

CHURCHES! TIME MACHINES! A GOSPEL APOLOGETIC!

JONATHAN LEEMAN PRESENTS

WE COME IN PEACE!

This article is taken from issue 07 of *Primer*, entitled *Show & Tell*. The issue explores the meaning and role of apologetics, and also includes contributions from William Edgar, Gavin McGrath, Matthew Peckham and Dan Strange. Learn more at PrimerHQ.com

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Imagine thousands, even tens of thousands, of alien ships suddenly appearing around the globe. Government officials and police forces cautiously move in. News channels carry the images to stunned faces in restaurants, offices, and homes.

Yet the doors of the ships open, and ordinary men and women walk out. They speak the language of whatever country they land in. They wear the clothes of those countries. “We’re not from another planet,” they say. “We’re from the earth’s future. We represent a day when one kingdom will cover the whole planet, like the waters cover the sea.”

The ships are not alien spacecraft but time machines.

Their message about a planet-sized kingdom sounds both far-fetched and menacing. Once a week they will gather at their time machines for further instruction and for rehearsing the message of this coming kingdom through song and prayer. But they explain that they mean no harm. They will live among us peacefully and quietly. “And you’re welcome to join us!” they cheerfully add.

These citizens of a future kingdom have come, they continue, to share a message about the love and judgment of their king and to demonstrate that message with their lives. They claim we have offended their king and that we need to be reconciled to him. Apparently, he lived on our planet a couple of thousand years ago and was an incarnation of God himself. Then he died to pay the penalty for wrongdoing and rose from the grave.

It’s a strange message, to be sure. Yet as weeks, then months, then years pass, we have the opportunity to watch these folks live out their message. What does it look like when it’s lived out?

From our perspective, some things are attractive, other things are offensive.

They commit to each other and watch over each other. They love and make sacrifices for each other. They don’t kill their babies or their elderly. They work at caring for their spouses and children through ups and downs. They don’t just care for one another’s needs, but the needs of our people. They share their goods. They pursue justice for the oppressed and comfort for the

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hurting. They practice business in a way that benefits every party, not just themselves, nor depends on maintaining a permanent underclass. They are continual learners, reading their Book and books about their Book.

All that's good, but the good comes with an underbelly of criticism toward us and our world. No, we cannot kill our babies. No, we cannot sleep with whomever we want. No, we cannot define ourselves, our gender, or our plans willy-nilly. No, we cannot offer bribes or fiddle the books or skimp on taxes or exploit every advantage for personal gain. Yes, we have to give. Yes, we have to obey the law. Yes, we have to be patient with the hurting. Yes, we have to apologise for wrongdoing and admit that we're self-centred and give all that up. Perhaps most offensively of all, they propose that we become one of *them*, citizens of the future.

Who do they think they are? It's presumptuous, arrogant, ignorant, exclusivist, intolerant!

They say they're not revolutionaries. They don't want to overthrow the government or topple the markets. But the way they live – and by example call us to live – could undermine our governments and markets. Certainly, whole industries would crumble if we lived like them. And many governments would have to change their way of doing business.

They're a funny people, to say the least. They're nice on the surface, but they don't live and let live. There's an edge to everything they do. An agenda. They both love and condemn, hug and hit, you might say. There's something right and humane about them, admittedly, but there's something obnoxious and threatening, too. At best, these people are weird.

THE CHURCH IS A TIME MACHINE

That is, the thought that the new creation has already broken into the present age. For more on this, see Stephen Witmer's article in *Primer* issue 05.

Hopefully, the connections I want to make are obvious. Local churches – your congregation and mine – are those time machines. The gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit have broken into history and established them as embassies of the end times. The rule of Christ will be universally and fully visible at the end of the age. Yet local churches offer glimpses of Christ's rule now locally. The life and structures and fellowship of particular congregations are the *already* in the *already/not yet* of inaugurated eschatology.

Churches possess an ambassadorial message: “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20). And that message should be matched by a counter-cultural community: “go out from their midst, and be separate from them... bringing holiness to completion” (2 Cor 6:17, 7:1).

What I'd like to emphasise in this piece is the apologetic role the life of a church plays in giving credit to our message. The most powerful apologetic

for the gospel, the thing that gives credit to the evangelistic message once it's spoken, will generally not be a philosophical argument, whether evidentialist or presuppositionalist. It will be the loving and holy life of a people in community, a church:

John 13:34-35

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

People will recognise our membership in Christ not by our love for them, says the verse, but by our love for one another.

