

ISSUE 16  
THE KIRBY  
LAING  
CENTRE

CHRIST PLAYS IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES  
**THE BIG PICTURE**

THIRD PLACES



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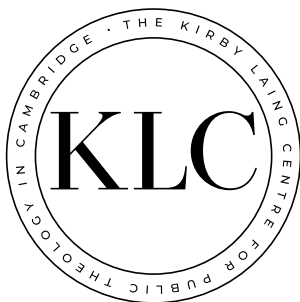
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*The Big Picture* is produced by the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge, a non-profit academic research centre whose vision is to foster Christian scholarship and public theology, rooted in spirituality and practised in community, for the glory of God and the flourishing of the church and world. Our resources and events are all aimed at exploring answers to the question: How then should we live?

*The Big Picture* seeks to: (1) Educate, inform and inspire readers about public theology, (2) Ground our work in Scripture, (3) Embody the big-picture vision of the gospel with creativity, (4) Connect with good practice wherever it is found, and (5) Build community locally and globally with our friends and partners.

Please be aware that the articles that we choose to publish have not been selected because they reflect an official KLC position or the views of the editors. Our aims above encourage deep discussion of a plurality of views, across traditions, within the broad boundaries of the gospel. We celebrate difference without division.

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### COVER ARTWORK

*Vertical Libraries (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)* by Liviu Mocan is a 2.5 m sculpture in gold, bronze, iron and paper. It is comprised of real books that transform into gold as they rise, perhaps hinting at the upward call made by the Gospels. Liviu has contributed an image of his beautiful Decalogue sculpture for our article on KLC's Year of the Decalogue.

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# Third Places as Mission

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

I loved being a pastor. There was something marvellous about preaching and teaching as well as sharing the lives of those you served. I have never understood pastors who only want to preach and teach or only want to counsel. Immersion in the life of those you are set apart to serve requires both and I found the combination exhilarating. Intuitively I understood the importance of place and of third places but it was years before I discovered the language for what I experienced.

I was ordained while doing my national service as a chaplain in South Africa. This was during the apartheid years and while, in retrospect, I have critical questions about serving in the South African Defence Force during that era, at the time I was just beginning to explore the comprehensive implications of Christian faith and felt that it was right to do my two years of national service. I was posted to a large infantry battalion that took itself very seriously. When I arrived there were five chaplains, two English ones and three Afrikaans. As a chaplain you could either sit in your office and wait for troops to come to you or you could get out and be where they were. I opted for the latter.

At peak times some 2000 troops were in training, bringing with them all sorts of pastoral challenges. Infantry is a harsh environment and the chaplaincy was an oasis where humanity could be affirmed and struggles listened to compassionately. We had a large coffee bar area and I ended up running it. Amidst the battalion it became a true third place, a place

between the barracks and daily training or work. Troops flocked to it in the evenings for coffee, games, and conversation. I had a sign made and erected outside calling it *Matthews* because Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors ... at Matthew's house. Our offices were right next door and thus the coffee bar became an easy bridge into one-on-one discussions with the chaplain and then back into the mix of games, coffee and conversation. Matthews developed organically and provided a rich context for community and relaxation amidst what was often a desensitising environment.

After my national service I was on the staff of a large church.

I lived in the rectory right next to the church and my expansive lounge became a third place for the young adults on Wednesday nights and after the evening service on Sunday. I ran the young adults ministry and while I was finishing up after the evening service in the church the rectory was already full of young adults hanging out, enjoying themselves, raiding the fridge, etc. Out of a large young adults group of some 60+ I identified a group of twelve for intensive discipleship. As their gifts emerged we put these to good use. The rectory functioned amidst all of this as a third place so that as students went off to the local university campus they felt quite comfortable in building bridges back to me and the rectory for their Christian and non-Christian friends. All in all an exhilarating experience.

I first came across the concept of third places when I was researching my *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for*







Priscilla du Preez

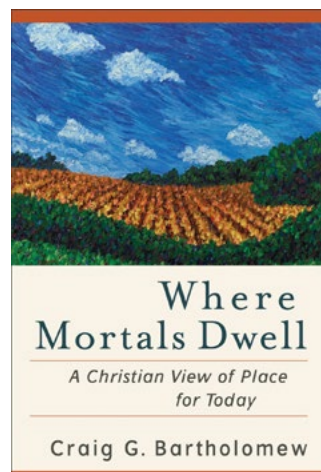
*Today* (Baker Academic, 2011). I found Ray Oldenburg's books on this topic and was fascinated. Oldenburg uses the example of the French café to evoke the role of the third place:

Once the French worker finds a tolerable work situation, a suitable dwelling for his family, and a bistro at which to enjoy the companionship of his pals, he becomes an immovable object. Why should he move? ... Having established his first, second, and third place, the Frenchman wisely proceeds to enjoy them.<sup>1</sup>

This is a rich view of human *being* rather than just of human *doing*. It is one that we are in danger of losing as more and more people work virtually from home – the loss of the second place – and as traditional third places such as the local coffee shop are taken over by corporate brands with the eye on profit and thus cheap, often temporary, staff, rather than on the creation of a genuine, local third place.

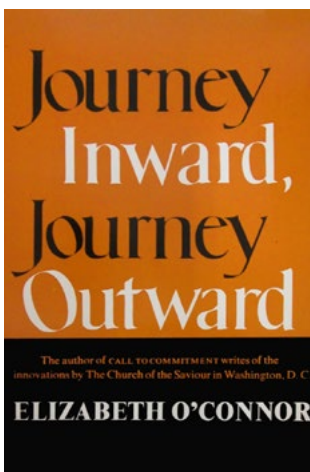
I have long thought that attention to place is a huge missing piece in the jigsaw of the church's mission. This is certainly true of third places. Once grasp *Gospel-centred integral mission* as set out by Chris Wright in his excellent article in this edition of *TBP*, as well as in his many books, and it is not hard to see how the intentional, conscious development of third places fits firmly within the arc of mission.

<sup>1</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (NY: Marlowe and Company, 1999), 154.



Oldenburg ignores churches as potential third places but Matthew Sleeman rightly does not – see his very stimulating article. Years ago I read Elizabeth O'Connor's *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, which includes the story of Church of the Savior in Washington, DC, establishing The Potter's House coffee bar and bookshop. For several years I taught a week's course in DC and would always go and visit The Potter's House. You could taste the stillness and goodness when you entered it. In recent years under Fritz van der Lecq's leadership, KLC's partner the UCT Y, based on the exquisite property of the University of Cape Town, has revisioned itself along integral missional lines, as set out, for example, by Chris Wright, and in the process established a wonderful third place Coffee House. I almost feel that I can smell the coffee when I read Fritz's article!

Karl Barth says that the Father sent his Son into the far country in order that we might come home – come home to ourselves, come home to our neighbour, come home to God. At their best third places embody this invitation so that people can taste it even before they hear the invitation. As I think



of – hope for – a thousand such points of light shining in the darkness and cold of too much contemporary culture, I particularly find myself asking, what would such places look like amidst the poorest of the poor, what Fannon calls the wretched of the earth. What might third places look like in Gaza, in the West Bank, in Iraq, in Sudan, as well as in our own neighbourhoods?



# THIRD SPACES *The Garden*

GENEVIEVE WEDGBURY

Magical moments...  
I stood on the dank grass  
And looked up  
Into the black night -  
The stars seemed alive -  
They seemed to sparkle  
More than I'd seen before -  
It was a magical moment,  
And as I stood on this

Sacred ground  
It seemed so fitting  
That I should sing, softly,  
"Twinkle, twinkle little star..."  
How I wonder what you are -  
And so I do -  
Great balls of fire  
Yet we sing about their littleness!

Up above the world so high,  
Like a diamond in the sky!  
The sky bejewelled  
For us,  
A gift.  
And as I sang,  
My breath circled  
Like chimney smoke  
In the brisk air.

Ralph Albert Blakelock, Moonlight

Thanks to the dog, we're getting out into the garden a lot more now. I quite like doing the last one before bed. I put on my boots and coat and step out into the cold night air. I often walk to the back of the garden. Last night the air was clear and crisp. I looked up into the night sky and was struck by the twinkling stars. Surely they were sparkling more than I had ever seen before?! I scanned the sky and each one I spotted was dancing in its place in the same mischievous way. It felt right to sing softly, under my breath, the nursery rhyme, "Twinkle twinkle little star," its verses resonating more like a hymn, as if I were singing about something sacred, which of course I was. And each time my voice spoke out, my breath

was like little wafts of chimney smoke in the winter air. "How I wonder what you are." So true! How little these magnificent balls of gas and fire appear. How terrible they are, and how sweet to my eyes here in the garden, millions of light years away. Standing on the dank grass on a cold January night, I wonder at the glistening stars, the bejewelled sky and the God who gifts them to me.

*Genevieve is a freelance writer and Professional Doctorate candidate at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, where she is researching a robust theology of body literacy and Christian spirituality. She enjoys running, writing and Russian-style ballet.*





# A CRISIS IN THIRD PLACES?

MATTHEW SLEEMAN

In the UK, at least, it's hard not to hear periodic indications that third places are in decline. By third places, we mean places which are neither the home nor the work place, but a different kind of place where people gather for conversation, commonality and conviviality. Third place is a term Ray Oldenburg coined and popularised back in the 1990s and, since then, there has been a shadow of crisis lingering over it.<sup>1</sup> A little bit like Woody Allen's 2011 film, *Midnight in Paris*, it seems like the golden age is perpetually in the past and, it seems, at risk of being passed over by a less vibrant present. Pubs, bookstores, even post offices and high-street banks, are all in decline. Villages and towns seem to be more silent, their populations more isolated. As places of conviviality shrink and decline, it seems that social interaction is moving stealthily online, into personalised niches, and polarised societies seem increasingly the norm.

<sup>1</sup> The book in view here is Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (St Paul, MN: Paragon, 1989), with a second edition appearing in paperback in 1997. At the same time as revising his book, Oldenburg paints a decline. See p.xiv about planning developments which are "hostile towards both walking and talking", and Ray Oldenburg, "Our Vanishing Third Places," *Planning Commissioners Journal* 25 (Winter 1996-97), 6-10.

A quick response might be to question whether third places are in crisis and, if they are, to question whether they are necessary anyway. But such a response does seem to come up against a nagging and multi-faceted narrative, that we're no longer socialising together and, increasingly, to recall Robert D. Putnam's description of the United States, we go bowling alone.<sup>2</sup> Trade unions and similar collective organisations are in decline, and solidarities between strangers seem harder to nurture online. Difference is increasingly politicised, with distance replacing dignity, and discord usurping dialogue. Is there more than a wistful nostalgia in the air? Perhaps we are, individually, institutionally, and technologically, losing something of the craft, and the practice, of making healthy, hospitable and diverse places. A more considered response is needed.

Can churches step into the breach? At a local level, this suggestion has a hopeful edge to it. Many churches, far more than a generation ago, are familiar with the idea of home groups, smaller gatherings than the entire congregation, meeting regularly and displaying many of the characteristics

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).



of a third place that Oldenburg identifies. This is without his encouragement: in his book, Oldenburg is silent about churches. They don't get a chapter, or even a mention in the subject index of his book. The nearest index entry is for "clergy," pointing to two instances where Oldenburg is critical of the churches' nurturing of third places. As one involved in theological education, I think that Oldenburg misses an important beat here, and it's important that we don't, as well. Let me explain.

We are all place-makers. As Christians, we're aiming to make better places wherever we are, as part of our discipleship, our humanity, and our participation in the body of Christ. But I think we will make better places at our churches if we see them as third places. For one thing, I think we'll welcome people better, if we take on for ourselves, across our congregations, something of Oldenburg's ethic and status of the "regular."

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In any healthy third place, there is typically a reservoir of regulars, people who don't own the third place, but nurture and steward it as neutral ground, collectively sharing the role of host, willing and able to foster commonality and participation. The regulars are those who are conducive to fraternity, who help create a levelling atmosphere of welcome, of a comfortable, freely accessed place. They exhibit a plain, homely and non-pretentious quality which accepts people coming into the place. They are willing to linger, and to flex with what is not necessarily planned, open to the kind of encounters that will accommodate "where people are."

I hope and pray as I describe them, you sense who those people are in your church. If you can name them, I imagine you rejoice in them and treasure them. You enjoy talking with them, listening to them, and being listened to by them. They care, they are the people who seed the quality of "let's do this again together." Warmth, appropriate intimacy, generous belonging and open-hearted care characterise them. I describe them at length, because such regulars keep the place alive, help set its tone, its mood, feel and vibe, as they attract, welcome and accommodate newcomers and other regulars alike.

As I look in the book of Acts, Barnabas strikes me as such a person. You'll find him modelling this kind of living in Acts 5, Acts 9 and Acts 11. Unsurprisingly, the Holy Spirit calls him in Acts 13 for a new sense of mission. Such mission, and local





church life, is infused with the need for place making, whether it's first places in the home, second places at work, or third places bathed in the light of the gospel.

