me into the discipline, and the study of God, and I could think of nothing greater than the study of God and especially the triune nature of God.

JMF: Somewhere along the path you moved into Trinitarian theology. How did that go about?

PLM: I was a student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a couple of my professors there had encouraged me for my doctoral studies to consider applying to King's College, London, to work with Professor Colin Gunton. He was a leading Trinitarian theologian who died a few years ago and was a major player in terms of the renaissance in Trinitarian theology. Working at King's in London was a great introduction into Trinitarian thought forms, and it was great to be able to work with him. There were others, such as John Zizioulas, who would come in and teach and lecture, and many others as well. It was a great place to study Trinitarian theology.

JMF: You're editor of a book called *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*, in which you look at Colin Gunton and his work through the eyes of a number of authors. Maybe we could talk about that a little later. Right now, as we introduced you, we mentioned that your passion is the integration of theology and spirituality with cultural sensitivity. What is an integration of theology and spirituality? What's the difference, and what do you mean by integration?

PLM: Theology by nature is a very integrative discipline and very much concerned for various domains of thought and life. As a Christian, I think everything we're about should be about spirituality. While I'm not doing spiritual theology in that classic sense of the discussion that Professor James Houston will be about, I have great respect for his work. The types of theological thought forms I'm working with within Trinitarian theology are participation in the life of God, union with Christ. Those are central motifs in my own writing and research, and that has import for cultural sensitivity dynamics in our postmodern, post-Christian context of how we engage alternative spiritualities. We need a robust understanding and awareness of the spiritual dimensions bound up with the holy love of God, and Christ, in the power of the Spirit. That's bound up with what I'm thinking of here.

JMF: By "spirituality," you're not talking necessarily about spirituality in the sense of mysticism... you're talking about a holistic Christian life as theology informs it, particularly Trinitarian theology. What is practical about Trinitarian theology in the Christian life?

PLM: When Trinitarian theology is framed in light of the holy love of God in Christ and that we're called to participate in this God's life and not simply to emulate (which is part of our work), but actually to participate, it gets us beyond a form of religion, or rules, and legalism and

“sin management” (as some will talk about it) of do’s and don’ts. Paul is very much against that in the book of Colossians, where there was a faulty asceticism of “don’t drink, don’t chew, don’t date girls who do” type of thinking back in the ancient world. The Christians were getting bound up with them and they thought that their identity with Christ was about sin management — keeping the rules.

Paul is saying that our life with Christ goes far beyond sheer concern for moral rights — it must be about union and communion within the life of God. He says in Colossians 2:9-10: “All the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ.” That’s the kind of union that Paul is concerned for. You said before that it’s not about mysticism per se, well to me, there is a mystical component. It’s not the kind of Buddhist mysticism, a pantheism, it’s not that, but the Reformers were very concerned for union with Christ in the Spirit, where our hearts are wed to his heart. There really is that participation, and I would call that mystical, but it is bound up with the holistic frame of reference with practical import to such things as you mentioned in getting beyond legalism toward a real relational model of spirituality.

JMF: By relational model, you’re talking about how to get along with each other.

PLM: Yes, and that God communes with us heart-to-heart, not simply thought-to-thought, but heart-to-heart, because that’s where the best communion takes place. Our thoughts, our actions, our moral initiatives flow out of that heart-to-heart communion with God. I like to pick up from Martin Luther and his side-kick Melancthon, when they both in the 1500s talked about, we don’t change hearts by changing behaviors. Our behaviors are changed by our hearts being changed. That only occurs by way of the Holy Spirit being poured out, as Romans 5:5 says: “The love of God is poured out into our hearts with the Holy Spirit.” When our hearts are transformed, then these other things flow from them. That’s what I would call an affective spirituality that’s bound up from Trinitarian thought.

JMF: Now, cultural sensitivity flows right out of that, in an authentic Christianity that’s coming from the heart as opposed to a list of rules. Cultural sensitivity is going to be the natural by-product. What are some of the ways that you focus on with regard to bringing cultural sensitivity into that process?

PLM: Well, because God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, God did not seek to... I like to use the imagery of he didn’t come to take back Jerusalem or take back America from his enemies. In the evangelical Christian movement (of which I’m a part), we’re

often concerned for our rights, and taking back America from those who live very differently from us. While I want to follow the Bible through and through, and live according to God's desires for us as his people, nonetheless God is calling us to love people where we're not seeking to shape them by behavioral frames of reference, but as we relate to people relationally, not behaviorally — they get to see that we care about them. That's where there's the opportunity for people to have a change of heart. As it's been said elsewhere (and I agree with this), we're known more in the conservative Christian movement for what we are against than what we're for.

As I'm engaging in cultural issues when I'm working in Portland, Oregon (it's not the Bible Belt), and when I'm working with Buddhists and others and they're concerned about what they've seen in evangelical America of seeking to take back America from them, there's a lot of fear that they have of us. I think that an imperfect love is driven out by fear, but a perfect love casts out fear. When they come to understand that we're concerned for their well-being and that we want to care for them in the love of God in Christ, that changes the dynamics of how we deal with people with different spiritualities and different moralities. It's that relational context that gives birth — comes forth from God's heart — to a kind of cultural engagement that is not about enforcing Christianity on people, but it comes from the inside out, not the outside in.

JMF: In the Gospels, Jesus is described as a friend of sinners, and yet in our evangelical traditions, we tend to shy away from being friends of sinners — the last thing we're going to be is a friend of sinners. We want our children to go to private Christian schools, we want to keep ourselves in an enclave of our friends within the church, not outside the church. Yet it sounds like you're talking about the need to be friends of sinners, like Jesus was and for the same reasons as Jesus was, because people are human beings created in the image of God, and it's the heart of God that reaches out to all people. Often though, Christians are told to make friends with non-believers with an ulterior motive of getting the gospel to them [**PLM:** bait and switch] — it's a project where the *real* goal is to get the gospel to them, as opposed to them being the goal as a person, worthy of friendship because the love of Christ is in us and he's a friend of sinners.

PLM: Absolutely. With that frame of reference, Trinitarian theology gives rise to a concern for people as people, and not as a means to an end of something else. So I couldn't agree with you more, that we don't engage nonbelievers and build relationships with them simply to get the gospel to them, because there's a problematic notion of the gospel if we don't see the gospel

itself in terms of its DNA as *relational* — the good news is that God desires relationship with us. If I'm only after relationship for the sake of seeing people come to Christ, then relationship is not the goal — relationship is a means to an end of something else, and often that's a behavioral rationalistic frame of reference — *understanding* certain things about God and *doing* certain things, rather than heart-to-heart communion.

When I talk about a desire to build relationships with people, that goes beyond whether they come to Christ or not, because I think Jesus would *want* me to care for them, for the oppressed, those who are in hunger and need, even if they don't come to Christ. I think he would still feed them and would still care for them, and we should, too. But we always want to see people come to know Jesus personally as Lord and Savior. That's our desire because *we* know this communion with him, and we want others to know it. It's an invitation rather than a negation.

JMF: It's living out of the gospel, rather than a formulaic presentation by words — it's being the gospel.

PLM: It's a gospel of word and deed. Especially in our context today, because we have created so much fear in the broader community and so many contexts as conservative Christians with our "take back America" strategy, I find that we have to create the space with our lives for our views to be heard, and that's going to require a lot more sacrificial living than we've been accustomed to. We'll look a lot more like the early church context. I'm excited about that, even though there's some fear on my part of what that will entail, but for us to move toward a mindset of being a missional outpost in our culture rather than some dominant superstructure, makes for our depending on God and Christ more, not less. So I'm excited about the opportunities that the church will have in North America in days ahead.

JMF: Speaking then of cultural sensitivity, in your book *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church*, you point out that race problems are not necessarily a thing of the past, even though overtly many of the structures are gone, that within the church, there tends to still be race and class divisions. Could you talk about the title, what you mean by "consuming Jesus," and also what these race and class divisions look like.

PLM: In the title, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church*, I'm doing two things with the words *Consuming Jesus*. One, negatively: we have with consumer culture these projections we place on Jesus. We make Jesus to be what we want him to be. So consumerism consumes our perspectives on Jesus.

I think here of the movie *Talladega Nights*. There is this prayer by Ricky Bobby (Will Ferrell) where he's praying to Jesus, eight pounds, six ounce baby Jesus, to help him win a race. Other people at the dinner table are talking about how they like Jesus looking like this or Jesus looking like this, but it's all based on their own preferences rather than on who he is in himself. So the negative aspect is how consumerism impacts us and we distort the biblical perspective on Jesus with our own cultural preferences.

The more positive notion, in terms of how I use the words, is that I long for the church to be consumed by Jesus and a more noble vision of our concern for the church being his people, his community, where there are no divisions (including divisions of race and class) — those are torn and destroyed. That's the other aspect of how I'm using the words "consuming Jesus."