Want to convince unbelievers that our views on sexuality are not bigoted and intolerant? It's not just the clever articles we write that will convince them. It will be flourishing adolescents, singles, and marriages, where those who stumble into this or that temptation find themselves meaningfully embraced by a new-creation family.

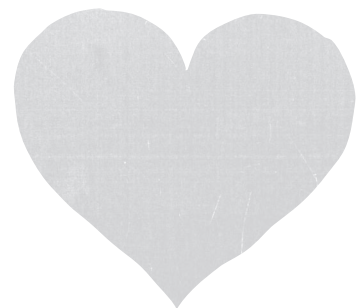
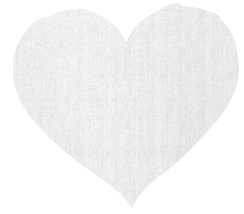
Want to convince them that what the Bible says about male leadership in home and church is not oppressive? Write books on this topic, sure, but, more than that, consider what it takes to cultivate a culture of happy, strong, and engaged women.

Want to undermine the claim that Christians don't care about justice? Then preach the word, all of it, and cultivate a culture of discipling and good deeds, where congregations present a picture of true justice and righteousness, both within themselves and spilling outward.

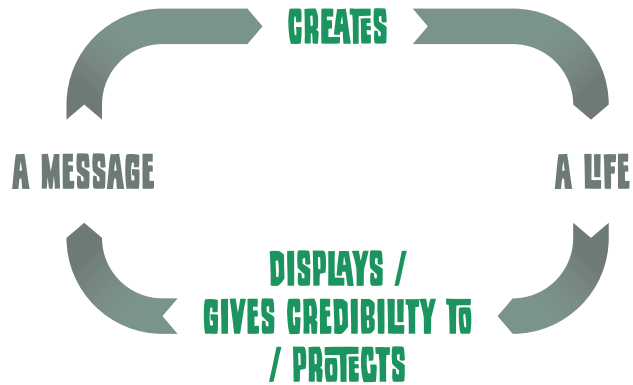
Even with all of this, some people will hate what they see. Living by the law of God contradicts the law of fallen hearts. Therefore, they will "insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matt 5:11).

Yet as they revile they will experience an inner dissonance. Their natures were designed by God, and they were made to prosper best when living by his law. Something inside of them will testify against their reviling (see Rom 1:20-21). And then some, wonderfully, will be drawn to what they observe. They will "see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:16).

The point in all of this is that we, the saints, must be distinct – like salt. What good is salt if it loses its saltiness? You might as well throw it out (Matt 5:13). It's ironic, then, that so many books and conferences for church leaders emphasise the topic of relevance, as if our challenge is showing the world that we're like them. In fact, the main challenge for churches today is the same challenge God's people have experienced ever since wandering in the wilderness: not being like the nations, but being distinct from them.



The relationship between our *message* and our *life* looks like this:

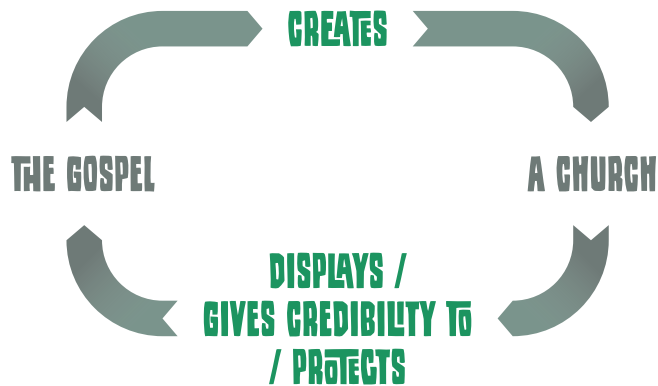


A message creates a life. And that life in turn displays the message, gives credibility to the message, protects the message. In short, it acts as an apologetic or defence for the message.

Churches need – the nations need – messages and lives from the future. We all need a glimpse of what *will be* based on *what we are* based on what Christ *has done*.

THE GOSPEL & A CHURCH

Speaking of what Christ has done, we need to use more specific words than the generic “message” and “life.” The Bible locates the dynamic interplay we just observed between message and life in the relationship between the gospel message and the local community of believers we call a church, like this:



The gospel creates a church. And a church displays, gives credibility to, and protects the gospel. People can become Christians apart from the church, but apart from the church they will have difficulty displaying and giving credibility to the gospel message. They will have difficulty protecting the message in their own life or in the lives of others.