It's not always easy: indeed, Barnabas and Paul fall out in a dispute about John Mark, one relative newcomer, and whether his presence with them will be good for these new places. Looking at Acts 15:36-41, I think it's impossible to say who among them is at fault. Perhaps, as Luke writes Acts, he doesn't expect us to look for the black-box flight recorder, the forensics of cause in the dispute. Perhaps, instead, and I think this is the case, Luke includes the incident to make us think about the ethics of reconciliation. Later on in the New Testament, when in prison (a challenging kind of third place) Paul longs for Mark to join him (2 Timothy 4:11).

Biblical place-making avoids either extreme: it falls into neither despair in a crisis nor romanticising or over-simplifying any kind of place. At its end, Paul is still using a prison-house for bold and unhindered place-making. We too need to pray into, and for, the fruit of place-making arising from "the things fulfilled among us": this is the outworking of chapter one and verse one of the entire Luke and Acts project (Luke 1:1), third places included.

Perhaps all third places, and the relationships within them, tend towards crisis, even decay. They remain vulnerable, even when enabled by the Holy Spirit filling those people making them. But this is far from a reason to give up on third places. If anything, it is an impetus to pray for them, to pray that we might play our part in them, in our churches and beyond. Across both Luke and Acts, synagogues, market places, prisons and even roads function as third places. Disciples need to be ready, imaginative and equipped, for godly and bold place-making. How can we go and do likewise? What

kind of posture and skills will play into such a vision and such a vitality for life? Two suggestions follow, from my reflections as both a church member and a theological educator.

First, we need to pray for the heart to hang out together, and then do so and keep doing so. If church becomes rushed, one moment of consumption in a rapid life of consumption, our third places will wither. As Oldenburg notes, third places are prone to becoming commodified, or otherwise used to serve another purpose. Now I doubt our local church is likely to be bought out by Starbucks, or otherwise sweated for a profit. But many of us live in and are shaped by frenetic cultures. Both precarious and profitable work patterns need patterns of place-making that resist speed, or causing loneliness and isolation for some. Relationships and the places they form are shaped by and need our prayer and care.<sup>3</sup> Let's cherish the original impulse of God's call in Eden and the later counter-cultural practices of Sabbath, jubilee and non-optimising of profit. Relationally, let's leave edges in our lives for gleaning by others, and appreciate the gift of shared manna and daily bread together.

<sup>3</sup> <https://relationshipsfoundation.org/>.



Jonathan Monck Mason



Allison Saeng, edited

Second, let's not despise the small things, the next step of place-making. Rhythms and habits are formative, and practice makes permanent. Let's pray, seek and enable the imagination for place-making that wisely seeks healthy first places (hospitality in our homes – however big or small – that graciously shows our face and attention towards others), healthy second places (just and kind relations in our places of work, whether they be fixed or mobile), and healthy third places. In all these spheres, we can't do it alone. Too often, the seeming crisis of third places can tempt us to retreat into ourselves, to shrink back from enterprise and risk in our place-making. Instead, we need others, for solidarity, and support.

Third places are rarely centrally planned. May prayer spark imagination, innovation and solidarity, to discern and follow the next step in place-making, over and over and over again, in the particularities where we are. Life is made up of such small

steps. And the great delight of third places is that each of us can and should play a part in them. They can be the nursery for strengthening our place-making more widely. In them we can learn how to converse with strangers, how to sustain encounter with difference, and how to love our neighbours in face-to-face proximity.

The city on a hill that Jesus commends and seeks in Matthew 5:14 is made of many places. Pray, seek, ask and act, that we and our places may be salt, light and yeast for him. Any crisis of third places only adds to Jesus's existing invitation – and the earth is, of course, the Lord's, and everything, every place, in it.

*Matthew Sleeman is a human geographer and theological educator. He teaches at Oak Hill College in north London, a place he loves. He teaches "Place, Season, Others and Self," helping future church ministers grow in the craft of place-making.*





# THE 3<sup>RD</sup> PLACE Revival

COBY DOLLOFF

K Mitch Hodge

Have you ever walked into a coffee shop – you know the type – filled with carefully curated furniture and wire-rimmed glasses and copies of *Infinite Jest*, and left with an essay, or an idea, or a method for making homemade cold brew that you never would have had if you'd stayed home?

Have you settled into the cozy haze of a British pub and had one of those conversations with your friends that takes on a life of its own, pulling in bartenders and neighboring booths, forming new bonds and strengthening old ones, turning all who partake into beautiful caricatures of themselves?

Have you sat among a strange yet sublime combination of midnight truckers, wits-end strungouts and broke college students at varying levels of sobriety and observed that, between the hours of midnight and 5 a.m., *this is not, in fact, a Waffle House, but a Waffle Home*?

If any of these sound familiar, you have been the recipient of the inherent magic of a third place.

I have always thought that the most useful formula for considering an important question comes from the eminent philosopher Jerry Seinfeld: *What's the deal with \_\_\_?*

*What's the deal with airplane peanuts? What's the deal with dry cleaning? What's the deal with the problem of evil? What's the deal with third places?*

The term third place is nearly ubiquitous now, but it was first coined by sociologist Ray

Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place*. The term denotes the idea that, while most of our lives are spent between our homes ("first places") and our work ("second places"), a *third* set of places – cafes, pubs, barber shops, salons, bowling alleys, churches (?), and the like – give us another space to rest, create, play, commune – a space to be human. We've recently seen a revival of such places (or, at least, an awareness of our loss of them) in the public consciousness.

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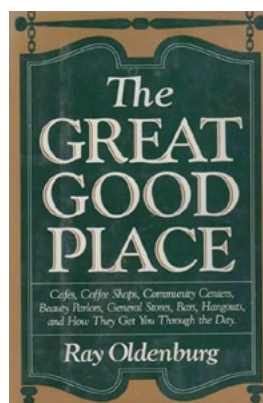
Robert D. Putnam's sociological tour de force, *Bowling Alone* (2000), laments the loss of the *social capital* such spaces have long provided to American communities. Americans still bowl, but enrollment in bowling leagues has declined sharply. This spells trouble for community, society and culture.

And of course, the COVID pandemic showed us just how bleak our individual and communal lives can look when left *entirely* without these hubs of social capital. Perhaps I'm an optimist, but I have sensed, since then, an uptick in our collective concern for cultivating them.

The thing about third places – wide-ranging as they are in character – is that they breed culture in a way that would be impossible without them.

Coffee houses in Paris, London and New England have served consistently as cradles of intellectual discourse, earning such cafes the title penny universities.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [history.com/articles/coffee-houses-revolutions](https://www.history.com/articles/coffee-houses-revolutions)





The *Eagle and Child* pub, famed Oxford meeting place of the Inklings, spun from its cozy, wood-panelled walls and leather seats some of the most influential works of fiction and theology of the 20th century. There is a real sense in which Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, Barfield and the rest were as much products of their time together at “the Bird and the Baby” as they were products of their individual reading lists.

And that famed rendition of Creed’s *Higher* by your buddy Brian that has become the stuff of legend in the friend group would certainly never have happened without the help of your local karaoke joint.

Third places produce culture. But how do they do it?

In *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis describes friendship as arising when people discover that they share something each imagined to be his or her own, particular treasure. Friendship begins when one finds oneself saying in surprise “What, you too?”<sup>2</sup>

Friendship develops out of a love between two people for a third thing – and conversely, new things are born from the mingling of kindred souls. It is commonly the role of third places to be the ground on which friendship is forged and on which friendship gives birth to culture.

This is only possible, of course, because third places are places of hospitality: they provide time and space where such connections can flourish.

What produces this effect? I would argue that it often has to do with cultivating a space that invites *continued presence* – comfortable furniture, aesthetically pleasing decor, rounded surfaces, *mugs* (rather than to-go cups). Starbucks is hardly a third place. A drive-thru is the antithesis of one. But from a wider view, third places create culture because they are places that exist for the love of things, whether those things be good coffee, food, beer, sports, comedy, you name it.

2 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), 77.

This is why you have Philadelphia Eagles bars in Portland and why every flannel-donning espresso-granolite in the Northwest Arkansas tri-state area finds themselves pulled, magnetically, into Onyx Coffee. The best third places convene the lovers of particular things.

And without crossing into the dangerous waters of the precarious church-coffee-shop distinction, I must observe that churches, too, display a similar tendency. The church gathers its people with the express purpose of allowing them to love something outside of themselves, namely God. And when they do so, *culture* – fellowship, friendship, music, art, cathedrals – are formed from the communion between them.

\*\*\*

In the introductory chapter of *Orthodoxy*,<sup>3</sup> G.K. Chesterton describes a hypothetical, whimsical fable, “a romance about an English yachtsman who slightly miscalculated his course and discovered England under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas.”

Chesterton contends that such a sailor, once he had overcome his initial wave of embarrassment, would feel a peculiar mix of emotions – for “what could be more delightful than to have in the same few minutes all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the humane security of coming home again?”

He muses that the predicament of the sailor is really, in many ways, the predicament of the human race:

This at least seems to me the main problem for philosophers ...  
How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it?

Chesterton sees in this “mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar” an essential human need for a “life of practical romance; the combination of something that is strange with

3 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1908), 3-4.





something that is secure. We need so to view the world as to combine an idea of wonder and an idea of welcome. We need to be happy in this wonderland without once being merely comfortable.”

For Chesterton’s own purposes, he asserts that the Christian faith is the best answer to this double spiritual need. Consider how this paradox of wonder and welcome comes to bear in our third places. If Chesterton is right, it is unsurprising that we gravitate toward places that get at this deep human need for “practical romance.”

Ultimately, the magic of third places lies in their ability to be places of both wonder and welcome. We all know the experience of walking into our local haunt. You step in the door and feel as if you are home.

*I’ll have the usual.*

*Put it on my tab.*

*Sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name.*

Yet we also know that part of the allure of these places is that they are decidedly not our homes. You never know when a friend might walk in. Or a literary agent. Or a cute girl who happens to be reading *The Brothers Karamazov*. And of course, she wants to be in the book club you are starting up. The rest, as they say, will be history – and you’ll be off on the adventure of a lifetime.

Third places are in our comfort zone and yet out of it. They are our home and yet not our home. They are wonder and welcome. They have one foot in the world and another in Fairyland.

Charles Dickens tells of an episode in a cafe that awakened him to this reality:

One [coffee shop] in St. Martin’s Lane, of which I only recollect that it stood near the church, and that in the door there was an oval glass plate with “COFFEE ROOM” painted on it, addressed towards the street. If I ever find myself in a very different kind of coffee-room now, but where there is such an inscription on glass, and read it backwards on the wrong side, MOOR EEFFOC (as I often used to do then in a dismal reverie), a shock goes through my blood.<sup>4</sup>

As biographers note, this scene constituted a profound awakening of Dickens’s imagination to the fantasy of the everyday, and he went on to paint his own fictional world with all the elvish realism of the mooreeffoc.

It is no surprise that this awakening took place in a coffee room. He was not the first (and far from the last) to walk into a third place and leave with a transfigured vision of the world.

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4 G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1906), 47.

\*\*\*\*\*  
**COFFEE ROOM**

\*\*\*\*\*  
**MOOR EEFFOC**





In some ways, these places function like large-scale icons. They awaken us, for a second, to the way things *are* all around us. We overhear a conversation at the table next to us and realize *just* what the main character should do in the last chapter of our novel. We hear a side-splitting new stand-up bit, and we are awakened to the gratuitous absurdity of existence. We see *MOOR EEF* through the window and realize we are sitting in Fairyland.

And this brings me to the relationship between the coffee room and the cathedral.

The church, to state the obvious, is home. It is the place where we know and the place where we are known. Where – if it's done right – we feel safe to be our most vulnerable. It is the place where the clamor of our masks and impressions should give way to our truest selves in communion with one another.

But it is also the place where we encounter the incomprehensible. The place where we go to meet with the living God who holds the universe in the palm of his hand, upholding stars and planets by the word of his power.

It is wonder and welcome. It is bread and wine – the most human and homely of things. It is the body and blood of the resurrected Christ – a thing more full of wonder and mystery than we could possibly imagine.

And I do have just an inkling as to why great third places speak so deeply to our souls. They do so because they give us just a glimpse of something that we were made for.

Throughout the story of Scripture, there are two spaces which (though at times permeable) remain largely distinct. There is Heaven – the place of wonder and adventure and perfection, where the Lord dwells. There is earth – home, a place that is, through God's creative mandate, truly *ours*.

Yet the whole arc of Scripture seems a dogged attempt at finding a *third* space, where the two can somehow dwell together at last.

*A garden where God walks with man  
A tabernacle where Heaven moves upon the earth  
A temple where the holy of holies is made accessible  
A person in whom Word becomes flesh  
A meal that is the bread come down from heaven, given for  
the life of the world  
A Presence that places the good law of Heaven directly on the  
hearts of humankind*

And we move at last toward a great Third Place, where Heaven will come down to Earth, wonder and welcome will finally fully be one – and more than just the fresh batch of coffee will be made new.