To develop that further, the issue of how race is still with us today (and race and class divisions tend to go together in American culture historically and even in the present day), there's a book called *Divided by Faith* on evangelical religion in America where the authors, Emerson and Smith, talk about how we're not in the slavery era of race problems, we're not in the Jim Crow era of separate drinking fountains, sitting at the back of the bus, but in the post-Civil Rights era. Because we don't have these legal structures in the same way that we may have in the past, a lot of people think that racism is no longer with us.

So they develop this at length about how racism, racialization, how race impacts everything from economics to where you live, to job placement, etc. They talk about how race is still with us. Race is a variable, not a constant — it's always fluctuating — racialization and race impacts our culture. With that as a backdrop, I argue in the book that one of the ways in which racism is still with us is by consumer preference. We all tend to flock with those or toward those who are like us, and a lot of churches cater to that.

There's been use of this missions principle, the homogeneous unit principle, applied to church growth strategies in America. To help the church grow fastest, you work with people of the same socio-economic feather and if you target them, they will flock together and they will flock quickly. It's difficult to get churches to move beyond these kinds of principles because it's very pragmatic: it does grow churches quickly when you're working with preferences of people, and people tend to choose (if you listen to them) churches based on what they like rather than where God is calling them.

Just listen to how people say, "I chose this church because I like the worship, I like the way

the pastor speaks.” You don’t hear much about “God called my family to this church.” That might be hard to configure at times, what’s the call of God like, but nonetheless you don’t have people even wrestling with that. So if a pastor’s going to talk about race divisions, normal families will be thinking, “What does this have to do with my family? I just want to see my kids raised up morally and I want them to have good Bible teaching. I’ll just go to the church next door where we don’t have to listen to this stuff — what does this have to do with the gospel?”

I talk about how these things are related to the gospel message because Paul says in Galatians 3: “There’s no longer any division between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free.” While the Jew-Gentile issue is different from black/white issues, for example (because you could become a Jew if you’re a Gentile, by circumcision and other things — but a black person can’t become a white person, a white person can’t become a black person), but those same divisions between Jews and Gentiles have pertinence and relevance to the divisions we have on racism and racialization today.

JMF: Morality seems to be the thing that we’re focused on with our children — maybe not so much with ourselves, but certainly with our children — we want our children to be moral. It reminds me of *The Music Man*: we want the children not to be playing pool, we want them to be moral, so we get them into band. But through all that search for morality, or that effort to focus on morality, we can get to the place where morality becomes so important that we look down on sinners, we even despise them, we talk about them in negative ways of reflecting how we feel about them, as opposed to being like Jesus, who is a friend of sinners, to letting his love flow through us because these are the very people he came to die for. We are all sinners before we come to Christ anyway (and we still sin afterward), and yet we focus on morality, but the gospel focuses on relationality. You’ve talked about the parable of the Good Samaritan, how it relates to that.

PLM: When Jesus is talking about morality (because in the context of the Good Samaritan parable, he’s being challenged by a religious leader who asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life?), Jesus gets into that discussion of caring for one’s neighbor, and Jesus frames morality relationally. He’s concerned, as God, for morality, but how he shapes or frames morality is always relational. The religious leaders were often so concerned for a kind of behavioral, individualistic morality, they missed the real essence of the law — which was to love your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

So Jesus says, “this is what it means to care for one’s neighbor” — and our neighbor is not the person I most like. As Henri Nouwen said, “a true community is the place where the person you least like always lives.” Who does Jesus use as the hero in the story of the Good Samaritan? It’s the Samaritan who had extraordinary mercy, as one translation frames it. In that context, it’s the religious leaders (this man’s peer group), who don’t care for the Jewish man (I’m assuming it’s a Jewish man) — one of their own who’s been oppressed, who’s been beaten, left for dead. It’s a Samaritan who comes to his aid, and in the issues of race and poverty matters that I’m concerned for in *Consuming Jesus*, I’m not looking at people of different ethnicities as bound up somehow with sin, but how we relate to people or not relate to them, based on them being different from us. That’s the sin issue, that we don’t care. Jesus is concerned for mercy and justice and sacrifice and breaking down divisions, especially in the church, but also beyond. Jesus was concerned; Paul was concerned for these things in the church.

JMF: I’ve always been intrigued by Peter’s statement: to be ready always to give an answer for the hope that lies within you. It implies that you’re not supposed to be always going around blurting out the hope that lies with you, but you’re prepared, you’re ready to, when the opportunity and the circumstances call for it. Paul said something, in another context, about an individual that he said not to associate with because of his behavior within the church and they were, in effect, putting him out of the church for a season. He had to correct them: “When I said that, I didn’t mean not to associate with anyone who’s a sinner — I was talking about the individual who purports to be a member of the church who was grievously and overtly sinning in public.” He said you’ve got to associate with sinners and unbelievers, otherwise you have to come out of the world.

There’s a recognition of the fact that relational Christianity is going to and needs to engage people who are not believers. That means it’s right and appropriate to be friends of sinners, and you can do that without taking up their behavior. Yet how can we reach out to them showing them what the gospel is and what Christ is like in the world if we don’t engage them, if we keep them at arm’s length, if we just see them as a target of our condemnation, and we’re constantly trying to pass laws to put them in jail?

PLM: Exactly. With Christ, even with the leper, even though it wasn’t a sin issue that the person had leprosy (maybe some people want to make the connection, he has this because he’s a sinner), if you look at it from a legalistic sense, looking at the letter not the spirit, Jesus, by

touching the leper, broke the law, from that reading. But by touching and healing the leper, he fulfilled the law. Jesus is about a relational engagement, a transformation of people. While I share the concern for being holy people and we're called to be holy people, it's a dysfunctional spirituality, it so fears engaging the world that we don't have contact. We need to be so captured by God's holy love in Christ that the real force of movement is from us to them in God's holy love, not a fear of coming out from the world so that we're not tainted.

Where's the transformation coming from: Are we being conformed, or are we being transforming agents? In John 17 Jesus prays, "Father, I don't pray that you would take them out of the world, but that you protect them in the world." Where did Jesus hang out, and where were Jesus' greatest rebukes going? Who was the audience for his rebukes that were most forthright? For the religious leaders. I think about that in terms of a concern about myself, because it wasn't the tax collectors and the sinners, the prostitutes that he attacked — he called them to repent, but his attacks were for those who considered themselves righteous and they don't need him. That's where his rebuke was, and it was a stinging rebuke.

My question to me, as a religious leader, is, if I read this Gospel and I'm thinking he's attacking mostly the nonbeliever person who is the "sinner," then I'm missing the point. Am I broken? Am I sensing my own need for him today? That's where I think all Christian leaders should be going, and we need that sense of desperation for him to show up and transform *us*. Because then, we will be in a position to speak to people in our midst.

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The Church Should Include All Peoples

JMF: In your book, *Consuming Jesus*, you have an afterword by John M. Perkins — you have a strategic ministry partnership with him. In the beginning of the book especially, you have some extensive quotes from him, and one is, “We have substituted a gospel of church growth for a gospel of reconciliation.” Tell us about that.

PLM: Dr. Perkins is saying that our emphasis is often on quantitative growth, and while there is a place for that (the early church had 5000 right off the bat), we’ve taken the focus off of qualitative growth and discipleship, and have put our focus on quantitative growth. So he says we’ve replaced the gospel of reconciliation with the gospel of church growth. He’s calling for a more holistic spirituality and a church that gets beyond issues of race and ethnic division and the like, and that’s the context for that statement.

He also says in that same context that the American evangelical church is the most racist institution in America, and at least one blogger raised questions over that statement, and really misunderstood what Perkins was after. He’s not saying that evangelicals are the most racist individuals, but institutionally, we’re often blind. Because of our emphasis on individual people, we often don’t account for the structural dimensions.

Even in church growth, we structure religion and spirituality by way of, what I have said elsewhere, along the lines of this “homogeneous unit principle,” of working with people, targeting people of a certain sociological, social, economic bent, if you will, sort of demographic. That’s not expansive enough. We need to take into account people’s whole stories, their contexts, and I’m for a focus on language and location, but not likings. To work by way of preferences gives rise to separating people in America today along consumer lines, and that often tracks with separation by way of ethnicity and economics and other related matters. That’s what I

think Perkins is after.

In the evangelical movement, we have no idea, at least by and large, about a prophetic voice of what Dr. Perkins is calling for. We write books on how to grow your church and make a profit in religion, but we know very little about prophetic voices such as what Perkins offers. We need to reengage the Scriptures in terms of its call to a holistic spirituality.

JMF: Most evangelical churches are going to have white faces, predominately, and be more of a middle-class constituency as opposed to reflecting the whole culture, and you're proposing certain ways to address that. How do you suggest churches begin to look at things, and what should they do differently?

PLM: I think that's where we've been as a movement. But if we're going to have growth, we need to be concerned for diversity. Not in some kind of politically correct manner, because that's where a lot of people will raise questions... is this just trying to be PC, fit in with American culture? That's not it at all.