Think of all those people who call themselves Christians because they heard and embraced the gospel message, but who try to live the Christian life apart from membership in a local church. They *might* be Christians. But at best they're ineffective Christians. They don't present an attractive witness in their workplace or homes. Their lives are slightly cleaned up versions of non-Christian lives. Therefore, their children don't follow them into Christianity, nor do their friends. The gospel's witness is unprotected. It's not durable. It lasts maybe one generation.

For instance, I think of my friend Jared (not his real name). He calls himself a Christian. He can give an orthodox explanation of the faith. But he's reluctant to bind himself to any one church. Instead, he plans meals and coffees with a number of Christian friends from different churches, most of whom are his age and share his socio-economic status and political opinions. Generally, they reinforce Jared's opinions of himself, partly because he refuses to hear otherwise. And little by little I've been watching Jared adopt unorthodox views of Scripture in order to support his preferred sexual lifestyle. If Jared really is a Christian – and I'm not sure that he is – he's radically undermining the gospel's would-be impact on his life and in the lives of others. He certainly is not extending the gospel's reach by making disciples.

Jesus gave us churches, among other things, to preserve the gospel and to make it shine. Churches are like the gold prongs of an engagement ring, Mark Dever has said. They hold the diamond of the gospel in place. Imagine instead a man who gives an unattached diamond to his fiancée, and then she keeps the diamond in her pockets. Eventually that diamond will fall through a hole or end up in the laundry. So it is among those who are wise-in-their-own-eyes and try to live the gospel outside a church.

Yet the connection between the gospel and a church is not merely a pragmatic one. Christians shouldn't join churches simply because it's good for us. We join churches because that's what we *are* – members of the body of Christ. Peter says, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:10). Notice that receiving God's mercy – becoming a Christian – happens simultaneously with becoming God's people.

Justifying church involvement principally on a pragmatic basis runs deep among Protestants. John Calvin, for instance, begins the very first paragraph of his book on the church this way. We gain Christ by faith, he says in the first sentence. The second sentence follows: "Since, however, in our ignorance and sloth...we need outward helps to beget and increase faith within us, and advance it to its goal, God has also added these aids that he may provide for our weakness." And these aids are preaching, the sacraments, pastors and teachers, the church, and its governance. In other words, he encourages us to unite ourselves to churches for the pragmatic good that they will do. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV.i.1 (Battles 2:1011-12).



Or think of the two ‘buts’ in Ephesians 2. First is the “But God” pointing to our vertical reconciliation with Christ, where God raises us up and seats us in the heavenly places (2:1-10). Second is the “But now in Christ Jesus” pointing to the horizontal reconciliation between Jew and Gentile, where those who were far off are brought near and become one new man (2:11-22). Being covenantally united to God means being covenantally united to God’s people. Horizontal reconciliation necessarily follows the vertical. Mom and dad adopt me from the orphanage then bring me home where I discover new brothers and sisters.

In short, the gospel does not just create individual Christians. It creates a community, a family, a body. The gospel is church-shaped.

And don’t miss how concrete that community must be. The gospel doesn’t merely create a vague “warm thoughts toward our worldwide brotherhood” community. It creates a concrete covenanted-together, geographically-located, accountability-providing list of actual names that we call a local church. Hey look, there’s brother Bob, sister Sue, and deacon Dev. We don’t get to choose our fellow church members or their problems like we get to choose our friends. Rather, we’re stuck with whoever joins the church, like brothers and sisters at the dinner table. Joining or covenanting with a local church is how we “put on” our membership in the new covenant body of Christ, just like we “put on” our covenantal righteousness in Christ by pursuing righteousness. Don’t tell me you’re righteous in Christ if you’re not pursuing a life of righteousness. Likewise, don’t tell me you belong to the family of God if you’re not showing up at the family dinner table. I need to know your name, and you need to know mine, in order for us to keep each other accountable in the gospel.