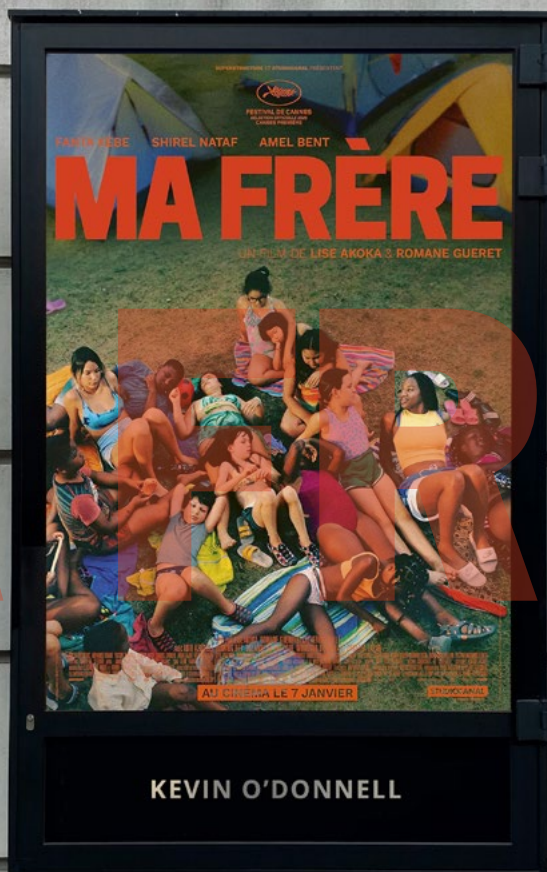
*Coby Dolloff writes and teaches at Pepperdine University in Malibu, CA. Most of his work sits at the corner of theology and comedy. You can follow his work on his Substack (substack.com/@cobydolloff?). A version of this piece was first published in Christianity Today.<sup>5</sup> It is republished with permission.*

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5 [christianitytoday.com/2025/06/third-space-revival-cs-lewis-coffee-shops/](https://christianitytoday.com/2025/06/third-space-revival-cs-lewis-coffee-shops/)



# MA FRÈRE



A French film that generously allows people to be themselves in a third place

*Ma Frère*<sup>1</sup> takes place almost entirely on a summer camp for children. They are on a school trip, led by some of their teachers and a few helpers. The children are the equivalent of the final year of Junior school in the UK, aged about 10-11. They are going to the countryside from an inner-city, poorer suburb. Both children and staff find themselves away from home and work, more in a situation of play and activities, some educational, some just for fun. The children splash and swim in the river, build things with pebbles, run around, draw and sing. They go on visits to a museum and listen to an old woman who lost family in the Holocaust. There is a whole coachload of young actors as well as about half a dozen adults. To guide and utilise such a cast of young people must have been a challenge; and they perform their simple roles admirably.

The film by Lisa Akoka and Romane Gueret runs for nearly two hours, all in French with no subtitles (French or English). It has no real narrative as such, simply following the day-to-day life in the camp. There are constant brief interchanges between children, and occasional chill-out times at the end of the day

<sup>1</sup> I should note that the “ma frère,” not the correct “mon frère,” was a term of friendly endearment between some of the girls. Was this a playful bit of camaraderie, a touch of political correctness, or an assertion of female identity? Perhaps all of these.

for the staff. There are some arguments and mockery such as gathering round to push a boy and girl to kiss, chanting “Bisou! Bisou!” It should have been boring to someone like me with limited French, and I struggled a little during the screening. However, the richness of its simplicity haunted me the day after. It was a work of gentle genius. There are a few slight individual narratives among all the romping around. One of the staff finds that her lover deserts her at home and she faces up to her own illusions with life. One young girl is frightened



Brooklyn Morgan



and won't speak until a long way into the film. She is looked after by a friend who always accompanies her. The female teacher kneels down on the coach before they depart and offers the timid girl a sweet, being patient as she does not reply, and giving a look of compassion. Slowly, the girl softens and responds to the teacher, so much so at the end, and talking freely, that her friend feels isolated and sad. The teacher sits down for breakfast after her breakup and several children come over and hug her at which she bursts into tears. Another adult touches her briefly and offers to pour a coffee. The scene sits motionless for a couple of minutes after that with the children comforting her without words.

Teachers can feel contained and necessarily distant sometimes because of the discipline of dealing with groups of youths. Away from work, they began to relax a little and even become teasing and playful with the children. They sneak out of their tents one night to spy on a few of their charges who they know have purloined some snacks from the supplies and are hiding in the bushes passing things around. The staff are amused, and not angry. In another scene, two boys hesitate to eat a blancmange dessert. The teacher in between them distracts one and then the other. She bends low and sucks the dessert up, deftly and speedily, so that the child does not know where it has gone. The other children laugh. They enjoy each other's company. The teachers relax and be "human" rather

than wearing the masks of monitors.

I felt frustrated at first that I did not follow much of the short exchanges of quickly paced and rather random dialogue. Upon reflection, the looks, facial expressions, body language and actions spoke much more than words, rather like when the children hugged the teacher. Its slowness and bare script allowed this to happen so naturally, and the viewer was Immersed in their lives, watching but feeling. To produce a film with so little content and narrative is no mean feat.

I was left with the value of the body and our interactions. A look does not always need words. How often do we overuse words in our lives, in our worship, our prayers or preaching? How could some biblical scenes be enacted or filmed silently? (I can think of a powerful example from Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* where a lengthy shot shows a dejected Joseph walking away, his back to the camera, from Mary's family. Then he spots children playing. That turns his heart. Not a word is spoken for several minutes.) What would be said that we would sometimes miss? That is a challenge for all of us.

*Kevin O'Donnell is an author, a priest of the diocese of Arundel and Brighton, and an auxiliary chaplain at the basilica of Notre Dame de Pontmain in France.*



Tegan Mierle





# Somewhere, A Place For Us

PHILIP SAMPSON

"My God, what kind of *people* are you? What kind of a *place* is this?"

This *cri de coeur* from the recently widowed Mrs Colbert goes to the heart of Norman Jewison's film *In the Heat of the Night*. The story is set in the small town of Sparta, Mississippi; it highlights the relationship between the Chief of Police (played by Rod Steiger) and a homicide detective from Philadelphia (Sidney Poitier). Steiger's Chief is racist; Poitier's detective is African American. Mrs Colbert's late husband was an entrepreneur from Chicago, looking to invest in the town, but murdered before he could do so. Mrs Colbert's passionate plaint reprimands the racism of the Chief, and of Sparta, his town. As she suggests, it's the people who make the place, and the place, the people.

## Answers and Doubts

The contemporary twenty-first century offers many answers to Mrs Colbert's questions: from the modern materialism of atoms knocking together in a cold, indifferent cosmos; to postmodern narratives that we tell ourselves, precisely to keep out the cold. Most share a common thread: both we and the world exist, in various senses, as autonomous and self-sufficient being. There is only being and nothingness; a world behind the material scene before us is an illusion. There is no lived third place, real yet transcending both material presence and representation, where we might touch the face of a god.<sup>1</sup>

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), xlv. For "third place," I here draw on Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

In the mid-twentieth century, this conception was held with a certainty formerly reserved for creeds. In particular, the Enlightenment had appropriated man's likeness to God from the Bible and transformed it into "sovereignty over existence, the Lordly gaze, the command," attributes formerly belonging to deity.<sup>2</sup> We reign over the world; it is ours to exploit as we wish.

Emmanuel Levinas argued that the self-sufficiency of being is a recent development in Western thought. Our historical preoccupation with both transcendence and communion with deity has been abandoned, perhaps for the first time. Moreover, in the West, this abandonment has largely proceeded without the benefit of a positive engagement with some two millennia of theological reflection upon finitude and the human condition.<sup>3</sup>

Enlightenment was intended to free us from our self-imposed immaturity, to mark our coming of age. But it has en-lightened us, made us lighter, less substantial, melting into air and floating free of norms and values, untethered from all that is solid, from what it is to be human. "All that is holy is profaned." Sadly there is little sign that this has brought the greater clarity about either ourselves or our place that Marx anticipated.<sup>4</sup>

2 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 6.

3 Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 51. Emmanuel Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

4 Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom* (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 231. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. Samuel Moore (Chicago: Charles Kerr, 1910), 1.16.



Many have recognised this. Today's world lacks the confidence of the mid-twentieth century. The abandonment of a third place transcending material presence in favour of self-sufficient being has not gone well. The optimistic expectations of the modern world were shattered by the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, and more subtle consequences of the doctrine of "progress" are emerging in the twenty-first, not least climate change and our treatment of other sentient creatures. We are generating global suffering and death on a previously unimagined scale.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, colonisation by self-sufficiency has desecralised the world and left a sense of something lost. Yet there is no lack of knowledge. Unlike those first-century centurions, we know what we are doing, but we live as though we did not know, denying the reality before our very eyes.

The Christian Church has proved largely unable to resist the subjugation of the third place to being and nothingness. A generation ago, Francis Schaeffer observed that many had traded the gospel for "personal peace and affluence"; nowadays, we might add "and a supportive community."<sup>6</sup> As Christians, we don't so much live in a third place where we might encounter God as travel through it; pilgrims in a vale of tears, which is destined to be burned up. We are neither in the world nor yet out of it. Meanwhile, like everyone else, we have grown accustomed to its face, to its horror; the best we can do is to make the vale as peaceful and comfortable as possible; a theology of despair.

### Accommodating to horror

Jonathan Glazer's reality-based film *The Zone of Interest* sharply portrays the way that people who simply want

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida and David Wills, "The Animal That Therefore I Am," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 369–418, 394.

<sup>6</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1976), 205.



affluence and the best for their families can accommodate to horror.

The Höss family live the cosy, comfortable life they had always dreamed of, set in the idyllic countryside of Poland, with a river running through it. It is affluent and peaceful, a "wonderful environment" for the children. The Höss's see themselves, and are seen, as decent folk who want only to bring up a happy, healthy family.

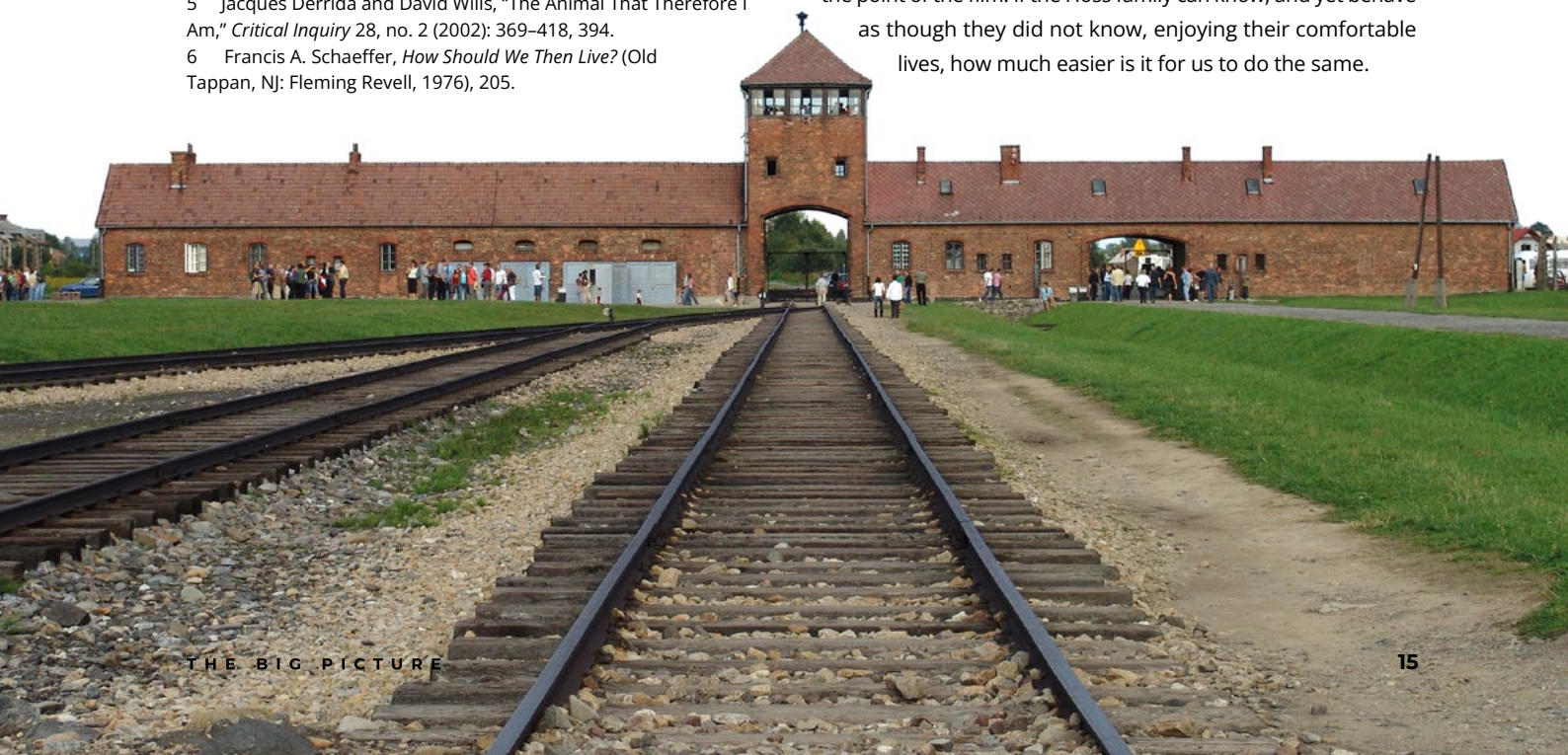
Literally on the other side of their garden wall is Auschwitz concentration camp. Mr Höss is the Commandant. Now and then the horror intrudes: they find human remains in the river while bathing; but the memory is soon washed away in their very modern bathroom.