Are we really missional in our orientation? Do we have our eyes open? Are we reaching out to the communities around us? America is not becoming increasingly white. America is becoming increasingly brown, if you will. I don't look at that as a threat — I look at it as a great opportunity. In the years ahead, the growth is going to come, by and large, in non-Caucasian contexts. That's already happening in certain contexts, but the dominant evangelical superstructures are not there.

Our leadership, in our institutions of churches and education and parachurch, are largely white. I happen to be a white person, and I'll often joke with people when I'm speaking to them, remember I'm a white guy. I'm not out here to attack white people, but we need to be missional. We need to open our eyes. We need to be concerned for doing church, as I said earlier, based on language and location, not likings. If we have eyes to see, we'll see that there's more diversity in our communities than we've often been able to or willing to acknowledge. It's there, but are we being intentional about looking to see how diverse our communities are?

That is what I would want to maintain in addition to other principles, even in how we do theology, what we preach on, how central the Lord's Supper is in our worship services...not as a placebo tablet with the Supper, but more that it's not simply about individuals before God — it's about persons in communion with God and with one another. The Lord's Supper in Corinth was meant to break down class divisions, and yet the Corinthian church, 1 Corinthians 11, was

dividing people even at the Agape Feast by way of social class. Paul says, “not on my watch. That won’t happen here, because it is the Lord’s table, where all are equal, where all are welcome.” We need to make sure that all people are welcome to the bountiful harvest of God’s communion.

JMF: Even if all people are welcome at a given church, wouldn’t it still work out, in general because of the way people are, that churches still build up around racial and ethnic similarities? Don’t most people feel more comfortable worshipping together with others who share their cultural and ethnic background and history?

PLM: People feel more comfortable with that orientation or with that framework, but that doesn’t mean it’s most biblical. That’s what the Corinthians were doing. They were doing things based on comfortability. The rich were in their dining rooms in the house church eating with each other, because the Greco-Roman culture allowed for that, and the poorer Christians were without. They were not able to have anything of the feast. They were, so to speak, in the courtyard with their faces plastered to the glass looking in.

Paul said that’s not going to happen. Even though that’s your comfort zone, that’s not going to happen at God’s table. We need to replace comfortability with the comfort of the cross — and all are equal there. That might sound pious and super-spiritual, but I don’t mean it that way. It’s a matter of, do we really have a heart for seeing the church look like what the kingdom of God would be?

In another book that just came out, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, my co-author and I say that we need to live now in light of what will be. As a friend of mine has said elsewhere, if the kingdom of God is not divided, how on earth can the church be? We need to live now in light of what will be in God’s eschatological kingdom before the throne. As that kingdom and community now, we need to look different, because Scripture calls us to do that. It’s not to beat ourselves over the head if there are no people of different colors in our community, and we don’t have to bus people in from hundreds of miles away, that’s not the point. But are we truly seeking to be missional?

I want to get beyond what I like, and my preferences with worship services (this is a lot of where the generational divisions occur). I don’t necessarily like a lot of the worship in churches with the praise choruses. I like a lot of hymns. I like liturgy. But I’d rather put down my own preferences for the sake of worshipping with people of different generations.

We have the generational gap, the worship wars and generational divisions. I think that’s

going to hurt us long-term. It's already hurting us long-term, where young people don't feel connected to churches and they leave churches for their own type of church later. We need to worship as a family. My concerned about all these services (contemporary or traditional) is bound up with the same kind of consumer preference. It's subtle, but it ends up with very destructive tendencies in the long haul.

JMF: What is a way around that, though? In a given church...you take a black church or a Korean church, typically a white person is not going to feel comfortable there, likewise a typical Korean worshiper is not going to feel comfortable in a white church or a black church. They're going to prefer to go to a Korean church. You've got rich people, young people, generations as well as socioeconomic levels. There can be an effort to make everyone in the generations and the rich and poor welcome in that context, but how do you go about it? It's one thing to be welcoming, but will it really happen where churches begin to become missional to the degree that all races can enjoy and meet together as one body? Will that ever become a reality?

PLM: It's a very long process, and it's a hard road. It's painful, because those wounds are still deep. A lot of people think the wounds have gone away, the racial tensions for example, but it's often from people who haven't even engaged in the issues. They haven't asked the questions. They haven't come alongside of others from different backgrounds and really started to ask questions and live life together. If we do, we'd see that these things are real issues and open wounds in many contexts. It depends case by case, but they are there. They are very much present in American culture.

As I said before, it's OK to distinguish language and location, not likings. You can have an immigrant community from Africa, or somewhere else in the world where they're speaking in their native language the first generation. I'm thinking, okay, second generation, third generation, and are they still seeking to be set apart? At that point, it often becomes a matter of cultural preference.

I'm not trying to do away with cultural distinctiveness. I love and long for church contexts where we celebrate the diversity of our worship styles and the like. We need to be intentional. It's one thing to say we're welcoming. Anyone can say that. I never talk about that we just want to welcome people. I want to be intentional about making sure that they really do have a place at the table, and that they have ownership.

So, how do I change structures, even leadership structures, where if I'm a person in a

position of authority, how do I use my gifting, my influence, my position to make it possible for people of other gifting experiences to have ownership and leadership? In some ways it's a death to myself.

When the issue comes back to making people feel comfortable, we're just going to nurture that same problematic orientation. I do not believe in making people feel comfortable in church. I want to have people know that they're loved and cared for, but not comfortable as in making sure they feel that all of their desires and wants are met. That's the consumer problem. It's giving people what they want, when they want it, at the least cost to themselves. That's the consumer problem in the church.

If you deal with these issues of ethnic division and economic division and generational division and that doesn't whet their appetite, they'll go next door, and that's very problematic. So how do we change the preaching? How do we change the ideology? The mentality? The spirit of our churches where we're just catering to people because we want to make sure people come in the door? Again, I don't mean it by way of false piety or it sounds all good.

To me this is DNA, and it's partly because this is my own life. My wife's from Japan, she's a Japanese national, a Japanese citizen; our kids are dual citizens. I have to hear what my son experiences at school and what my daughter will experience and what my wife has experienced going into an immigration office to get a green card years ago (I talk about it in the book *Consuming Jesus*; it wasn't as sexy or as funny as Hollywood's green card version). It was a very painful experience, and I felt like a helpless hopeful, just like the Mexican applicants looking for green cards and citizenship papers. I felt on the outside looking in with some of the things we had to endure. I saw another side of America. As much as I love our country, I saw another side.

A lot of people experience that in the church. Do we want people to feel welcome? Absolutely, as long as everyone feels welcome. But that doesn't mean comfortable, because Jesus calls us to carry a cross so that we die, so that we can truly live and find a meaningful life that's beyond our best life.

JMF: It sounds like there has to be a passion. I don't see that happening unless there's a passion in the pastor to preach and educate the church in a way that helps it to see itself in a new light and fresh light, as opposed to just being a church to attend for the various social reasons that oftentimes we attend church, for the friendships and the security in the sense of support and

so on, but for the church to see itself differently.

PLM: It's partly the pastor's role, but just like the president of the United States, the president isn't fully in control. There are a lot of other people who have ownership of the issues. The pastor is a major player, as well as the elders or church council, and the lay people. There's a sense in which we all need to be in a state of desperation.

Perkins says we've replaced this gospel of reconciliation with the gospel of church growth. That's not good news. A watching world looks on us, and it's not like we're trying to tickle the ears, it's not like if we just do the race issue right then the world will like us. I don't believe that. But I think they see the hypocrisy when we talk about the love of God in Christ and all people are welcome, and yet Martin Luther King Jr.'s statement from way back in the '50s or '60s is still true today. The most segregated hour in Christian America, even in a post-Christian America, is Sunday morning at 11:00 a.m. How can that be, in God's household?

We have to have a sense of urgency and desperation, and that doesn't come overnight for a lot of people. It would be wonderful if the Holy Spirit would just move in such a way that people would be awakened to it. Sometimes the Spirit does work in that way. Other times it's a long haul.

I've been in church situations most of my life, even talking about these things, where the dominant structures aren't thinking about moving toward change anytime soon. It's a marathon race, not a short-term sprint. If I didn't have this confidence and hope that Jesus will make this reality of the church that is truly unity in his eschatological kingdom, I'd give up hope and I'd despair because it is so painful and it is so slow-going. There has to be that sense of urgency and desperation that our lives must create the space for our views to be heard.

When we have a segregated church economically, ethnically, and in other ways, what are we saying to the world? Are we really salt and light? I don't think so. I don't see it from the standpoint of wanting to put a guilt trip on people and be moralistic. It's a longing for something more noble, more profound, a Christianity that really gets at the heart of God. That's what I long for. I've seen what it can be like. I've been in situations where it's more beautiful and more profound, and I long for us to look like what God calls us to be as his church.