In other words, the gospel doesn’t just create the Church – capital C. It creates churches – small c. It comes into your life and mine and gives us a *new identity* (son, brother, sister) and makes *new demands*. Formally speaking, the gospel demands that we wear the Jesus nametag on our lapels (so to speak) by being baptised into his name (Matt 28:19). The gospel requires us to gather with other believers in his name so that we might jointly exercise the keys of the kingdom, that is, affirm publicly the *what* and the *who* of the gospel, confessions and confessors (Matt 16:13-20; 18:15-20). It demands that we gather regularly together, both to affirm one another as one body as we partake of the one bread as well as to spur one another on to love and good deeds (1 Cor 10:17; Heb 10:25). It requires us to submit to our leaders as men who will give an account (Heb 13:17). Informally, the gospel demands that we love and care and correct and feed and give and warn and disciple and evangelise and abide as a family throughout the week.

So *become* what you *are* by joining a church. You are no longer just an “I.” God has made you a “we.”

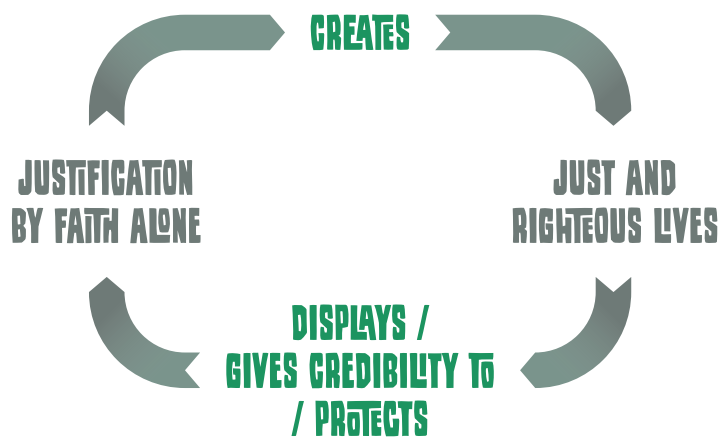
In other words, the gospel possesses an intrinsic social dynamic, and that dynamic is the local church. A local church is a presentation of the gospel, a picture of the gospel, the outworking of the gospel, the gospel on display. And in all of these ways it works as an apologetic for the gospel.

I think of Ryan, an atheist, who grew up with Christian friends in Texas. He partied with them on Friday and Saturday nights, but then watched them attend church on Sunday mornings. Their hypocrisy turned him off from Christianity. Then after college in Washington DC, his family entered a series of crises. My church first cared for his mother, who became a Christian. Then it cared for him and his twin brother, who followed their mother into salvation. What struck Ryan, according to his testimony, was how well the church had cared for his mother as well as how the members looked after each other. It was dramatically different than the churches he had witnessed as a youth. The life of the church served as an apologetic for the message it proclaimed.

JUSTIFICATION AND JUSTICE

What is the gospel? It is the good news that Jesus paid the penalty for sinners, rose again, declares righteous all who repent and believe, and is now remaking this faith-filled people in his own image, to be revealed fully at the end of history. I can share this gospel with you on an aeroplane, never see you again, and you can be saved if you only repent and believe, like the thief on the cross.

Yet, once again, we cannot miss how profoundly social, even political, this gospel is. The gospel of justification by faith alone in Christ alone creates a whole new body politic, one where a true justice and righteousness finally prevail. And the just, righteous lives of these people in turn protect and testify to the message of justification by faith alone. Like this:



How? First, God's courtroom declaration "righteous" renders us righteous not just before his throne, but before all the citizens of his kingdom. It's like a judge's verdict of "not guilty." That verdict makes a person innocent before the judge, yes, but also before the bailiff, the sheriff, the courtroom clerk, the courtroom audience, indeed, the whole town. So, too, God's *forensic* declaration, by its very nature, is a *political* declaration. It creates a whole new body politic. Each individual declaration – "You're righteous"; "You're righteous"; "You're righteous" – reinstates a free citizen of God's kingdom with all the rights and privileges thereof (see Gal 4:1-7), and every member of that body politic now possesses equal standing before the throne. "And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord." (Jer 31:34a)

Second, justification by faith alone means the end of self-justification, and self-justification is the throne upon which all self-rule sits. Self-justification is an argument that says, "I deserve to rule *because* I'm wiser than God" or "wealthier than them" or "whiter than you." Self-justification is the argument underneath all tyranny, oppression, exploitation, abuse, sin. Paul offers an illustration with the Jews of his day: to those who "rely on the law" and regard themselves as virtuous, he challenges, "While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" (Rom 2:21b-22). Their self-justification yielded self-rule or sin.