Throughout the film, as the Höss family play, swim and sunbathe, we hear continuous background noise: gunshots, dogs barking, screams, a train pulling cattle trucks, the roar of the furnaces. Yet the Höss family no longer hears it. By the end of the film, neither do we.

### Hope

In this darkest of places, there is a place for hope. At night, a young Polish girl smuggles in apples for the concentration camp prisoners. She is unable to behave as though she did not know. No doubt, there were other courageous people like her who also resisted, creating a third place where love could thrive. They are not to be underestimated. Indeed, they have been vindicated by a history they helped make. In 1947, Mr Höss was hanged.

This is, surely, too extreme for our own case. That is, I think, the point of the film. If the Höss family can know, and yet behave as though they did not know, enjoying their comfortable lives, how much easier is it for us to do the same.







An entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp declaring "Work sets you free" (Wikimedia).

We now know that, for the first time, our own behaviour, not geological time, is changing the planet, and not for the better. Indeed, the Anthropocene is said to be accelerating a range of potential catastrophes, inaugurating a global "polycrisis," which threatens to destabilise our human way of life.<sup>7</sup> Of course there are some who are creating third spaces, smuggling in apples. Thousands march; activists resist and protest; many exemplify a better way by living different lives. Yet, for most of us, life goes on, and the background noises fade into familiarity.

### A Moral Ambition

Rutger Bregman, last year's Reith lecturer, stands in the same place as the Polish girl with her apples and offers hope for a better way. He proposes a moral revolution, pointing to those in the past, such as the abolitionists, who made transformative changes from a third place. Like the Polish girl with her apples, they were vindicated by a history they helped make.

Although he does not say so, many of those he mentions were influenced by a specific Christian vision of praise and great joy drawn from a Reformed Protestant tradition. I have

argued elsewhere<sup>8</sup> that these pioneers shared a common thread: they did *not* believe that either we or the world exist as self-sufficient being in any sense whatever. Rather, for them, creation points beyond itself to the creator; it manifests the glory of God.<sup>9</sup> Creation abundantly exceeds its material presence to create a third space, inspiring awe and praise, even threatening to undo us. Wherever "you turn your eyes, ... it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around without being *overwhelmed* by the immense weight of glory," said John Calvin.<sup>10</sup> Creation sings of joyful praise.



"Have you never stood by the seaside at night," asked the nineteenth century Calvinistic Baptist C. H. Spurgeon, "and heard the pebbles sing, and the waves chant God's praises?"<sup>11</sup> And not only pebbles. The seventeenth century Calvinist, Thomas Adams, said of animals: "They that have tongues, though they want reason, praise him with those natural organs. The birds of the air sing, the beasts of the earth make a noise ... the very 'dragons in the deep' ... sound out his praise".<sup>12</sup>

8 Philip J. Sampson, *Nonconformist Perspectives on Animals and Language* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2026).

9 Westminster Confession. 1647. 2.ii.

10 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (original 1559; repr., Edinburgh: Macdonald, 1845), 1.v.1.

11 C. H. Spurgeon, *Songs in the Night, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* 44 (February 27, 1885): 1.

12 Thomas Adams, "The Taming of the Tongue," in *The Works of Thomas Adams*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862), 10–22, at 10.

7 J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 4f. The term "polycrisis" was popularised by the World Economic Forum *Global Risk Report 2023* [www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2023/digest/](https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2023/digest/).

Creation is a song of embodied *meaning*, a song sung for another, each creature joyfully manifesting God according to its kind. Long before it came to philosophical maturity in the work of Herman Dooyeweerd, this vision of meaning inspired hope and sparked the change that Bregman celebrates.<sup>13</sup>

Bregman wants small, committed groups to do the same for the evils of our day. There are certainly many pressing issues demanding our attention, but Bregman identifies one as the “greatest moral atrocity of our time.”<sup>14</sup> It is not necessarily what we would expect. He names not climate change, nor war, nor even genocide; not hunger or poverty; but “factory farming.”<sup>15</sup> It is our abuse of animals that drives many of the other evils: deforestation, malnutrition among the poor, antibiotic resistance, pollution of land, sea and air, zoonotic and other diseases, and even migration and warfare. Indeed, the meat and dairy industries account for around 14% of greenhouse

gases, about the same as all transport by land, sea and air put together.

But maintaining the steadfastness to produce change needs hope, and it is not clear where this is to come from in a secular age of self-sufficient being. But the Christian hope is bright and clear, and Bregman’s moral ambition is surely a call to action for those who believe that the meaning of creation is realised when it praises the triune God, not when we make it groan and scream.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, the nonconformists and evangelical Anglicans of the past recognised, with Bregman, the evil of cruelty to animals, and have already opened a third space for us to pursue reform and restoration.<sup>17</sup> Like Mrs Colbert with whom we began, we should ask ourselves, before God, what kind of Christians are we, and what kind of place is this church of Christ?

*Philip Sampson is a fellow at the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics; and consultant editor for the Journal of Animal Ethics. Recent publications include: Animal Ethics and the Nonconformist Conscience (2018); and Nonconformist Perspectives on Animals and Language (2026). Both Palgrave Macmillan.*

13 “Meaning is the being of all that is created and the nature even of our selfhood.” Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 4 vols. (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), vol. 1.

14 Rutger Bregman, “Factory Farming Is ‘the Greatest Moral Atrocity of Our Time,’” *Prospect*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/views/brief-encounter/69833/rutger-bregman-factory-farming-is-a-moral-atrocity>.

15 Rutger Bregman, *Moral Ambition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2025). For an extract, see: <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/he-feels-as-trapped-as-the-chickens-how-an-activist-teamed-up-with-the-enemy-20250401-p5loc4.html>.

16 E.g., Psalm 148; 150; Romans 8.

17 Philip J Sampson, *Animal Ethics and the Nonconformist Conscience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).







## A Place to *Be*

### DAVID PARISH

It's a frosty Tuesday January morning as I cross the icy car park next to the church hall. The yew trees in the church yard nearby glisten with frost.

The church clock is striking 10 am as I enter the door of the community café and hub and the room is humming. A welcoming place to be if you are homeless or unable to heat your home or just wanting a space to get warm and have a coffee after shopping in the village high street.

In one corner is the "Craft and Chatter" group who work on individual and collaborative projects like the knitted poppy display for Remembrance Sunday. The people who come find companionship if they live alone and the stimulation of working together.

In another corner of the room is the Foodbank table with the clients lined up to collect their grocery bags. An essential life line for those who are still waiting for their Universal Credit payment to be approved. Most of the people who come to the Foodbank stay on and have a cooked breakfast and hot drink. There is also an advisor from Citizens Advice who can help with issues like housing and ensuring people can access the services they need.

The staff in the kitchen are working at speed to make the lattes and flat whites for the customers. As an example of community and local partnership the Italian coffee machine



Getty

Cathedrals were consciously built to be visible, central and numinous.

In our more pluralistic age, the role of faith has been privatised and consequently the church has been decentralised. While church buildings are now no longer our cultural centrepieces, we have an opportunity to make them community centres, places where pockets of life and light can draw others in. While no longer aspiring to be symbols of the transcendence of God, our churches can perhaps become embodiments of the immanence of Christ (image: Getty).



has been donated by a local coffee roasting company, Coffee Bay, and they supply the coffee and train the kitchen volunteers in barista skills. Sometimes the volunteers are older children from a secondary school for children with additional needs and they find enjoyment in being part of the community and learning catering skills that might lead to employment when they finish school. Another example of community and connection is that the Christmas lunch for over 80 people was provided and cooked by Colets, the local health club.

St Nicholas church has stood at the centre of the community of Thames Ditton, a village now on the edge of the London commuter belt, for 900 years. It was built as a field chapel by Merton Priory to serve the farm workers on its grange farm lands in the area. You can still see the Norman arches of the chancel.

Over the centuries it has been expanded to meet the needs of the village as it grew. In the 1640's the vicar was Richard Byfield, theologian and chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, and he held the Puritan view that the church served the whole person, body, soul and mind. In the Victorian era the railway came and the population and church grew again and some of the fields were replaced by light industry.

Today the church seeks to reach the whole community

**We welcome people of every faith and background, sharing with them the love of God and the warmth of our community so that no one ever feels they are facing life alone.**

whatever their situation and some who use the Hub feel themselves part of the church even though they may attend only at the major festivals. Others have gone on to do an Alpha Course and become members of the church and themselves become volunteers at the Hub.

I talked with Emma Macfarlane who leads the Hub initiative and she told me this:

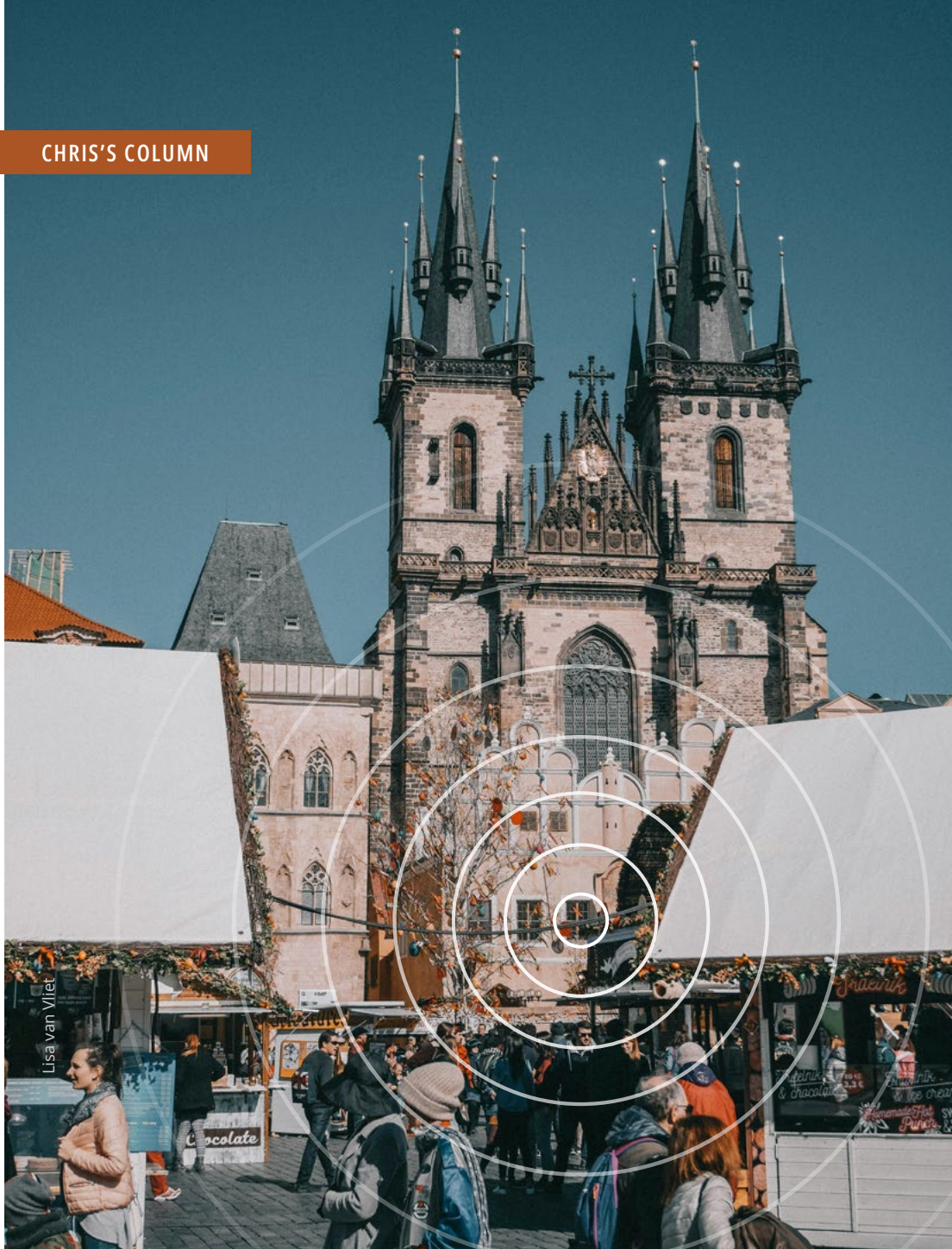
Offering a warm and welcoming space within the St Nicholas' Church community enables us to meet, support and walk alongside those who might otherwise face loneliness, especially during the colder months. Rooted in God's mission to love, serve and bring hope to all, our Community Hub places the church at the centre of everything we do. We welcome people of every faith and background, sharing with them the love of God and the warmth of our community so that no one ever feels they are facing life alone.