In John 17, "May they be one as we are one, Father, that the world might know that you have sent your Son." So we're telling the watching world that God hasn't sent his Son if we're not truly one — and that's not just ethnically, economically, it's not just generationally. It's in a

host of ways in which we don't have unity. The turf battles we have in churches and beyond. The denominational warfare and the like, turf. It's often ego-related.

Paul challenged that completely head-on in 1 Corinthians. They were saying, "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas," and they weren't of Christ. The ego problem is usually the biggest problem along with, in American culture, the comfort-zone problem. Those things need to be dealt with prophetically and passionately, calling people to something more beautiful and noble. (Because if it's guilt-tripped, that doesn't help anyone.) It's helping people to repent, but to repent so that we enter into something more profound together. I'm part of the problem; I want to be part of the solution. I know a lot about these things, the question is, what am I doing about them? I have to live them out all the more fully.

JMF: Paul wrote that 2000 years ago. Here we are 2000 years later, and we still have the same problem. In your book, you propose a few concrete suggestions about moving from here to there. Can you talk about those?

PLM: I'll talk about the kind of preaching that needs to occur, and I had already mentioned that aspect of prophetic speaking. And the kind of theology we're teaching, what kind of theology we foster. Trinitarian theology is communal, it's relational, it's not individualistic.

There are many practical principles that the book sets forth from different angles—some theological, some in terms of worship: how we do the Lord's Supper, how we view the Lord's Supper. Also, as it relates to community development work, we mentioned Dr. John M. Perkins before, and even how we engage as the church in the broader community. He's talked at length about principles of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. Perhaps we'll have time to talk about those things, and it's bound up with our partnership that he and I have developed.

Third, there's a network called the Mosaic Global Network, which is helping churches move toward being more multi-ethnic. There are a lot of things that can be done, developed, different models for how to be integrating, even how we do (and this is beyond the book), but how do we greet people? What does our literature indicate? What does it suggest? Again, how do we do worship? Who are we targeting? I don't like the word "targeting" because it's too narrow in its orientation. I want to be *missional*, but often targeting is, "I'm going to focus on this niche group."

Our whole community should be who we're seeking to minister to. Jesus' band of disciples was diverse. Even though it was Jewish men, it was pretty diverse. Jesus always had his sleeping

bag between Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector every night, because tax collectors were hated by Zealots. Given the chance, who knows what Simon the Zealot would have done to Matthew the tax collector? Paul rebuked Peter for not associating with the Gentiles and he talks about it in Galatians. In the early church, James talks about the economic, what we would call class divisions today, with the leaders giving preference to the rich and despising the poor.

Who makes up the boards of our churches? Is it the power brokering of the world that we have, or is it the cruciform existence of the cross? Not many of us who were called to Christ were great or noble by way of the world's standards. Where is greatness to be found? A theological, a spiritual, a missional perspective, is all-encompassing. It takes years to develop. It takes a lifetime to live out. It is costly, but it's more profound in terms of what God is calling us to.

JMF: How did you meet John Perkins?

PLM: Around 2000, a friend said to me we needed to get John Perkins to come to Portland to speak at Multnomah, where I teach and I direct this institute on the Theology of Culture, New Wine, New Wineskins. So we invited Dr. Perkins, and he accepted, and he came to Portland to speak for our conference on justice issues.

One of the places he spoke at was Reed College. Reed is talked about every year in the *Princeton Review* as being one of the most godless or non-religious, secular, irreligious schools in America, depending on how you want to word it. It's not seen as a bastion of evangelical orthodoxy, to say the least. Yet the Reed students wanted to hear this evangelical social-justice advocate civil-rights leader from the deep South, John M. Perkins, which struck me.

When he spoke there, he just shared his testimony, but it was radical and it was transformational to me. I felt, as a Multnomah Biblical Seminary professor, I had come to Christ in Reed College's auditorium hearing Perkins share his story about how he was led to Christ, how God called him back to the deep South to give his life for the poor, and then after he was nearly beaten to death, God called him beyond bitterness to be broken and holy love for even his oppressors. God called him through that traumatic ordeal where he had a heart attack, and vital organs of his body were shredded. He said God called me through that incident with these white police officers beating me to the point of death, God called me to race reconciliation for all people.

The Reed students gave him a standing ovation for a life so well lived. While they might not

have agreed with his evangelical convictions at that point, they knew there was something beyond religion here, that really was an encounter with the living God through this man. Even now, that sends shivers down my spine because that is a more profound form of Christianity than I ever had experienced to that point. I want my life, I want my family's lives, I want the church of Jesus Christ and of North America to enter more fully into that kind of radical, sacrificial spirituality that is simply bearing witness to and participating in the life of the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ.

JMF: You are partnering with him in a particular ministry. How does that contribute?

PLM: Around the time of the release of the *Consuming Jesus* book (after years of reflecting upon his story, theology, my own family's story, life in Portland and beyond), it was my own manifesto, so to speak. When he read the material, and he had come back to Portland for another New Wine, New Wineskins conference that was geared toward the oppressed, the poor, ex-offenders, how we relate the gospel compassionately to them in a holistic manner.

Dr. Perkins asked me if I would partner with him, and this is one of my mentors. This is a man whom I have the highest regard for, and that he would ask me to partner with him was one of the greatest privileges of my life. Having studied under Colin Gunton in London and then being able to work with this evangelical community development civil rights leader, it's a great marriage between Trinitarian theology and a life that really lives it out, illustrates that life and how to develop it.

He could sense that there was a theology I was developing by the grace of God that resonated with what God had called him to do as a Bible teacher and as a practitioner for decades. [At the time of the interview] he's in his late 70s and he's thinking about the marathon race ahead and the legacy, not in terms of an ego issue, but a stewardship, how these things would be carried on for the long haul. He's partnered with a variety of people, and I'm one of them. This partnership, Drum Majors for Love, Truth, and Justice, is bringing together a biblical theology of engagement that's led to his profound practices of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution.

We've spoken in different parts of the country and we're looking for other opportunities to go out and speak, to inspire people to become themselves, members of the marching band. The imagery comes from one of Martin Luther King Junior's messages where he wanted to be remembered as a drum major for justice. Love is the driving force of justice and the biblical

framework, and there's a need for justice. There's so much injustice in our world today, in America, with all the greed that's bound up with the current economic mess and the lack of concern for biblical truth.

Love, truth, and justice as a catalytic force, they simply want to bear witness to the Triune God as he engages sacrificially through the church in our cultural context. It's putting together that biblical theology of engagement with what Dr. Perkins has been about with his community-development work for decades.

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Christians Engaging Contemporary Culture

JMF: You're partnered with Dr. John Perkins in an organization called Drum Majors for Love, Truth, and Justice. Can you tell us what that's about?

PLM: The drum majors partnership is something that started a little over a year ago when Dr. Perkins had asked me to join him for this partnership where it brings to bear the theology of engagement that I have developed that's based in Trinitarian thought, and then also his work as a practitioner with community development motifs...and to join those two in a word of inspiration and exhortation to the church at large in terms of how we should engage and challenge and build up the church in terms of confronting race and class barriers in American Christianity and beyond today.

We've gone out and spoken in different places. The Luis Palau Association sponsored the Drum Major's Conference in Portland. We spoke at the CCDA Convention last year together in Miami, Florida, and we spoke at Calvin College for a conference earlier this year. We're looking for opportunities to speak and encourage other people to join the band, so to speak.

The imagery for this work comes from Dr. King's sermon where he talked about being remembered as a drum major for justice. We're about love, and love is the impetus, or it's the momentum building for issues of justice and truth. We want everything to be captured by God's holy love in Christ, and then truth and justice.

We live in a culture where biblical truth is not often taken seriously, and we want everything to be grounded in biblical truth. And justice...we live in a culture of greed and consumerism, where people are taking advantage of the system to get rich as the poor get poorer. So we want love propelling or moving truth and justice forward. That's our message to encourage, invite, challenge the church at large, to join in this movement of God's Spirit as we seek to be catalysts

for this work under God's direction.

JMF: If a church wants to join that movement, what does that look like in terms of the effect on the local church or what the church would do?

PLM: We would look for opportunities to speak together to a church or churches or schools, institutions. We do several things in terms of our speaking because it's an inspirational work. We're not trying to do the work for people, but to come in and give biblical theology, practical applications and illustrations, talk to leaders and work with them on things that they can be doing in their communities, and maybe we can talk a little bit about what Dr. Perkins has stood for, by way of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution—his three principles that he's been known for for decades—advisor to several U.S. presidents on these matters...on poverty and racism.

With relocation, it's a matter of following God's incarnation, where Jesus was incarnate—he relocated from heaven to earth...and so to be intentional about locating or relocating into communities in disrepair. There are different ways in which that can be done, but one way is a group of people moving in and living in the community and staying in a community to build the community up from the grass roots—a community that's been in disrepair.