Paul's solution? We must seek "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Rom 3:22). If you kill self-justification, you kill the argument *for* self-rule and *against* God's rule. Blessed are the poor in spirit, and blessed are those who have closed their mouths (Rom 3:19) and stopped boasting (Rom 3:27). Justification by faith alone, in other words, may well be the most powerful political doctrine in the Bible. If self-rule sits on the throne of self-justification, God's rule sits on the throne of God's justification. Christ's vicarious righteousness relieves us of our need to prove ourselves and the superiority of our works, our class, our skin colour, our nationality, our Sunday School attendance, our wealth, our family name, or the thousands of other things we use to justify ourselves and lord it over one another. It puts the trophy in our hands – all the privileges of Christ's covenant – so that we no longer have to win it with a sword, and that sword can now be beaten into a ploughshare, the spear into a pruning hook. Our status as equals with one another and our voting-rights as citizens of Christ's kingdom depend upon Christ's merit not our own. We have nothing to boast about. Rather, we are free to promote one another's good for Christ's sake. The community of Christ's people, then, are those who acknowledge that God rules and that their citizenship status depends on mercy. They can practice the first-fruits of true justice and righteousness, as will be revealed in the final judgment.

See Rom 2:6-7,13;
8:1,13; 14:10-
12; 1 Cor 4:4-5;
2 Cor. 5:10; Gal
5:21; 6:8.

They can do this, third, because God has granted them his Spirit. His law now rests within their hearts (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:27). The vicariously and

covenantally justified community becomes the just community. And the justice of that community witnesses to its message of justification. What does this look like? Typically, it doesn't look like the stuff of television biopics, as with a BBC or PBS special on William Wilberforce. The pursuit of justice among church members might occasionally rise to such heights, but ordinarily their righteous activities will be quieter, more common. Member Mark quietly slips money into member Ethel's mailbox. Members Joe and Janet invite member Alan, who has decided to live as a life-long celibate because of the strength of his same-sex attraction, to live with them and be a part of their family. Member Gina, who is white, confesses her racism to member Dan, who is black, and finds forgiveness. Philip's Bible study of young single men, all members, spend Friday night in the nursing home with member Helen, who can no longer make it to church. Remember, they will know we are his disciples by our love for one another. But, also, a small group considers how they might care for the refugees placed by the government in their neighbourhood. And another small group works together in a crisis pregnancy centre. We seek to do good to all people.

In the previous section I offered the challenge to stop saying you're a family member if you never show up at the family dinner table. By the same token, you should stop calling yourself a Christian if you give little attention to justice and righteousness. If the church is a time machine from the future, the just and righteous activities of the saints are the very things that differentiate the citizens of the future from the ordinary citizens of today. Justice and righteousness is our culture, our accent, our style.

At the end of history, Christ's rule over the entire cosmos will be fully revealed. Yet that rule is becoming apparent in our love and righteousness now. Our life and message matter when we gather and when we scatter. Our citizenship is in heaven, yet our kingdom lives begin with conversion and membership in a church.

THE NARROW & BROAD MISSION

All of this gives shape to the much-debated mission of the church. Tim Chester is exactly right when he argues that the church's mission is both *centripetal* and *centrifugal*. Typically, people view ancient

Israel's mission as centripetal, drawing towards a centre – “Come and see us!” (see Deut 4:4-8). The New Testament church, on the other hand, is said to possess a centrifugal, outward mission – “Go into all nations” (Matt 28:19). But that's not quite right. What's really changed, says Chester, is the centre. Churches and church planters should go, but when they go, they establish what I'm calling embassies of the eschaton, doorways into another dimension, or time machines for the nations to come and see what Christ's future rule will look like.