It is hoped to expand the range of activities at the Hub by having a workshop operated by the charity "Men in Sheds" in an old stable on the property, a relic of the Victorian era when rural clergy had a horse and carriage. This workshop has the potential to house a Repair Café to help the circular economy.

*David Parish is a retired airline executive and an Associate Fellow of KLC.*







# Gospel-centred Integral Mission

CHRIS WRIGHT

*Gospel-centred integral mission* is now my own preferred phrase for what I believe to be the biblical mission mandate, in theology and practice.<sup>1</sup>

Mission must be gospel-centred, provided we are using that word “gospel” in its full biblical sense, as the good news of the specific historical events that God both promised and accomplished through Jesus of Nazareth, along with their implications as regards his status (as Messiah and Lord), the kingdom of God, the destiny of all creation, and our own destinies in response to who Jesus is and what he accomplished in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. It is, as Paul says

quite often, “the gospel of God”, i.e. primarily good news *from God and about God and about what God has done*, not just a formula or prayer for individual salvation.

To put it another way, the centrality of the gospel is not quite the same thing as the primacy of evangelism, for the simple reason that the gospel is what *God* has done (perfectly, finally and forever), whereas evangelism is what *we* do (well or poorly or not at all). It is the gospel (not evangelism) that is the power of God for salvation, says Paul. And it is the gospel of God – the sheer fact that *there is* good news because God has acted for good – that validates all that we do in mission, including evangelism, since good news must, of course, be “good-news-ed” – proclaimed in words that bear witness to what God has done.

<sup>1</sup> It is now also the title of Chapter 13 in my fully revised and updated *Mission of God* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (IVP, 2025).

And mission must be “integral”, in the sense that the central truth of the gospel (as defined above) integrates, i.e., holds together, authorises and motivates, all that we do in word and deed, as God’s people called to participate with God in his redemptive mission within history. And as the Lausanne Movement has affirmed for half a century now, integral (or holistic) mission holds together both the proclamation of the gospel in evangelism and the demonstration of the gospel in works of compassion and justice, and also, since Cape Town 2010, our creational responsibility for the earth that, according to Paul’s gospel in Colossians 1:15-23, belongs to Christ by right of creation, redemption and inheritance. It is the truth and centrality of the whole biblical gospel of God that governs and drives every aspect of our missional thinking and acting in God’s world for God’s glory.

As regards the first two – evangelism and social engagement – the relationship is still portrayed by some speakers and writers as a matter of “tension”, or “priorities,” in spite of the immense quantity of theological reflection that the global evangelical community has done, including especially in the decade following Lausanne I (1974), demonstrating biblically that, although of course they are not the same thing, they are inseparably and integrally related within and around the centrality of the gospel itself. Any “tension” between them is not in the Bible but generated by ourselves, in the way churches may emphasise or engage in either while ignoring or failing in the other. But that is a fault in the church, not a reason to argue the priority of one over another or invent some kind of tension between them.

For example, it is often objected (to me when advocating an integrated and holistic understanding of mission), that churches which become active in social projects of various sorts can easily lose their passion for evangelism (if they had any) and slide into failing to preach the gospel. To which I say, that is *not* holistic mission and such churches need the rebuke and correction of the Holy Spirit and his word. It is not a reason for others to neglect the social implications, claims and demands of the biblical gospel. But there are churches also, whole denominations sometimes, well known for evangelistic zeal, but lacking any apparent concern or action in relation to issues of deprivation and injustice in their own environment or globally, sometimes with the claim of being “apolitical” (a term that would make little sense to the prophets). Let’s remember that the gospel, again in Paul’s terminology, is a matter of obedience, not just of belief.

Once again, it is the centrality of the biblical gospel itself that integrates all these dimensions of mission, and summons the

whole church to reflective and strategic obedience to “all that I have commanded you” (as Jesus said), with multiple giftings, callings and sendings, and, yes, a variety of priorities spread across those equipped to variously address them.

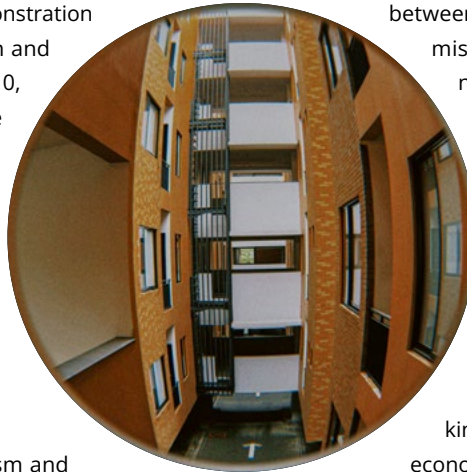
But doesn’t Acts show that the early church prioritized the preaching of the word over social issues, when a conflict between them surfaced in chapter 6? That is a misunderstanding of Acts 6 which I think needs to be corrected.

Luke has already shown twice that the small but growing community of believers in Jesus as Messiah, in the power of the Holy Spirit, has been characterized *both* by fearless preaching of the gospel that the crucified Jesus had been raised by God and was now exalted as the world’s true king, *and* by a quality of *koinonia* that gave economic substance to their spiritual unity in generous care for the poor. And Luke emphasises that the church was growing exponentially in the wake of *both* those characteristics (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35).

Then come the threats to this early embodied gospel witness. First, we shudder at the devastating impact of intentional lying and deceit within the community, lying in fact to the Holy Spirit and to God (5:1-11). This was dramatically exposed and confronted by the Apostle Peter, with a signal instance of divine wrath. But still the church goes on growing (5:14). Then comes the threat from the religio-political authorities, including imprisonment and flogging, which totally fails to stop the apostles “teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah” (5:17-42). The *word* goes forth; the church grows.

And then comes the threat to the *social* harmony of the community, which Luke has so carefully described twice as the life of people transformed by the gospel and the presence of Jesus through his Spirit. The very acts of compassion that were characteristic and attractive become a source of division along linguistic fault lines, with perceived favouritism and injustice doing their ugly work. This is a serious threat to the church’s demonstration of the gospel’s power. And what is the apostles’ response this time?

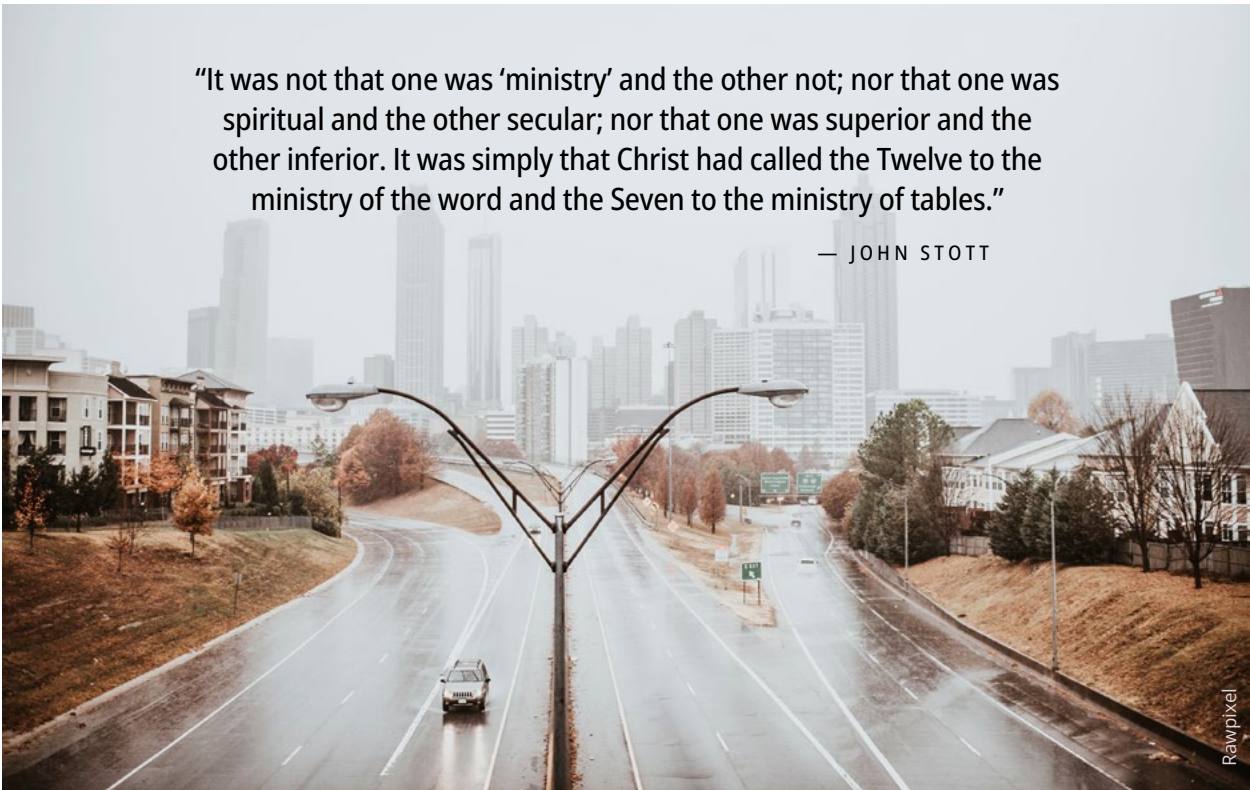
Unfortunately the NIV does not really help us here. This is how they translate the apostles’ words in Acts 6:2. “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word in order to wait on tables.” Now that immediately sounds like a pejorative comparison. Obviously, being a preacher is more important than being a waiter! (obvious to some, perhaps, but not a good biblical theology of work and vocation; but that’s another





“It was not that one was ‘ministry’ and the other not; nor that one was spiritual and the other secular; nor that one was superior and the other inferior. It was simply that Christ had called the Twelve to the ministry of the word and the Seven to the ministry of tables.”

— JOHN STOTT



issue). What the translation obscures is the fact that the Greek uses the same root three times:

- in v. 1, *diakonia* (translated “distribution of food”, but simply means “ministry”, or “ministration” [KJV]);
- in v. 2, *diakonein* “to minister/serve at tables” (NIV inserts “ministry” before “of the word”. It is not in the Greek there.
- in v. 4, *diakonia* (ministry of the word).

In other words - the whole passage is about *ministry*, in two distinct forms: one the *ministry* of caring for widows, the other the *ministry* of preaching and teaching the word. John Stott puts it like this:

It is essential to note that both distributing food and teaching the word were referred to as ministry (*diakonia*). Indeed both were Christian ministry, could be full-time Christian ministry, and required Spirit-filled people to perform them. The only difference between them was that one was pastoral ministry, and the other social. It was not that one was “ministry” and the other not; nor that one was spiritual and the other secular; nor that one was superior and the other inferior. It was simply that Christ had called the Twelve to the ministry of the word and the Seven to the ministry of tables.<sup>2</sup>

And that further points to a more careful understanding of the apostles’ point. They were concerned for their own Christ-given priority, not referring to the whole church. “It would not be right for us...” they say. The emphasis is clear

at the start of v. 4, where the “and we...” of the NIV overlooks the particle *de*, which contrasts their task with the task they assign to the Seven. It would be better rendered: “We will turn this responsibility over to *them*. But as for *us*, we will stick firmly to prayer and the ministry of the word.” It would not be inappropriate to use the word “mission” here. The apostles certainly had their mission already, direct from the risen Christ. But the Seven also now had *their* mission, as part of the overall mission of the church as a whole who chose them and accepted their apostolically authorised task.

The apostles know the priority that Christ had given to *them* as authorised apostles, specifically called and sent to bear witness in words and signs to the crucified, risen, ascended and reigning Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ. They are not telling the church as a whole that caring for the widows in practical and impartial provision was of secondary or lesser importance for the whole church, or even worse (as is sometimes alleged) a “distraction” from the real work of mission. On the contrary, in view of the *importance* of that specific *diakonia* in the visible, gospel-embodied witness of the new community, it must be done and done well – and for that reason it must become *the priority for those who would be appointed to see to it*. And it is noteworthy that when the Seven were chosen, they were essentially “ordained” to the task, with prayer and laying on of hands – exactly the same significant actions that launched Paul and Barnabas on their second missionary journey (Acts 13:3).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: An Urgent Plea for Double Listening* (IVP, 1992), p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> Their first mission trip (when the church in Antioch, alerted by the Spirit, sent off Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus together) is in Acts 11:27-30, and it was for famine relief. That “mission” (12:25, NIV), is actually also called their *diakonia*. Their subsequent church-planting work in Asia Minor is twice referred to simply as their “work” - *ergon* (13:2; 14:26).