Reconciliation, first the vertical component of being reconciled to God, because that's huge: On issues of race and class divisions, we need to be born from above, because the movement of God's Spirit is essentially important if we're going to move beyond those historic and present tensions of jealousy, envy, greed, hatred, whatever you want to call it, and even those more benign forms of simple indifference. We need the movement of God's Spirit. Reconciliation with God then flows forth in a love for neighbor, reconciliation with our neighbor—black and white, Asian, Hispanic, you name it, breaking down those divisions. It's not just race—it's class divisions and beyond. That's reconciliation.

Then redistribution. It's not simply about giving money to a situation, because you can throw money at something and not be very relational or communal or caring—it's just easing a bad conscience. With redistribution, it's a life-on-life form of solidarity, where people are moving into a community, or people coming in from outside. As long as there's an incarnate presence working amongst the people, other people can come in and associate too, in sharing not only financially in a work, but also with talents and resources—expertise.

It has to go beyond charity. Perkins has written a book called *Beyond Charity*, and what I would add to that, is that Jesus wasn't condescending in his engagement of the Samaritan

woman. He was really in need. He needed water in John chapter 4, and she gave him a drink. There was that sense of Jesus coming in this humility and love, of equality. He saw her as a precious human being created in the image of God, and so he cared for her, I would say, even as an equal.

We need to get beyond charity, where we keep the poor, as I like to say, at the far end of our outstretched arm. We are into token gestures rather than really entered into relationship and seeing the value in them—and also our need for them, because there are many ways in which we benefit from that relationship with people who are in impoverished situations.

Not that poverty is sexy, but at the same time, how many stories have you heard of missionaries or churches going to Mexico or elsewhere and coming back and saying, “These people had so little and yet they had so much in Christ, and we have so much, and yet so little in Christ.” They are moved toward a greater sense of discipleship and concern for Christ having his way in their lives. In those encounters, there’s a sense in which people come away impacted and can be built up. The need is mutual rather than a token gesture of condescension. It has to be incarnational and communal.

JMF: Is there an example of that you can give? Of a church that made a transition like this and began to experience their Christian walk in a fresh way?

PLM: There are churches that have been concerned for this. I think of Irvington Covenant in Portland, Oregon, formerly pastored by Henry Greenidge. He’s an African-American pastor, and is intentional with people in the community, people with different ethnicities being intentional in concern for the plight of the urban poor. They have a ministry to the ex-offender population, amongst others, and work with the elderly. Irvington Covenant in Portland would be an example.

Another church would be Lawndale Community in the Chicago area. Coach Wayne Gordon is the person who is responsible for founding that work, I believe, and he’s a close associate of Dr. Perkins. And there are other works around the country.

A movement that’s concerned for multi-ethnic (and I had mentioned this before in another segment) is the Mosaic Global Network. Mark DeYmaz and others are seeking to be intentional along those lines.

I’m excited that different works are developing. There’s the Christian Community Development Association that meets annually. It’s a network to encourage groups working in

this regard. I also mention your denomination's Office of Reconciliation Ministries, which is an outreach ministry of Grace Communion International. Curtis May, whom we both know, runs that ministry, and it's a vital work that the denomination is developing, with Curtis as the leader of that. So that would be a work that people within the denomination and beyond could connect with to learn more on how to go forward in this regard.

Then there's the John M. Perkins Foundation in West Jackson, Mississippi. All these works are great resources to help along the lines of what we're talking about.

JMF: How does Trinitarian theology come to bear on this work?

PLM: In the context of consumerism, for example, we have to move beyond the commodification of human identity. What I mean by that is where we treat people as objects; we use them to get what we want. If you go back to the slave days, the trade triangle of sugar, slavery, and shipping, it was all bound up with what we might call materialism, or what have you. They needed slaves to get the sugar to put on the ships to send back to Europe, and it was the commodification, the using of people for financial value, financial gain.

We don't do that in the same context today, but when we use people for whatever means or end we have in sight, rather than seeing them as people having inherent dignity and value, as I was talking about before, even amongst the poor, we should look at them as equal. Especially among the poor! Looking at them as equal, rather than as people we can give to and look down upon and feel good about ourselves. That's commodifying them for our own spiritual growth, so to speak.

Trinitarian theology is about communion of persons, but we don't use people as means to the end, of individuals in isolation using people for our own individualistic gain, but really a communal reality, where we become the community of God reflecting what it means to be the people of the Triune God, three Persons in communion, giving sacrificially to one another for all eternity. That is the model, and the basis, and the foundation stone, and the inspiration for living life today.

Jesus Christ incarnate—what greater example could there ever be? He had everything—he who was rich became poor so that we could become the riches of God [2 Cor. 8:9], and he who knew no sin became sin so that we could become the righteousness of God [2 Cor. 5:21]. Instead of upward mobility and the yuppie dream, it's downward mobility and getting beyond homogeneity, of like attracting like—we move toward the “other” to embrace the other in all our

distinctiveness to build a community that's diverse and a profound example and illustration of what the kingdom of God that is dawning in our midst is all about.

JMF: In your book, you talk about “beyond moralism” and “beyond escapism.” What is that referring to?

PLM: With the “beyond moralism” aspect, I’m getting at the issue that it has to move beyond simply doing good deeds, because Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 talks about anything not done for love will profit us nothing. Even giving all of our possessions to the poor, surrendering our bodies to the flames, speaking in the tongues of men or angels, but having no love, it profits us nothing [1 Cor. 13:1-3].

In the context of dealing with the Corinthian church (where there wasn’t much love...and we’re talking about the works of the Spirit and the like), Paul puts it in the context of the moral axle, in a way, and says you can have all these things and do everything right, but if it’s not birthed from God’s love, which according to Paul comes from the Spirit’s movement in our hearts, that as Paul says in Romans 5:5, “The love of God is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

That changed heart creates faith, as I read the Bible, because Paul says, “I’ve been crucified with Christ,” Galatians 2:20, “and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me, who gave himself for me.” Faith is an empty hand. We don’t bring anything to the table. Luther said, “Faith is an empty hand.” Faith is created by God’s Spirit moving in our hearts giving us a new love, creating in us, instead of self-love where we turn inward on ourselves, the selfless love of God poured out from God into our lives, and that gets us from beyond self-concern to concern for others—especially those who can do nothing to elevate our own status—the distressed, the downtrodden.

But we go beyond rights, our own rights, and the like, and that will lead us into issues of getting beyond escapism out of concern for people who have no rights and benefitting them because of God’s compassionate loving overflow of salvation in our lives. The love-transformed heart births ethical action. Otherwise, it can be pharisaical; it can be just a “dutiful” Christianity. It has to be birthed from God’s love. That’s what I mean by living beyond moralism... the intent, and the heart transformation.

But some would take that to mean, “Okay, so as long as we have this heart transformed and feel different, things are fine, and then we don’t have to do anything about it.” No. If we’re truly

converted... It's not that we're supposed to analyze our spiritual navels and the like, but a true conversion will always lead toward care for the other. I think of Zacchaeus the tax collector. Jesus said, "Salvation has come to your house, Zacchaeus" [Luke 19:9], it's because he who had usurped people's significance, had taken money from them, had been a robber, so to speak, as a tax collector, he says, "I'm going to pay you back and then some and give bountifully to those whom I've taken from."

It's in that context that you see the transformation having fruit. The transformed heart always gives rise toward a life of concern for the other. That's what I mean by moving beyond escapism. Often our Christianity has been how to show non-Christians that Christians can have fun, too. I think that's a very weak view of what it means to be caring for others. While it's good to have fun, all the more important is to have love, and to be concerned for the needs of those in our community—especially in a culture so captured with affluenza. I think that the problems are intensifying.

JMF: Affluenza?

PLM: There was a PBS documentary a while back about the problems of affluenza, affluence, and how it's sickening our society. There's not a problem with having money, it's what you do with money that's the issue. Do we distribute our wealth to benefit all, or do we take it to ourselves like the rich fool and say, "I'm going to build more and more and more for myself," and God says, "Your life is going to be taken from you this night because you haven't been concerned for the things that are on my heart" [Luke 12:18-20].

If I'm concerned for what's on God's heart, that shows that I love God and have concern for his concerns, and I want to please him just because he loves me. It's not so I can find my merit or my worth ultimately, it's just because I'm captured with God's love and therefore I would want to give because he continues to give to me. It's gratitude, not guilt trip. It's not sense of obligation as in guilt, but that sense of obligation that comes from gratitude. I have a debt to pay to God's love which I could never repay, nor should I try, but that I would love on others as he has loved on us.