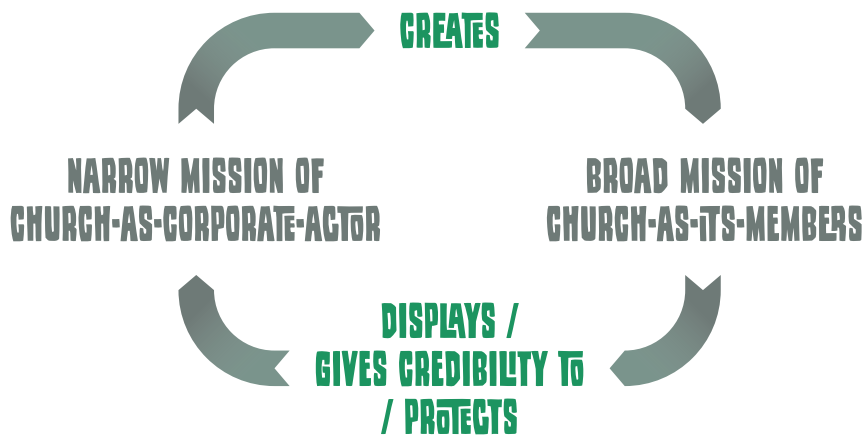
www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/mission-of-god-see-church

For a chapter-length discussion of the church's narrow and broad mission see my contribution to *Four Views on The Church's Mission*, edited by Jason S. Sexton (Downers Grove, IL: Zondervan, 2017), 17-45.

Furthermore, the centrifugal and centripetal elements of a church's mission correspond, vaguely, with the narrow and broad aspects of its mission. The distinction here requires us to think of a church in two different ways or in two different moments of its life. Corresponding to the centrifugal motion, the church *as an organised collective or corporate actor* (the church jointly) possesses a narrow mission: make disciples and citizens of Christ's kingdom. Through the pulpit and membership decisions, a church employs priest-like words of formal separation, identification, and instruction: "This is the gospel," "This is not the gospel," "She is a believer," "He is not a believer," "This is the way of obedience," "This is not." The ordinances speak and seal these decisions, binding and loosing on earth what's bound and loosed in heaven. This narrow mission should condition the bulk of what a church does together, including what it does in its services or through its budget. It should also constrain a pastor's job description.

Corresponding to the centripetal motion, the church *as its individual members* (the church severally) possesses a broad mission: live as disciples and citizens in all the ways that Jesus has commanded. This broad mission should characterise the lives of the saints all week, whether gathered or scattered. It calls us to live and rule as sons of the King, representing the heavenly Father in all our words and deeds. If the decisions and judgments of the church-as-a-corporate-actor are conscience-binding, the church-as-its-members abide in the domain of Christian liberty as they pursue their broad mission. One saint might decide to represent Christ's righteousness *this* way; another saint might decide to work for God's justice *that* way. One gets married, one remains single (see 1 Cor 7). One is convinced that abstaining from meat is holy, another is not (see Rom 14). Yet the purpose of all is to represent the image of Christ and the rule of the Father.

The relationship between the narrow and the broad look like this:



The narrow mission creates the broad, while the broad displays, gives credibility to, and protects the narrow. The narrow mission, in a word, is the work of an embassy. The broad mission, in a word, is the work of an ambassador.

PRACTICAL LESSONS

How can church leaders and members help our congregations offer an attractive and honest apologetic for the gospel? How do we grow in looking like we're genuinely from the future? Here are six recommendations:

BEGIN WITH WORD MINISTRY

First, the gathered church should give itself over to preaching, singing, praying, and reading God's word. The word alone gives life, replaces hearts, gives sight, grants faith. Your charisma as a preacher does not, my cleverness as a teacher does not. The word makes the church alive, holy, and distinct. It divides between the righteous and the unrighteous, and it points to the unrighteousness inside of us. A church that waters down God's word will have a watered-down discipleship. A church that abandons God's word will abandon its discipleship. A church that preaches meaty expositional sermons through every genre and book of the Bible is a church whose members will grow in grace, wisdom, and understanding.

ALWAYS DO GOSPEL MINISTRY

Second, our expositions of Scripture, our counselling, and our fellowship should centre on the gospel. Too easily do ministers take the gospel for granted. Too easily do the saints succumb to moralism. Learning to interpret every text canonically is a crucial part of this, but so is remembering that most sermons, counselling sessions, and words of correction to a fellow member should include not just words about what the saints must do, but what Christ has done. Justification by faith alone, with its talk of a vicarious righteousness, is the counter-intuitive and unworldly wisdom that makes no sense to our self-righteously political and self-sufficiently therapeutic age. Want to write a best-selling book? Write a motivational book, a how-to book, a prosperity gospel book, or a spirituality and wellness book. You'll sell millions because people love knowing what they must do. Every morning I wake up as a self-justifier and wannabe self-ruler. Every day and in every sermon, therefore, I need reminding that God blesses the poor in spirit and the mourning, because that is not my fallen heart's natural posture. All of a church's teaching and counselling and praying and singing, publicly and privately, should work through the lens of the gospel.