So it seems to me that when Luke concludes this episode (and a major section of his book) with another reference to the word of God spreading and the disciples increasing in number rapidly (6:7), he is not implying that this growth of the church was because the ministry of the word was prioritised over social care, but rather that *both key ministries* were effectively maintained by wise and godly decisions that ensured *both* were prioritised respectively by those called, appointed and Spirit-filled for each, so that the witness of *the whole church*, in word and deed, in proclamation and demonstration of the gospel, in obedience to the Messiah and empowered by the Spirit, continued to bear abundant fruit.

Of course, this careful prioritisation of each dimension of the church's mission for those appointed to respective ministries did not mean any kind of watertight separation between them. It was perfectly possible for Stephen to be a Spirit-empowered preacher and teacher, as it was for Philip to be a Spirit-transported evangelist, as it was for Paul to follow up his early famine-relief trip with a constant remembering the needs of the poor "all along" in the midst of his church-planting work (Gal 2:10).

In the church today, then, gospel-centred integral/holistic mission should mean that any local church community ought to be thinking strategically and comprehensively about the variety of ways in which the gospel can be proclaimed and embodied, in their own neighbourhood, in their nation, and in their commitment to God's mission to the ends of the earth. They should ask, are we ensuring that *the gospel of God is central* both to our verbal witness in the preaching and evangelism of the church, and also to our outreach in acts of love, compassion, service and justice in the community?

And while every member has their specific calling and place



*Saint Hedwig Feeding the Imprisoned and Caring for Pilgrims*

of *diakonia*, let those who know God has called and gifted them to particular forms of *diakonia* – whether word-based or other forms of ministry – concentrate on that as *their own priority*, without insisting that it be the only priority for the church as a whole, in a way that relegates other ministries as secondary or “not real mission.” That kind of dichotomising and taxonomising is where the so-called tension arises, and it is so unhelpful.

After all, the Great Commission is very clear. Jesus did not say, “make disciples....teaching them to obey *what you decide has priority* among all that I commanded you...” No, he simply said, “to obey *all* that I commanded you,” which, as the Gospels themselves show, is a very comprehensive range of obedience indeed.

*Chris Wright is a Senior Research Fellow at KLC and International Ambassador at Langham Partnership. He is the author of The Great Story and the Great Commission: Participating in the Biblical Drama of Mission (Baker, 2023) and Understanding Mission: A Study Guide for the Church (Langham, 2025).*







# The Coffee House

## PLACEMAKING AND THE ART OF THE THIRD SPACE

FRITZ VAN DER LECQ

In the geography of the modern university, students often find themselves oscillating between two poles: the “First Place” of the residence room and the “Second Place” of the high-pressure lecture hall. While these spaces serve the essential functions of survival and study, they often lack the warmth required for the soul to breathe. At the UCT YMCA, situated at the literal nexus of the University of Cape Town’s Upper, Middle, and Lower campuses, we have spent the last year asking a vital question: *Where is the space for the common good?*

Our answer arrived in the form of a “Third Place” – simply called the Coffee House.

### The Naming Process: History and Homeliness

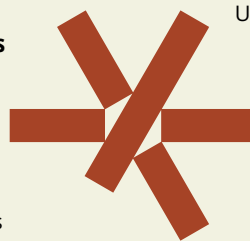
Choosing a name for this space was a journey through both our history and our architectural reality. We considered several options that leaned heavily into the YMCA’s global heritage. One was “Triangle,” a nod to the red equilateral triangle representing the holistic development of Spirit, Mind, and Body. Another was “The Hut,” a reference to the YMCA coffee huts that provided warmth, refuge, and a “home away from home” for soldiers on the frontlines during World War II.

Ultimately, we chose the “Coffee House.” The building itself resembles a small, standalone home rather than a generic “hole-in-the-wall” shop. This name evokes a sense of ritual and homeliness, reinforcing the idea of a welcoming threshold. The phrase “let’s go grab a coffee at the Coffee House” encapsulates an identity that feels less like a commercial transaction and more like an invitation into a shared domestic space.

### The Asterisk Logo: Sub-brand and Gateway

A critical part of our brand development was navigating the relationship between our organisational identity – the UCT YMCA – and the identity of the Coffee House. While the UCT YMCA remains our all-encompassing brand, we realised that placing it prominently at the front door could feel imposing or inadvertently act as a barrier to a university community seeking a liminal, non-threatening space.

To solve this, we developed the Asterisk as a dedicated sub-brand. The Asterisk serves as the “public face” of the UCT YMCA – a gateway that is subservient to the overarching brand but essential to its growth. Symbolically, the Asterisk is a powerful graphic. The circle at its centre functions as a “hub” or a converging space. Just as the nearby historic Summer House was designed as a radial point for the UCT campus, the Coffee House – marked by the Asterisk – becomes a modern “landing point.” It is a threshold where the different paths of student life intersect.



### The Priority of Craft: Excellence as Witness

One of the greatest temptations in a ministry context is to treat the “product” – the coffee – as a mere by-product of the mission. We have made a conscious decision to reject this. To be a credible “Third Place” on a campus as diverse as UCT, the actual coffee must be central to our reputation.

We have leaned into the world of specialty and craft coffee because we believe that excellence is a form of witness. We

want guests to be surprised by the quality of their latte before they ever realise the deeper mission behind the space. When a shop is known for its craft, it earns the right to be heard. By relying on high-quality suppliers and avoiding the complexity of a full restaurant menu, we ensure our small team can focus entirely on the quality of the cup and the quality of the welcome.

### **The Barista Society: The Heart of the House**

The true engine of our placemaking is our baristas. We didn't just hire staff; we formed a community called the "Barista Society." Since our launch in August 2025, the Barista Society has been anchored by our two lead baristas. Their expertise was critical in establishing the Coffee House, but their role goes beyond technical skill; they are the primary embodiment of our incarnational presence. We believe that the quality of Christian community in the Coffee House is inseparable from the people behind the machine.



The immediate next step in our journey is to grow this community by inviting student baristas into an apprenticeship model. Under the mentorship of our lead baristas, these "novitiates" will be trained in technical excellence and disciplined in the art of hospitality. These baristas will embody our mission daily, ensuring that the Coffee House isn't just a shop, but a place where the good news is made tangible through excellence and meaningful connection.

### **Curating the "Common Ground"**

A pitfall for faith-based spaces is the "Christian Clubhouse" syndrome – an environment so saturated with subcultural markers that it feels exclusionary. We have been intentional in avoiding this by creating a "common ground."

Crucially, we did not want a second undergraduate student lounge. We intentionally designed a more sophisticated environment that would appeal to the large postgraduate population and university staff. We believe that faculty are essential to the kind of intentional Christian learning community we are trying to establish at the Y. To maintain this, we make specific "quiet" decisions: we don't play worship music, and we ask our baristas to focus on making genuine connections rather than explicit evangelism. We believe that remembering a name and offering a "meaningful presence" is a powerful way to embody the life of Christ.

### **The Power of Collaboration**

While I have had the privilege of project-leading this initiative, the Coffee House is the fruit of a deeply collaborative effort. We must begin by acknowledging our donors, who gave so generously to make this dream a reality. Their contributions funded the restoration of the terrace roof and the essential set-up costs, including our beautiful refurbished La Marzocco







espresso machine. We can testify to the truth that *“God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work”* (2 Cor. 9:8). As Henri Nouwen writes: *“When this happens, we can indeed say with Paul, ‘There is a new creation!’ (2 Cor. 5:17). Where there is a new creation in Christ, there the kingdom of God is made manifest to the world.”*

Our journey was also significantly shaped by our partnership with *Pascal’s Coffeehouse* at the University of Florida, Gainesville. As an initiative of the Christian Study Center, Pascal’s served as a model for how a coffee house can be a living embodiment of a Christian understanding of work, craft, and relationships. We could not have arrived at our current clarity without the exceptional generosity of the Pascal’s manager. Their insights were instrumental in helping us understand how the Coffee House aligns with and advances our overarching organisational vision of “cultivating a place at UCT for the integration of faith, learning, and life.”

In terms of the craft itself, we are honoured to partner with the remarkable people at *Cedar Coffee Roasters*, a specialist roastery in Cape Town. They describe themselves as: *“Two simple guys from Cape Town, roasting high quality coffee. Making it more accessible. Reaching a wider audience. Genuine and authentic. That’s us.”* Their commitment to roasting high-quality coffee and their authentic approach have been foundational to our reputation for excellence.

Finally, creating a beautiful space required the expertise of key specialists. We owe a great debt to the architect responsible for the meticulous restoration and refurbishment of the terrace roof, ensuring the project remained in keeping with the heritage of our historic building. Equally vital was our brand developer and interior advisor; his incredible use of colour to define spaces and create visual interest between zones, alongside seating



options that optimise the use of space, has been essential in making the interior the success it is today.

### Conclusion: The Daily Pause

In the end, placemaking is about honouring the people who enter the building. It is about recognising that in a digital, fragmented age, physical proximity and “third places” are essential for human flourishing. The Coffee House is our “daily pause.” It is a reminder that we are more than our grades or our job titles; we are human beings who require rest, connection, and a taste of something “good, beautiful, and true.” By intentionally crafting this space – focusing on the craft of the coffee, the discipleship of the baristas, and the symbolic invitation of the asterisk – we hope to offer the university community more than just a caffeine fix; we hope to offer them a home away from home.

As we look to the future, our mission remains clear: to continue integrating faith and life, one cup—and one conversation—at a time.

*Fritz van der Lecq is an Associate Fellow of the Kirby Laing Centre and Director of the University of Cape Town YMCA.*





J. DAVID STARK

In Mark 10, “James and John, the sons of Zebedee” (v. 35a) ask Jesus to sign a blank check.<sup>1</sup> “We wish that you would do for us whatever we might ask you,” they say (Mark 10:35b). Of course, Jesus knows better than to underwrite such a desire, and he cautions the sons of Zebedee that they do not truly know what they ask when they seek to sit “at [his] right hand and at [his] left in [his] glory” (Mark 10:37; see Mark 10:38–40).

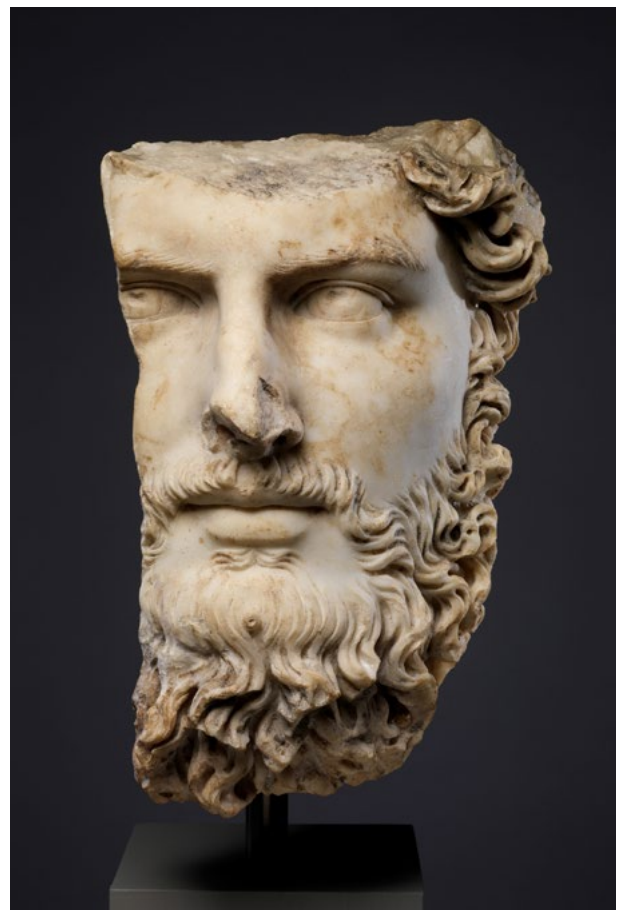
On hearing this exchange, the other ten disciples become angry with James and John (Mark 10:41). But why? Do they see how wrong James and John’s request was in principle? Or are they merely offended that they have been edged out of the opportunity to be among the first to vie for places of honour beside Jesus?<sup>2</sup>

Jesus’ response to the whole group suggests the latter. He calls together the twelve and says to them,

You know that those who seem to rule the nations<sup>3</sup> are domineering [κατακυριεύουσιν] over them, and their great men act like authoritarians [κατεξουσιάζουσιν] over them.<sup>4</sup> And it is not this way among you, but whoever wants to become great among

you will be your servant [διδάκων], and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave [δοῦλος]. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42b–45).