That's what Paul says: "The love of Christ compels us" [2 Cor. 5:14]. Jesus is saying, "Those who are forgiven much, love much" [Luke 7:47]. That's what we need to see in the American church. We've been too concerned for our own image and too concerned, in so many contexts, out of fear of having our rights taken away from us. It's all fear, fear, fear, and it's not

missional, it's all insular. That reflects to me a spirit not of God but a spirit... Paul says, "We have not been giving a spirit of timidity or fear, but a spirit of power, of love, and a sound mind, and discipline" [2 Tim. 1:7]. That's what we've been given, and so it should move us from even beyond seeking our own rights to seeking the rights of others.

As Karl Barth, whom I've written about, once said and once wrote, "A church that is always demanding its rights in the sphere of the state is a spiritually un-free church." What Dr. Perkins and I are about (somehow with our respective vocations and our partnership together) is not about somehow taking back America from our enemies, but laying down our lives as the church for those who have often been seen as those outcast and shunned by the church that we would have that concern, that compassionate concern of co-existence and of the sacrificial love of the Savior poured out through the Holy Spirit.

JMF: You've also written about Karl Barth in *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular Through the Theology of Karl Barth*, published in 2003 by Eerdmans. What does Barth bring to the question of Christ and culture in this context?

PLM: Barth is often misunderstood in terms of his engagement and understanding and reflections on culture. He's often looked on as a despiser of culture. It's an issue, a problem, in Barth studies that hasn't gone away readily. One of the things that I wanted to show (and others have done this in certain contexts as well) is that Barth had a very nuanced, multi-faceted approach to engaging culture. There's much there that is advantageous to someone who is seeking to develop a theology of culture.

A key part of my work is on the theology of culture. That's not just systematic theology, which is dealing systematically with the various themes in church doctrine. With theology of culture, it's focused even more on the matter of "What does that entail for how we engage in our contemporary cultural context?" and seeing that all theology, every aspect of theology, always arises within a cultural context.

That doesn't mean it's relativized, as some would fear, but it means it's particularized—these things aren't coming out of a hat like a rabbit—they're not pulled out willy-nilly in that way. They arise, whether people are conscious of it or not, from a cultural context. Every theology is that way, so we need to be aware of it and be attentive to it, so that we can engage thoughtfully and meaningfully the biblical text, and bringing that home to how we engage in contemporary culture.

One other point along those lines... John Stott, the famous Anglican evangelical minister, said that evangelicals are very good at engaging the Bible, but not so good on engaging culture. Liberals are good at engaging culture, but not so good on engaging the Bible. As ministers of God's word, we need to be concerned for both. As Barth said, having one finger in the bold print of the Bible and the other in the bold print of the daily newspaper. We need to be in those two worlds, bridging those two worlds as ministers of the gospel.

Barth had a multi-faceted approach to culture, and all of his theology arises within various cultural contexts, because it was written over many decades and developed. He was responding in one way or another to the situations that he faced, such as Hitler in Nazi Germany. Barth was one of the key opponents of the Hitler regime.

Barth would often attack "cultural Christianity," but it wasn't that Barth lacked an appreciation for culture in its various manifestations, such as Mozart. He had a great appreciation for the music of Mozart, which is striking to people and puzzling to many, because Mozart was a Mason, was perhaps a nominal Roman Catholic, and Barth was a Protestant theologian, and what might he see in someone like Mozart? He saw him as the theologian of providence par excellence in terms of his music. Barth would listen every day to Mozart's music.

Barth was a great student of politics. He read and studied on politics and spoke to issues throughout his theological career, on the issues of the Soviet Union, democracy, what was going on in Hitler's Germany and beyond...working with the miners in their crisis in his early days as a pastor in Switzerland, where he was from.

Barth was engaging culture in a variety of ways—not always negatively, sometimes constructively and positively. That was one of the things I wanted to bring out in the book — showing this multi-faceted approach. There's a famous book by H. Richard Niebuhr called *Christ and Culture*, and it has merit in terms of certain typologies, but I also think it's lacking. I've written on this with my colleague, Brad Harper, in our new book *Exploring Ecclesiology*, where I deal with Niebuhr's categories and see they have a place, because you can use them to classify. But Barth's model doesn't quite fit any of Niebuhr's categories. It's not Christ against culture, it's not Christ of culture, it's not even necessarily Christ transforming culture, to use Niebuhr's categories. There is a *sui generis* [one of a kind] quality to Barth's work. It's very multi-faceted, and he was a complex theologian.

Those are some of the things that intrigued me about Barth, including his opposition to

Hitler, because the work of most theologians is not taken seriously in terms of having much say in the broader sphere. Barth's work did have that kind of import for the political issues of his day. I don't think we should politicize the faith, where we use the faith to baptize this or that political party, but the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ does impact all kinds of political issues.

When Jesus said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" [John 18:36], he wasn't saying, "My kingdom is irrelevant"—he was saying, "I'm not going to be manhandled by you, but my kingdom will intersect, will call into question, will judge your culture and even your reign and rule, Pilate, because I am a king of a different kingdom and that kingdom is coming, and it will be the eschatological reign of God in Christ's person." I appreciate that in Barth's thought—he had a robust theology that had import for all kinds of issues in his day, and I believe also beyond.

I'd like to talk to that issue of how his theology, in many respects, gives rise to a missional engagement in a post-Christian America. When I talk about missional Christianity, I don't mean a church with a missions program. You can have a missions program and not be missional, because you're not thinking about how to engage the world around you—you just have a program and everything has to fit inside that mold. When I talk about being missional, it's getting outside of our doors, trying to think in a way, communicate in a way...not that necessarily people are going to agree with it, but at least they understand.

We don't want Jesus to be the stumbling block, he *is* the stumbling block, and we have to deal with him, too. I don't want to be the stumbling block. I don't want to be an obstacle to faith, but Jesus will be a stumbling block to people, and I don't want to stand in the way of Jesus in one way or another. So when we're talking about missional, it doesn't mean tickling people's ears, it doesn't mean being politically correct, but it does mean presenting the gospel in ways that people around us can understand and can engage meaningfully, constructively.

The evangelical movement in the church at large in America, if anyone's reading the newspapers and listening to the airwaves and reading carefully, people are going to see that in our scene, America's changing rapidly. A lot of Christians are threatened by what they see as the rise of secularism in America—things may not be going politically, ethically where many evangelicals would like them to go. It depends on which aspect one's thinking of.

I'm glad, I'm thrilled that we've had the civil rights movement. I think there's been progress

there for America. Some Christians don't seem to take all that too seriously and just think everything's getting worse. In some ways, things are getting better. But secularism, nonetheless, is on the rise. There's a lot of talk today about Christianity and religion in general being antagonistic and not good for the common good, and evangelical Christians and Christians more broadly in America... We've moved from the Simpson-esque version of the evangelical Christian and the Christian as Ned Flanders, if you're familiar with that...you know, nice guy, a bit naïve...to looking more like a fascist. We're made to look like Adolf Hitler, that we're antagonistic toward the common good, rather than caring for our society at large.

How do we engage in that context? Do we close the doors and retreat and develop even more a fortress mentality, which I hear about? This is a challenge to people, and I ask people to keep thinking and keep dialoging. But all this talk about going back to the religion of our founding fathers... I really struggle with that, because not all of our founding fathers (this is one of these delicate issues) were God-fearing biblical Christians. There were many Deists in the American government. Thomas Jefferson was no Bible-believing Christian. He had a cut-and-paste Reader's Digest version of the Bible. He cut out the miracles. We didn't have just the government and American culture at large filled with Bible-believing, God-fearing Christians. There were some of those, that was a big part, but there were a lot of other sectors. We've always dealt with this.

I like what John Perkins said, "If we go back to the religion of our founding fathers, I'm still a slave, and I don't want to be that." It's this funny historiography about what we value and what we think is meritorious and that we want to go back there. I want to live *now*. I want to engage in biblical Christianity now, and I feel that there's this fear of losing "our rights," losing our power. I don't see Jesus or Paul and others having that fear factor. As a Christian, I want to influence my society, and to the extent I can, influence government in the ways that I think honor the society at large.

In the light of that Barth statement, I think he was reflecting on Scripture when he said, "The church that demands its rights in the sphere of the state is a spiritually un-free church." There's that fear of rights, and our rights, and you've got to preserve those rights. We're not caring for the other. We're not caring especially for the dispossessed, like a William Wilberforce, the leader of England's parliament on the race issue—he lost his wealth. His life was threatened numerous times because he was willing to use all of his affluence and influence for the sake of

people who could not benefit him—the slaves. That speaks volumes to me.

That's the kind of evangelical Christianity we need—not because we're trying to tickle ears, but because God is moving in our midst, and we're willing to lay it down, like Esther in the Old Testament, where Mordecai says, “Who is to say that you weren't raised up for a very hour like this, Esther? [Esther 4:14] Do not preserve your role as queen to gain more affluence and wealth and influence. Give your life for the people, otherwise God might dispose of you and put someone else in as queen.” Esther's response should be all of our responses, “If I die, I die” [v. 16]. She put her life on the line for the sake of her oppressed people with Haman's holocaust ambitions.