THE WORD ALONE GIVES LIFE

PRACTICE MEMBERSHIP AND DISCIPLINE

Third, churches should practice membership and discipline. If the churches look just like the world, why would they heed our message? The failure to practice meaningful membership and discipline, in other words, will undermine a church's preaching. Therefore, churches should receive as full-communing members only those who know the gospel and have committed themselves to living by it. Paul therefore exhorts the Corinthians to put out of their fellowship a man who is sleeping with his mother in law. Later, he tells them to "come out and be separate" from false teaching and living more broadly. Lightness and darkness, Christ and Belial, have nothing in common, he says. He exhorts the Galatian churches (not the leaders, but the churches) to put out anyone who preaches a false gospel, even if that preacher plays the apostle or angel-in-heaven card, never mind the bishop or pastor card. John tells his readers to test the spirits by making sure the spirits affirm that Jesus came in the flesh. Jesus himself tells the church to put out of its fellowship anyone who will not repent in a dispute with a brother or sister.

Different churches will have different ways of practicing membership and discipline. Generally, I would encourage churches to consider what my church does: hold membership classes so that people know what they are committing to. Require membership interviews where pastors or elders ask prospective members about their spiritual journey and for an explanation of the gospel. Share the name and testimony of the prospective member first with the elders and then with the entire congregation, asking the church to affirm each individual. This whole church must know for whom they are responsible – who the different parts are (see 1 Cor 12). Preach corporate applications every week, explaining what different passages mean for the church's life together. Remind the congregation regularly of their need to build relationships where they can have meaningful conversations. Encourage them to practice church discipline privately with loving words of correction and encouragement. Teach and eventually practice church discipline publicly, warning and then putting out of membership anyone who proves unrepentant for serious and outward (everyone agrees on the facts) sin. Few things destroy a church's apologetic witness more quickly than a lack of discipline. Contrary to timid Christian intuitions, church membership and discipline are crucial to a church's evangelism. Speaking of which...

CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF EVANGELISM

Being a time machine from the future presumes we tell people we're from the future, or rather, that Christ's kingdom is coming and they, too, must repent and believe. Salvation does not come through one's parents or membership in the Church of England. There is no such thing as a Christian country or family. It does not come to those who do good and mean well.

God's final judgment is irrevocable, awful, and certain. His love is expansive, exquisite, and eternal. Yet people must repent and believe. They must be *converted*, as intolerant as such a word sounds today. People must cross over from death to life by calling upon the name of the Lord, because everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

Churches, therefore, should encourage and equip their members to share the gospel. Use sermons, Sunday Schools, and small groups to train. Evangelism programmes are okay. Tools and training for evangelism are better. A culture of evangelism, where members treat sharing the gospel as an ordinary part of the Christian life, is best. Pastors and elders can cultivate a culture of evangelism by doing it themselves. When pastors don't evangelise, members don't either.

Evangelism is not sharing a testimony. It's not promising people purpose or blessing or riches if they would only give to Jesus. It's not doing apologetics or talking about Christianity in clever philosophical terms. Evangelism begins by announcing a judge's verdict: "You're guilty and under condemnation." It continues with the announcement of a king's promise: "The King has given his own Son to pay the penalty and offer a way of pardon." And it concludes with a call: "You must repent and believe."

Churches that don't evangelise undermine their own message. I'm unconvinced of your message if you won't even share it. They will eventually shrivel and die.

CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF DISCIPLINE AND HOSPITALITY

Living things grow. Therefore, we should expect for Christians to grow. Moreover, true followers of Jesus will help others to follow Jesus. It makes no sense to say you're following Jesus if you're not devoted to helping others follow Jesus. Again, a church's leaders must set the example of giving their days and evenings and meals and trips to the grocery store and time in the yard to helping others follow Jesus. "Can you help me with the overgrown bamboo in my back yard?" "Can I buy you lunch?" "Can I come over and help you with your laundry?" Church leaders and members should constantly be on the search for opportunities to interact with one another so that they might grow in the faith together. After all, families live together, and bodies depend on each part.