When Mark (or Jesus in Mark) refers to the “Son of Man,” the reference is to Daniel 7. There, “thrones” – plural – appear



1 Greek NT quotations accord with NA<sup>28</sup>; translations are mine throughout.

2 See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 418; M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 301–2. See also Morna D. Hooker (Black’s) and Adela Yarbro Collins (Hermeneia).

3 The term ἔθνη can refer either to “gentiles” specifically (excluding Israel) or to “nations” generally (including Israel). Here, the general meaning appears more likely. Israel and gentile nations alike suffered under domineering rulers, and Jesus’ contrast is between authoritarians and servants, not Jews and gentiles (Cf. Boring, *Mark*, 301–2; contra France, *Mark*, 418).

4 Cf. Luke 22:25. Sometimes, a κατα- prefix heightens the negative connotations of a word, which seems likely here.



in heaven, “and the Ancient of Days took his seat” (Dan 7:9).<sup>5</sup> Then, Daniel sees how someone “like a Son of Man” arrives “with the clouds of heaven” (Dan 7:13 θ; cf. Mark 14:62).<sup>6</sup> This person is with the “Ancient of Days” (Dan 7:13).<sup>7</sup> And to this “Son of Man” comes

the rule and the honour and the kingdom, and all the peoples, tribes, and tongues will serve him, and his authority is an eternal authority that will not pass away, and his kingdom will not be destroyed (Dan 7:14 θ).

It is this almost unimaginably exalted “Son of Man” who, according to Jesus, “did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom” (Mark 10:45).

To be sure, the “Son of Man” does come into the kingly authority that Daniel foresees (Mark 13:24–27; cf. Rev 3:21). But the Son’s accession to the throne does not alter either his posture of service or the total and irreconcilable break between this posture and the one adopted either by “those who seem to rule” and “domineer” or by the “great men” who “act like authoritarians” (Mark 10:42).

Like the disciples, those who “domineer” and “act like authoritarians” grasp for status and power (cf. Mark 10:41–43).

5 France, *Mark*, 32, 127–28; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 624–29.

6 Or “upon” (ἐπὶ), according to the Old Greek (οἱ). Cf. Matt 26:64.

7 Some witnesses to Daniel’s ο text indicate that the “Son of Man” was present *as* or *like* the “Ancient of Days” (i.e., 967, 88-Sy; ὡς παλαιός ἡμερῶν). But this reading is probably secondary.

They want to make something of themselves. That something is, in particular, a good bit more than their neighbours.

Grasping for status or power might be piously cloaked. It might say that it seeks only the greatest nearness to Jesus (e.g., places at his right or left hand). But, Jesus cautions, this is not the way of the Son of Man. Nor should it be the way of his individual followers, nor of those followers as they relate to each other.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the Son’s way is the way of *non*-grasping (Phil 2:5–8). It is the way of faithful obedience in the suffering he endured both throughout his life and finally in his self-giving death to ransom others (Heb 5:7–10; cf. Heb 12:3–11).

Even now in his majestic session at the Father’s right hand, the Son has still rejected the ways of “those who seem to rule” and of the “great men.” The Son has not found his way by grasping for status and power like they do. Instead, he reigns by grant from another – “the rule and the honour and the kingdom *were given* to him,” as Daniel says (7:14 θ).<sup>9</sup> Or as Paul describes, the Son has died, risen and ascended to the throne (1 Cor



8 See also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Führer and the Individual in the Younger Generation,” in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins, and Douglas W. Stott, DBW(E) 12 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 268–82.

9 Italics added; cf. 1 Cor 15:25, 27–28; Heb 5:5–10; 10:12–13; see also Heb 1:3–4; 8:1–2; 12:2. See also J. David Stark, “Understanding Scripture Through Apostolic Proclamation,” in *Scripture First: Biblical Interpretation That Fosters Christian Unity*, ed. Daniel B. Oden and J. David Stark (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2020), 60–63.

15:3b-5; 23-28).<sup>10</sup> Yet not even in his enthronement does the Son grasp for power, status or other means of pursuing an agenda peevishly centred on himself. Instead, the Son

must rule until [the Father] puts all [the Son's] enemies under his feet.... And when [the Father] subjects all things to [the Son], then the Son himself will also be subject to [his Father] who subjected all things to him so that God [the Father] might be all in all (1 Cor 15:25, 28; cf. 1 Cor 15:23-24).<sup>11</sup>

"The Son of Man [came] to serve and to give his life as a ransom," says Jesus (Mark 10:45). The Son's subsequent exaltation does not change this posture of service – only its location and manner.

The Son continues as high priest, mediator and intercessor for those who come to the Father through him (e.g., Heb 7:3, 22-25; 8:1-7; 9:15, 24; 12:22-24). And however exalted are the various aspects of the Son's continuing work, in the very midst of this work, the Son remains "gentle and humble in heart" (Matt 11:29). For "he is not ashamed to call them brothers" whom he helps to maturity in the midst of their temptations (Heb 2:11; see also Heb 2:8-10, 14-18).

So then, neither "in the days of his flesh" (Heb 5:7) nor yet now, does the Son "domineer" or "act like an authoritarian." He instead rules at the Father's right hand with the security of one



Noël Bellemare, *Book of Hours*

who need not grasp at power or status for himself. Likewise then, not even does the Son's exaltation invite his followers to jockey for greatness (cf. Mark 10:42).

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<sup>10</sup> Stark, "Apostolic Proclamation," 67-68.

<sup>11</sup> See Stark, "Apostolic Proclamation," 60-64; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1237-40.







## THIRD SPACES

# *The Health Club*

GENEVIEVE WEDGBURY

Curated Lifestyle

I met Sam on a Thursday when I took my daughter for her swimming lessons. We used the same Family changing rooms, she for her aqua aerobics class. She wore a permanent, bright smile, her eyes sparking. She always took especial notice of my daughter, and she often added little praises for my mothering. (I don't know if she realised what those words meant to me. I was a new mum to an adopted one year old. Deep down I agonised about whether I was "getting it right". She sprinkled me with encouragement and pride). We exchanged scant information about ourselves while we changed, the moments restricted between Sam blow-drying her chic, white crop and me chasing my daughter and simultaneously wrestling to get her dried and dressed. Then her class time changed. She wouldn't be coming in on a Thursday morning anymore. We didn't see one another for a while.

Then one day last autumn, I was sitting on one of the sofas in the cafe there, working on my laptop and enjoying a cosy moment with a coffee, when Sam walked past. She stopped.

We chatted, and somehow the conversation weaved to Christmas and her offering one of the beautiful Christmas sacks she used to fill for her three grandchildren when they were younger. I was touched and only slightly hesitant about the size of these sacks to fill (!) and willingly accepted. She could drop it off at reception for me, or we could meet up for a proper catch up and she could give it to me in person. It seemed far too impersonal to collect such a tender gift from the front desk, so we arranged to meet.

It was only when we sat down properly together and Sam quoted a scripture that I guessed she was a Christian (though it was no surprise, she had such a light and warmth about her). I confirmed she was but caveated it. Due to a painful experience, she was no longer in a church. I discovered that this health club had, in many ways, become her new faith community.

I am meeting more people, more women specifically, like this. Itinerant preachers, perhaps? Taking their faith out into



the everyday. Sam is full of joy and optimism, and her faith radiates. She confided she'd always had a strong faith. She'd always sensed the presence of God and knew herself to be loved, and she'd recognised this as a gift. However, from a young age, she'd felt that the teaching she received, like a building, was somehow too small to contain her experience which, like a well-spring, was ever spilling over. Devastatingly, this was confirmed throughout her life. Growing up in a home which she experienced as loveless in spite of it being "Christian," and the death of one of her two daughters; a very "evangelical," close relative sealed the fate of her growing unease with the institutional church when he asked her other daughter on the death of her sister, something along the lines of how she felt about knowing she wouldn't be in heaven?

Cold as a tombstone. Yet, Sam, no doubt long dissatisfied with this theology, saw an opportunity to jump ship into the unknown, swimming through the waters of a new way to express her Christian faith other than in a stifled community.

This health club is not just the place she takes care of her physical body. It is a place where she is spiritually enriched too. It is a place of community and witness for her. She is not shy about talking about her faith. Here those conversations are unforced, unhurried and unhampered. There were no apologies from Sam.

I spoke about my own faith. We both agreed this had felt like a divine encounter and we wanted to chat more.

I felt very blessed by this exchange. But I felt a deep sadness too that Sam didn't feel there could be a church in the traditional sense of a body of Christian believers that she could call home.

It makes me reflect now on what church means to me. The

primary church we as a family attend now is the first church we've really felt a sense of belonging to. It's a Catholic church, my husband and I having been received several years ago, due, in part, to our adoption journey; we adopted from India and this church in Cambridge is home to a flourishing Indian community. We have both felt a sense of cohesion there. A rhythm to the Mass. It's sometimes impossible to properly reflect on the scriptures as we struggle to distract our daughter with snacks and trinkets that aren't too noisy! But in the Eucharist, I am sure to receive Christ. It is so simple. So ordinary. And yet totally extraordinary. I trust that Bread will sustain me over the week ahead more than any self-reliance. It is humbling. This sweet rhythm and worship carry me in the happy chaos of family life.

I appreciate entering in more fully to the mystery of the church. The apophatic way.

And I wonder if this is potentially a gift of the postmodern movement to the church. That we don't have all the answers. And yet, for me, as I see it, the necessary tension of holding that with robust, orthodox theology. After all, both the following are true...

"You cannot put new wine in old wineskins" (Matthew 9:17).

And,

"Ask for the ancient paths" (Jeremiah 6:16).

I look forward to continuing my conversation with Sam again and this dance of truth and mystery, journeying, I pray for us both, ever more deeply into Christ.

*Genevieve is a freelance writer and Professional Doctorate candidate at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, where she is researching a robust theology of body literacy and Christian spirituality. She enjoys running, writing and Russian-style ballet.*







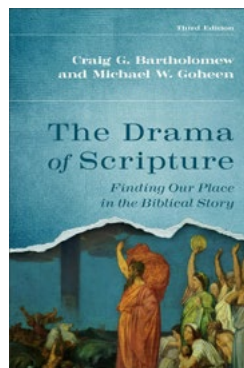
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# The Drama of the Decalogue

BUILDING THE GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

2026 is KLC's *Year of the Decalogue*. I recently submitted the second volume of my Old Testament Origins and the Question of God series, entitled *Moses and the Victory of YHWH*. Part 1 deals with Moses and Part 2 with Law. In Part 2 I have an extensive discussion of the Decalogue which is at the heart of OT law. This has been hard but exhilarating work, and this year KLC will be seeking to translate this sort of hard academic work into more accessible outlets.



this project develop in all sorts of creative ways. We welcome your ideas!

## The Drama of the Decalogue

Robby and my proposed title for our book deliberately alludes to *The Drama of Scripture*. In *Drama*, Mike and I seek to tell the story of the Bible – the true story of the whole world – as a drama in six acts. These six acts are as follows:

Rather than KLC producing product and then telling the church that this is what you need, we began with a consultation with church leaders and relevant parties as to what is needed. Further such consultations are in the works. At this stage we are planning:

1. A book on the decalogue comparable to my and Mike Goheen's *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story*. *Drama* has been a surprise bestseller and is now in some thirteen languages with other translations in the pipeline. The next translation due out is in German, translated by Rainer Behrens. Robby Holt has kindly agreed to co-author this with me and we have a verbal agreement from our publisher of choice.
2. A much more accessible version of 1, and at this point Libbie Weber is considering taking on this task.
3. A course on the Decalogue later this year.

Of course, we have many other ideas and would love to see

- Act 1: God Establishes his Kingdom: Creation
- Act 2: Rebellion in the Kingdom: Fall
- Act 3: The King Chooses Israel: Redemption Initiated
  - Scene 1: A People for the King
  - Scene 2: A Land for his People
- Act 4: The Coming of the King: Redemption Accomplished
- Act 5: Spreading the News of the King: The Mission of the Church
  - Scene 1: From Jerusalem to Rome
  - Scene 2: And into All the World
- Act 6: The Return of the King: Redemption Completed

This approach draws on multiple sources, namely the redemptive historical approach in Dutch theology, Tom Wright's proposals, Lesslie Newbigin's work, etc. It enable us to appropriate the Bible as a whole so that it in turn appropriates us in our totality. As the true story of the whole world we are called to make the biblical story our story and intentionally to indwell it. God's revelation of himself is progressive and we find ourselves today in Act 5 of this great drama. However, as Tom Wright argues, we need to use all



the clues we can muster from all the Acts in order to work out how to live today.

The Decalogue or Ten Commandments comes in Act 3 in two places in the OT, namely Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Exodus 20 is the primary version, reiterated by Moses in Deuteronomy 5 amidst his sermons preached to the Israelites on the borders of the promised land. You will recall how God rescues his people from dreadful, genocidal slavery in Egypt, and brings them to Mount Sinai in the wilderness where he formally establishes them as his people by means of the Sinai covenant or treaty.