That's the kind of sense of urgency we need to have—not taking back the centers of power from the left or the secularist and the atheists. I want righteousness and I want good government. Sometimes I think that there are people who are non-believers who have a better sense of that than we do, though. Our greatest concern should be how can we live compassionately and live of ourselves, because then we should influence as much as we possibly can.

Jesus and Paul and others, they didn't have this “moral majority.” They didn't have places of power and affluence. The church often works best as a missional outpost where we haven't been given power, and we have to depend on the power of the cross. As Paul says, “The cross is foolishness and it's weakness to most, but it is the power and wisdom of God.” 1 Corinthians 1:18, 24. That excites me, that challenges me. I long for us as the church in America to move into that sphere of engagement. I think Barth's theology resonates with that and gives a theological platform for cultural engagement along those lines in a post-Christian context.

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Consumer Christians, and God's Love

JMF: I'd like to talk about your book *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*. You edited this book and worked on bringing the authors together. What themes did you see emerge in the preparation of this book?

PLM: I'd like to preface that by saying a little bit about what the book did in terms of bringing together these respective contributors and what the aim of the book was. It was to bring together many contributors who shared interest, passion, conviction on the subject of Trinitarian theology and to look at most, if not all, the major doctrines in what is called systematic theology from the vantage point of Trinitarian thought.

For example, prolegomena, which is first steps in theology, the first foundational guidelines of how you're going to do theology. What does that look like from a Trinitarian perspective? The doctrine of revelation, what does that look like? The doctrine of the image of God or the divine attributes or perfections, the sacraments or ordinances, and on it went, to ethics. We dealt with various subjects, sin and grace, all from this vantage point of Trinitarian theology. That was the aim of the book, and I was encouraged by the consistency and the integrity of the work as a whole with the different contributors and the themes that appeared and continue to appear.

That brings us to the question you were asking. I think a key thing that would appear at various points would be *participation* — participation in the triune life of God (and we'll come to that later as we're discussing issues of grace and how that gets us beyond legalism and even burnout in ministry, things of that sort) but that issue of participation in Christ. God does everything through the Son and the Spirit. That is a key aspect of Trinitarian thought.

Colin Gunton (the book was dedicated to his memory as a Trinitarian theologian) liked to quote Irenaeus, the second-century theologian who said that "God does everything through his

two hands, the Son and the Spirit.” That was a key framework, a key aspect that continued to appear — that God works always through the personal mediation of the Son and Spirit. The personal dynamic — the interpersonal nature of God — has import for how we live, for issues like revelation, where we look at the Bible relationally. We understand sin and grace...non-relational in the case of sin, from a relational perspective in the case of grace. All those things came into play...and atonement — understanding the atonement from the standpoint of this Trinitarian relational matrix.

Those are some of the themes that appeared and reappeared in the book. Others have said that they felt that it was a fitting tribute to Professor Gunton, who was my theological mentor from my doctrinal studies days and whom I miss dearly... He’s had an impact on multitudes of people across the world. I’m just grateful for the privilege of having worked under his supervision for a time.

JMF: I’m sure a lot of people will find that book both encouraging as well as a great resource for understanding Trinitarian theology and its practical impact. Your latest book is *Exploring Ecclesiology*, which you co-authored with Brad Harper, and it’s subtitled *An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction*. Can you tell us about that one?

PLM: The book *Exploring Ecclesiology* is framed by way of a Trinitarian and eschatological vantage point. Those are the two angles, if you will, from which we approach all the different subjects that you would hope to find in an introductory text on the doctrine of the church, which is ecclesiology, the study of the church. We deal with the sacraments or the ordinances, when we deal with issues of order in ministry, worship, and culture, and mission all from the standpoint, in one way or another, from a Trinitarian and kingdom vantage point.

Dr. Brad Harper did his work (on George Ladd) from the University of St. Louis for his doctrinal studies. So that Laddian paradigm of the “now and not yet” enters into play when we look at the church. In many contexts, especially amongst dispensationalists in America (I have a great respect for dispensationalism, and I teach at a school that’s historically that, but...) often those in the dispensational tradition have not seen the church itself as a kingdom community because [in their thought] the kingdom is all future and it’s Israel.

So this was unique in that sense, to talk about the gospel of the kingdom, the church is the community, the eschatological community of the Triune God, and that has practical import when you’re talking about such issues as race and the like. I have alluded to this in some of our

previous segments — the church must live now in light of what will be. So we use Harper’s words, thus bringing the future into the present. We live now in light of that eschatological reality in the present context — the now of the not yet, so to speak. The church must be seen, as others have argued, as a concrete manifestation of the eschatological kingdom.

There is also that aspect of Trinitarian thought in that we must see ourselves (this is how the book starts out with the first chapter) as a *being*-driven community. The first chapter is “the church as a Trinitarian community,” the church as a kingdom community, so to speak...and so the church as a Trinitarian community, the being-driven church. While I think that Pastor Warren’s purposes for *Purpose Driven Church* are biblical, I don’t see a problem with them, I think more foundational than purpose and activity is *being*, communion, relationality.

We should all be purposeful, but you can be purposeful in a variety of ways. What about the baby who doesn’t have much purpose in life, or the elderly person who’s not able to function very well? They might not be seen to have much purpose, but they’re still loved, and they’re in relationship, I would hope, in the church. But we often look at people pragmatically, in a utilitarian way, of what benefit we can gain from them if they attend our church? What are they going to put in the offering plate, or what kind of tools or gifting might they have? We want people to bring their resources and gifts and talents to the church, but do we care for them as persons in relationship?

We have all these churches that are called “community church,” but, as a friend of mine in London said, “The very thing people want most they find most difficult to give — communion.” We all want it, but it’s costly, and it causes for a lot of consternation, because we usually don’t want to build the kind of community that’s needed, and that calls for a lot of sacrifice.

Relationality must be at the core. The Trinitarian framework of our churches being the people of God — because that’s what we are biblically, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the body and bride of Christ, those things, the household of God. Most of those images, if not all of them, are framed relationally, organically, and not by way of institutional frames of reference.

I hope that as we’re inviting people to our churches, that they’re coming not because we have the best programs in town, which I think can play into the consumerism — who has the best children’s programs, who has the best latté, who has the best coffee bar, on and on it goes. Instead of that frame of reference, it should be “come be the people of God with us,” — participational, relational. That’s key to the book.

Yet, as George Hunsberger, a leading figure on missional theology, has said, “So often in America the church is viewed as a vender of religious goods and services...” It’s the commodification of human identity [turning people into commodities] and of spirituality and of consumerism. What we’re trying to get at is that the church is the human community, the people of the Triune God, and we must live as that people in the here and now.

I will mention one other point that brings us into the issue of contemporary cultural considerations, and, as you mentioned in the introduction at a few points in our various talks, I edit a journal called *Cultural Encounters*, which is a biblically informed Trinitarian engagement of contemporary culture and its various manifestations. I have a real burden for that, and it flows out of an institute I direct called “New Wine, New Wineskins” at Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland.

With that cultural framing, we did a lot of the chapters, follow-up sections, as well as a major chapter in exploring ecclesiology, from this cultural vantage point. In America the church is often seen as a voluntary association of religious individuals whose true allegiance lies with the state, the market, or the nuclear family rather than being seen as the people of the Triune God, the kingdom community of the Triune God. I think we need to move beyond that idea of voluntary association of religious individuals where we pick and choose the churches we want to attend and we find our true identity with the state, the market, or even the soccer family motif, of finding that people are more connected to those after-school or weekend programs than they are to being part of the people of God. There are many reasons why that’s a problem — partly the way America is framed from its founding but also a contemporary consumer problem.

These themes emerge and re-emerge in the book. We’re hopeful that it will be of help not only to evangelicalism but to the broader church as well, because it is also an ecumenical book concerned for the church at large. We’re hopeful that it will help the evangelical community become more ecclesiastically framed. With all of our emphasis on individuality, it’s hard for us to see the church as something other than the people of God. We so readily look at it as a means to an end of helping our own individual spirituality, and God’s concern is first and foremost for the church. I’m not the bride of Christ, I’m not the body of Christ, I’m *part* of the bride, I’m *part* of the body. The church’s concerns must file away at my own concerns in the church.

JMF: What advice would you give pastors who want to shift their focus from legalism to grace, from an inward kind of a theology to a Trinitarian theology?

PLM: As it relates to the doctrine of the church and the like? I think for one, when we're talking about the church as the kingdom community of the Triune God and God as a holy lover, we must always see that we have to get beyond this idea of sin management — that we're going to church to manage our sin, to keep it under lock and key and close the doors. In fact, we don't even deal with our sin in the church. There's a lot of dysfunction. It's like being an alcoholic. (I have friends and loved ones who struggle in that way, so I don't mean this in any demeaning manner, but they don't talk, don't feel, don't think about these things.) That pertains to a variety of issues in the church. We don't have safety, we don't have authenticity, and we have to create a safe environment where people can be authentic and really deal with issues.