One practical tool my own church uses for this is a church membership directory. We work hard at keeping it updated and accurate, so that leaders and members know who "we" are. Many of us place it in our Bibles and pray through a column or page every day during our quiet times. Those prayers often turn into emails or texts: "Prayed for you this morning. How are you doing?" And those emails or texts turn into coffees or meals: "Doing just so-so. Wanna hang out?"



A church's hospitality should extend beyond its own members and pour out to neighbours, colleagues, and beyond. Non-Christians in my own city seldom invite others into their home for a meal. Here is an easy way for Christians to stand out as distinct. Friendships with unbelievers should be ordinary – in the workplace, in the neighbourhood, on the sidelines of the children's football games. Of course, this takes time. One of the greatest hindrances to friendship, hospitality, and evangelism just might be the busyness of our schedules. Are you willing to slow down and prioritise such friendships?

ENSURE THE ELDERS MODEL EVANGELISM AND DISCIPLING

I've seen it again and again: where the elders of a church consistently evangelise and disciple, you will find an evangelistic and discipling church. Where they don't, you won't.

This makes sense when you think about what God has created an elder to be. He is not a different kind of Christian, like a blue-blooded member of the aristocracy or a medieval priest. Nor is he a picture of "advanced Christianity." Rather, an elder should live as an example of "basic Christianity." His job is to disciple people to be like him – "Follow me as I follow Christ." This is why Paul's character qualifications for elders are so ordinary – they should characterise *every* Christian with the exception of "not a recent convert" and "able to teach."

What your church needs, in other words, is a plurality of men who faithfully define with their lives what ordinary Christianity looks like. When evangelism and discipling are ordinary for them, they will become ordinary for the church.

CONCLUSION

It's not cultural nostalgia that churches today need, or strategies for the culture war, or a vision for a nation. Yet nor should churches seclude themselves and forsake their neighbours. Instead, churches must engage the world with something otherworldly. They must respond to cultural chaos with a new culture; to a divided nation as a new nation; to broken families as God's family. They are to be what they are – time machines from the future.

Amidst social change, therefore, our focus must fall first upon our churches (see 1 Pet 4:17). We shouldn't talk about sex trafficking if we are viewing pornography. Or racial reconciliation if our churches are divided. Or welfare politics if we're not generous. We are the ones whose hearts of stone have been made flesh through the gospel.



The more Western culture opposes God and his people, therefore, the more the gospel distinctiveness of our churches should shine. Opposition sets a backdrop for the display of the glory of God in our lives.

Psalms 67:1-2 ■ *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us, so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.*

How do we respond to ominous cultural changes? By being the church, whether together or apart, that the nations might know the way of God.

For further reading see my *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Crossway, 2012), *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Crossway, 2012), and *How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics for a Divided Age* (Thomas Nelson, 2018). Many of these ideas have been developed at length and in academic terms in *Political Church: the Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule* (IVP Academic, 2016).

See also Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Crossway, 2017) and Mack Stiles, *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus* (Crossway, 2014).

Questions for further thought and discussion

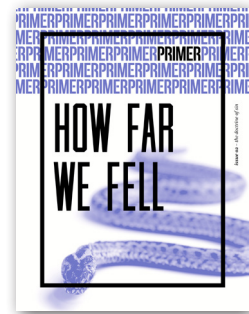
1. How is the gospel “church-shaped”?
2. What does justification by faith have to do with the life of the church?
3. If the church’s mission has both a centripetal and a centrifugal force, how is/could that be reflected in the life of your church?
4. In the face of objections to the biblical teaching about sexuality, gender and injustice, Jonathan argues that we need to create and sustain:
 - *flourishing adolescents, singles, and marriages, where those who stumble into this or that temptation find themselves meaningfully embraced by a new-creation family.*
 - *a culture of happy, strong, and engaged women.*
 - *a culture of discipling and good deeds, where congregations present a picture of true justice and righteousness, both within themselves and spilling outward.*

What concrete steps could your church take towards those?



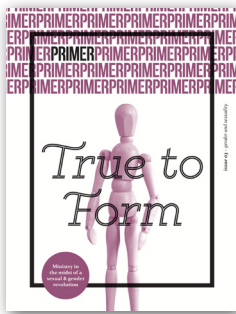
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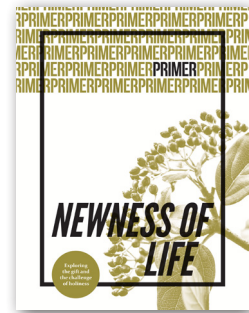
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