One of the things we get at in *Exploring Ecclesiology* is that we need to see the church as not simply a sanctuary of saints but also a hospital for sinners. As Martin Luther made clear, we are both unrighteous apart from Christ but also righteous — but only in Christ. So we have to keep that dialectic in mind, if we're to move beyond behavioral Christianity. We have to acknowledge that we're all broken people saved by God's loving grace, and we're on this journey together. We're not finished products, and we need to love one another and see truth and holiness relationally.

So also with truth, instead of having a guard-keeping mentality of gate-keeping, and if anyone doesn't line up theologically, we're going to oust them, using doctrine as a means of how do we help people grow in the truth of Jesus Christ? We need to have a mindset that we're about relational truth, not truth as some kind of doctrinal position that we simply recite and stick on a wall. No, it's articulating what it is we believe and the reality of God in whom we participate. It's from a relational framework.

I believe that does help us get beyond behaviorism and legalism and to really work with people...disclosing to them first and foremost in preaching and in other ways this idea of who God is revealed in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, as God is a holy lover and is someone who longs to have communion with us. To understand who we are as the church in relationship to that God, I think that's exciting and where I would hope that pastors would increasingly move to invite people to taste and see that the Lord is good in the communion of his saints.

JMF: If there was one main thing that you'd like to get across to people about God, what would that be?

PLM: I would long for people to know, and not simply to know cognitively, but to know

experientially, that God and Christ truly loves them. I look out at the faces of people when I share about God's holy love for us in Christ and the Spirit and that God loves us dearly, and I can often see in people's eyes a longing, a sense of longing, "If only that were true, I wish that were true, I want that to be true." We live in a culture today where there's so much dysfunction in the family and in society at large, people don't know what it's like to be loved, to be cared for faithfully and for the long term, for the long haul. Show me a child who is secure, and I'll show you a child who is loved. Show me a child who's insecure, and I'll show you a child who has not been loved.

The apostle Paul, when he was Saul, was all about trying to perform, was all about trying to gain merit and worth and security. I think he struggled with these Pharisaical teachers about the circumcision laws, who were trying to take people away from security in Christ toward insecurity, and Paul was all about moving beyond that, because he had been in that frame of reference for such a long time. Jesus would come on the Damascus road and love him, transform him, make him his own, make him someone who had a calling, a purpose, and life in him. Those who are forgiven much love much.

I've often had, and still struggle with, insecurities. It's often in my hard times — not the good times, in my hard times, that I have found that God truly loves me and that God comes close. When I'm thinking, "If I go through these hard times, how will I ever make it?" I have found time and time again that he is there to sustain and to lift me up and to draw me into a closer relationship with him through his Son. I don't mean this as "pie in the sky" impractical spirituality. This is, to me, the most important thing.

For the people I mentor in the internship program with New Wine, New Wineskins, the thing I want for them is what I want for myself too, is that whenever they're ministering, from whatever vantage point, it's not that they're trying to measure up and to make something of their lives, but everything would be not from measuring up, but from the measureless overflow of God's love in Christ. Again, Romans 5:5. I love coming back to that text. It was a key text to Luther, a key text to Jonathan Edwards, and a key text to Saint Augustine. "The love of God is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

It's that love that creates faith, because if a child doesn't trust the parent, they're not going to believe in that parent. If they don't think that that parent loves them, they're not going to trust. It's only when they know that their parent cares for them and is living it out, that the child really

trusts. It's important for ministry, vitally important. How many people are in our chairs, in the pews, in the pulpits, who really don't think God loves them? They're performing in order to try to get at that. I can't wave a magic wand and make that happen for people. I think it comes through the trenches, the difficulties of life experiences, and being loved by other people in the church. What we need is people who come alongside us and say, just as Christ has accepted us, Romans 15:7, "So I accept you."

I had a very painful past. I was rebellious as a youth and went through a lot of self-doubt going into the ministry. A pastor, mentor of mine, said, "I accept you, Paul, and I love you, and I care for you, and I believe God's hand is upon you." He spoke the words of Christ to me in the love of Christ, and mentored me and secured me in that love because God does use his people to that end. We need one another to confess our sins to one another, as the New Testament talks about, and also to encourage and exhort one another, but from a relational vantage point of moving forward participating in the triune life of God and his story, and that we're a part of that story. It's amazing to me. That's good news.

JMF: Where do you see the church, or where would you like to see the church in general in the U.S. ten years from now?

PLM: I hope that as the church...I long for this, I pray for this...that we would be beyond the performance frame of reference of the driven-ness toward success. While I want us to be good stewards, I think a lot of times we're trying to play the role of God in the numbers games that we play, and one church competing with another church.

It's often subtle, sometimes not so subtle, but performance-based spirituality. Pastors go to conferences; the question that's often asked of them is, "How big is your church?" If their church is small, they lose value. That's the kind of thing that is really problematic. Then that pastor brings that pressure back to the churches, and then they start viewing people as means to an end of growing the church, rather than they themselves are the end as the church — the people of God are.

For an academic like myself, is it publish or perish? Or is the writing I do simply gratitude of delighting in God's love and having a burden to express that, and not looking to how I can build my resume? I have the struggles, too, pastors have their own struggles, but then, how does that shape itself in the lives of parishioners in the congregations — that performance of measuring up, measuring up, and not making, not making it?

The call to sanctification in the churches should not be, don't be who you *are* — be what you're *supposed* to be. That's not how the apostle Paul spoke. It was, "Be who you are, not what you once were." We're calling on people to be who they are in Christ, and to be that together with them, and to move into that safety and authenticity bound up with the holy love of God in Christ that secures us in the Spirit poured out in our lives and in our hearts. That's what I would hope for the church to move into, and the reconciliation that that entails on subjects as we've talked before on moving beyond racism and classism divisions and the like, and moving toward a unity that's a reconciled unity in the power of the Spirit to the honor of Jesus for the Father.

JMF: What do you see as some of the causes for legalism and behaviorism in Christian churches?

PLM: I believe people-pleasing is a huge problem. I think of the Gospel of John. I'm working on a book on that subject with InterVarsity, and one of the things that keeps coming up is that they love the praise or the glory of humans rather than the praise and glory of God, whereas Jesus loved the Father's praise. He longed for the Father's affirmation. He had it — it wasn't something he had to go and seek after, but that's what concerned him is, was he pleasing his Father. That filial connection, that love relationship of the Father and Son, it kept Jesus immune to people-pleasing in his human state. It kept him from that evil.

Paul says strongly in the Galatians epistle, "Am I now trying to win the approval of men or of God? If I am still trying to win the approval of men, I am not a servant of Christ." He says, "You foolish Galatians, having begun in the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" He talks in that same book about how he had to rebuke Peter because Peter would not associate with the Gentiles in table fellowship, because he was afraid of the Judaizers, or what his own people might think of him, and that enslaved him to a godless passion.

As Martin Luther and others have talked about, we need to be enslaved to a godly passion controlled by the Spirit. That's not legalism, because those who are controlled by the Spirit, they're not enslaved to the law of sin and death, but they live by the fruit of the Spirit, "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law." Again, that comes from the book of Galatians. People pleasing, I think, causes us to look inward, trying to compensate, trying to cope, because we're trying to win the approval of people who are out to win their own approval. That's not freeing — that's enslaving in a very dysfunctional manner. People-pleasing is a huge problem.

There's also the legalism that's bound up with performance-based spirituality. One of the things that Trinitarian theology involves is this key theme of participation. We've talked about it in different segments, but my own dean, Dr. Robert Redman, has talked about how there's so much ministry burnout...people talking about what they need to do for God, what they must do for God in ministry, instead of what they do *in* God. You know, "Abide in me and my word...abide in you." You know, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." "Apart from me you can do nothing," Jesus says.

So it's participation. We live *in* God, not simply live *for* God. God doesn't even see us simply through Christ, he sees us *in* Christ. Paul's key phrase, "*en Christos*," in Christ. That would be the vantage point that guards us from legalism. It guards us from a performance-based spirituality. I'm excited about what's going on in your own movement. I believe it's a movement of God's Spirit. I seldom see a vibrant concern for Trinitarian theology, and I cannot say enough how encouraged I am by what you're doing, and I encourage you and those who work with you, Mike, to keep moving in this direction, because you're an encouragement to me, you're a good challenge to me and to many others to keep the faith and to press on in terms of Trinitarian thought, because it's not life-taking, it's life-giving.

It's made all the difference in the world to me because it's not a program, it's not a product that we sell to people — this is our God! God is a triune communion of persons — eternal, holy, life-giving, and he calls us to participate in God's story for eternity. That is what I'm willing to live and die for. This is good news to me, and you guys are leading the charge by the Spirit of God leading through you to move in this direction. I can only pray God's richest blessings on you in this profound work, so thank you.

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