The Israelites would have been familiar with such treaties since it was common practice for nations – or more precisely their leaders – to enter into treaties with other nations, either parity treaties between equal parties or vassal treaties between unequal parties. The Sinai covenant has the form of a vassal treaty in which the Decalogue is the general stipulations governing the relationship between YHWH and his people. The Israelites have to agree to it but the overwhelming partner is YHWH. In formalising his relationship with his people in this way, YHWH does something that is virtually unknown in the ancient Near East, namely a god entering into a treaty relationship with a whole people. And, of course, this is not just any god, but YHWH, who not only defeats pharaoh, but when he brings the Israelites to himself he reminds them that “the whole

earth is mine” (Exodus 19:5). And the Sinai treaty is with the whole people, with each Israelite. A characteristic of the Decalogue which we easily miss is that in Hebrew there is a you person singular and a you person plural. All the “yous” in the Decalogue are in the singular, thus addressing each individual Israelite as well as the people as a whole.



The Decalogue is akin to *the constitution* for the new nation being formed under YHWH's rule. Because YHWH is the creator, redeemer God we have every reason to find in this constitution a goldmine of instruction for how to live well in God's world. At the same time God forms the Israelites into a *theocracy* whereas in Act 5 Christians are scattered among the nations. We also live on the other side of the Christ event, in which Christ fulfils the OT. All of which means that we need to take care when

we leverage the Decalogue for how to live today. Let me give one obvious example. In ancient Israel breaking the first commandment – you shall have no other gods besides me – merited the death penalty. None of us would wish to advocate for such legislation in our pluralistic cultures and nor should we. Israel was an ancient Near Eastern nation, and her law bears all the marks of its context. None of us live in the *ancient* Near East, even if we live in countries like Israel, Egypt, Iraq and Iran. We live in Act 5 and at a very different time in history so that once again we need to be careful how we translate God's contextual instruction for his ancient Near Eastern people into our contexts today.







### Building the Good Neighbourhood

At the same time we should remember that Act 1: *creation*, sets the stage for all the subsequent Acts so that there is fundamental continuity even as we move from one Act to the next. Indeed, above and beyond all six Acts is the trinitarian God. Because YHWH is both creator and redeemer, the law – better translated as instruction – that he gives to the Israelites *mirrors the grain of creation* as he has made it, *for that time in history*. Insofar as OT law mirrors God's order for his creation and encapsulates his ways with his world it is and remains normative. However, insofar as it is for that Act and time in history it should not simply be slavishly copied. Chris Wright gets at this in a very helpful way in his description of OT Israel and YHWH's law for her as a *paradigm*. By "paradigm" he means a model or example which can and should be applied in other situations. As a paradigm it cannot and should not be literally imitated. However, if Israel was designed by YHWH to be a light to the nations then that light must still be allowed to shine today. Thus, Wright asserts,

we are to take Israel's social shape and characteristics, her institutions, laws and ideals ... as paradigmatic when we are engaged in the social ethical task – both in theory and in practice. They are not, of course, the exclusive paradigm for social ethics;

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the Christian brings this, as he does every other aspect of the Old Testament, into the light of the new age of fulfilment and the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Christ. He therefore sets his Old Testament social paradigm alongside the paradigm of the social life of the early church as well as the explicit social teaching of Jesus and the apostles. Only then is he beginning to formulate a wholly biblical social ethic.<sup>1</sup>

Another way of expressing this, following the Jewish sociologist Philip Rieff, is to say that in the Decalogue and the laws that follow, YHWH is translating sacred order – his order – into social order for the new nation he is forming as his people. As Exodus 19:3 expresses it, God's intention is that his people should be, as a nation, a royal priesthood and a holy nation. Just as priests mediated God's presence to the Israelites, so Israel in her totality is to mediate the presence of God to the nations of the world. God's intention is that Israel is to be, as it were, a window through which we can peer and exclaim, Oh, so that is what life looks like under the reign of the creator, redeemer King! Once again it must be noted that this translation of sacred order into social order is historically

<sup>1</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright. 1983. *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics*. IVP. 44-45.

contextual, and thus we must be instructed by it but not necessarily imitate it.

All of which is to say that the Decalogue is exceptionally good news! The OT scholar Patrick Miller evocatively describes the Decalogue as *the ethos of the good neighbourhood*. Like the sculpture pictured below, its ten words provide the framework within which human life can flourish. Far from being the killjoy that many think the Ten Commandments to be, they are in fact the signposts to the human person, fully alive, in community.

Unpacked, the commandments are comprehensive and embrace all aspects of our lives, both private and public. God was forming his people into a nation, and thus it is not surprising that in the quote above Chris Wright refers to our *social* ethic. Attending closely to the Decalogue I have been astonished by just how wide-ranging it is, moving from worship to mission and representing God well, to family life and how we live well in community, to law courts and the restraining of misdirected desire. Evangelicals continue to struggle to take

the public dimensions of life seriously as part of their service of the LORD Christ. Our hope is that through our *Year of the Decalogue*, we can prod one another into a faith that opens out on all the world, of which Christ rightly says, "That is mine!"

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I have been struck by what a remarkable piece of pastoral theology is the Decalogue. I have always loved Eugene Peterson's answer to the question, What is the pastor for? His answer: to keep God's people attentive to God. Working away on the Decalogue I have concluded that it functions similarly, saying to us, as it were, This is your God, and here is your neighbour. Attend to both well and you and your neighbourhood will flourish.

We invite you to join us in this exploration of the Decalogue. Help us find a thousand ways to unpack it creatively for all ages in word, art, literature and song, so that together we might contribute to the building of good neighbourhoods wherever we might live.

*Craig G. Bartholomew is the director of the Kirby Laing Centre.*

*Invitation/Decalogue* by Romanian artist Liviu Mocan is a sculpture consisting of ten finger-like pillars to depict the Ten Commandments as an invitation to relationship with God and others. Their smooth inward sides evoke peace and protection, while the sharp outward edges signal moral seriousness. Together they express encounter, ethical reflection and the transformative, life-giving purpose of God's law.







Phil Hearing

INTRODUCING

# The Mother's Smile

PHILOSOPHICAL FORMATION IN THE  
WELCOME OF MOTHERS AND FRIENDS

ESTHER LIGHTCAP MEEK

At first glance at its lovely cover, you may be inclined to dismiss *The Mother's Smile* as not a book for you. For mothers and babies, you think; about mothering and baby care, you surmise. Surely not a *philosophy book*! Surely not *about my philosophy*! Surely not *germane to public theology*!

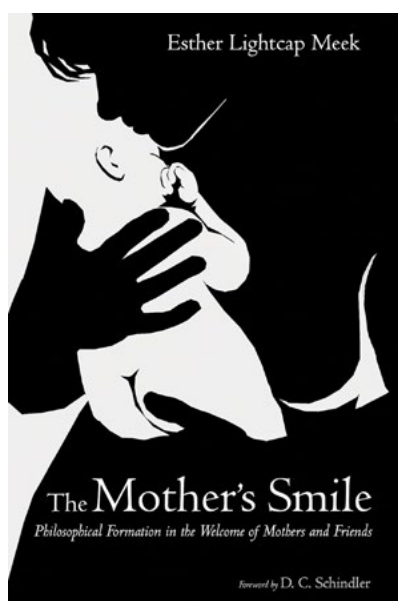
I hope you give it a second glance. You *are* in the cover's picture! You are *the baby*! – that is, you *were* the baby. There's not one of you who wasn't. If you are capable of reading this essay now, your mother or some other caregiver caught and cradled and welcomed you into their smile and world, from the first moment of your life through many months thereafter. You entered the world into the richest and most intimate face-to-face encounter imaginable. All of us entering the world are caught up into this profound philosophical act.

The book's subtitle suggests its thesis: at birth we begin to be formed philosophically in a natural, "natal" philosophy. This philosophical formation is sustained and matured over our lives in the delighted noticing regard of certain friends.

And as I claim in the book: "The mother's smile – our primal face-to-face welcome to the world – is the very

philosophical vision necessary to disarm and dispel the skewed spirit of our time, and to restore us philosophically to ourselves and to reality. And we don't need to adopt a new alternative so much as to return to what was originally ours."

Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote: "The little child awakens to self-consciousness through being addressed by the love of his mother." Philosopher and Balthasar scholar D. C. Schindler affirms that the event of *the mother's smile* forms the foundation of Balthasar's entire epistemology, giving his philosophy its distinctive quality.



In writing this book, I am simply "going to the bank" on these astounding claims. What is this philosophy which childbirth begins to shape? What is involved in our most fundamental sense of our own existence? How is Mother's welcome the shaping paradigm of our best acts of knowing? How does it shape our most fundamental philosophical act of saying yes to the real? Our understanding of reality's presence, there, beyond my thought of it? Our confidence in things' lively oneness, self-showing (beauty), self-giving (goodness), and self-saying (truth)? How does my encounter and communion with Mother – my first "other" – shape me in due regard for

all others, shaping me to be, philosophically, a friend? How does this natal encounter point on toward the face of God? – As Balthasar writes: “The promise of *the mother’s smile* is fulfilled only in Christianity.” Thus: philosophical anthropology, epistemology, metaphysics, political philosophy, and theology, public and otherwise.

In addition to mothers, there must be friends. I argue that as we see ourselves being seen in the delighted gaze of certain of our friends over our lives, this natal philosophy is sustained, matured, and sometimes (as in my own story) even restored.

You may well ask: how can a person reflect on one’s own birth event and experience? You can’t even remember it! It turns out that we access it, as I have done in writing the book, by being mothers and fathers ourselves (and aunts and uncles and...), and by having friends who see us with delighted regard, in whose gaze we see ourselves being seen. Actually, a key experience for me has been being a grandmamá: seeing my grandson Laurie in the welcoming smile of my daughter, his mother.



But *I ask you* – How could this fundamental primal philosophy have been overlooked? Of course, philosophically aware people know very well that our modern age eschews philosophy. And even without that, doing philosophy is a lot like trying to see your elbow: philosophy is more something you wear than something you stare at.

It’s always difficult to put words on it. However, philosophically aware and adept people also seem generally to discount, not even to notice, this most fundamental arena of the tiny child being formed philosophically in *the mother’s smile*.

Nor did I! Until only in recent years – as a grandmamá, actually! My plunge into philosophy, so I used to think, began with an inward crisis of skepticism at age thirteen: How do I know...! How do I know that God exists? How do I know, for that matter, that anything exists outside of my mind?? This set me on a lifelong philosophical quest. For decades I felt that the quest could only be about knowing, because I couldn’t have the arrogance to presume to talk about reality! In my philosophical study I came to realize that the picture I had found in my head, which as a product

Philosophically aware and adept people also seem generally to discount, not even to notice, this most fundamental arena of the tiny child being formed philosophically in *the mother’s smile*.





of modernity I thought was obvious, was Descartes' epoch-forming paradigm. Yet over my career, especially thanks to the metaphysical confidence of scientist-turned-philosopher Michael Polanyi, I have continued to take baby steps (in hope!) toward the real and toward interpersoned encounter as epistemically paradigmatic.

For decades I called myself a baby skeptic. Humbly I confess that only in the last five years did I realize: I wasn't a *baby* skeptic! My skepticism was "adolescent onset"! This freed me to look back and remember, in my tiny childhood, my exuberant love of the real – to recognize and accredit my natural natal philosophy. Humbly I confess that it is only late and last that I have come to see what was first and fundamental. Now it is glaringly obvious that my implicit, adolescent, modern Cartesian picture discredited, disavowed, disrespected and jettisoned an earlier, more fundamental and natural vision, a philosophically superior one, forged in the arms of my mother.

"This changes everything!" excitedly shouted a personal friend who is widely known as a cultural analyst (who is also a mother), when she heard my presentation on the mother's welcome. In this diminutive book's masterful Foreword, D. C. Schindler writes of the real reward for anyone reading it: for those who have been philosophical all along without realizing

it – (the ones I think of as my own primary audience), as well as for those "who have already studied philosophy at some depth [who] will discover a new dimension of experience that they have probably not explored much before, and can look forward to seeing things that could very well bring about a shift in their perspective."

"She shows us that the most basic philosophical act – a great Yes to being as such – is not a grand achievement reserved only for the heroes of the mind, but has always already been ours. We simply have to retrieve this original experience."

I commend to you this retrieval. Together may we explore its wider implications for our lives and for our time.

*Learn more at [www.estherlightcapmeek.com](http://www.estherlightcapmeek.com).*

*Read an excerpt and D. C. Schindler's "Foreword" at [www.estherlightcapmeek.com/the-mothers-smile-ms.html](http://www.estherlightcapmeek.com/the-mothers-smile-ms.html).*

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Andriyko Podilnyk



# Smoky Third Spaces and Flourishing

MICHAEL LANGER

Discussions of third spaces rarely involve smoke-filled cigar bars. However, eight years of ministry in Washington DC have clarified the virtues of sitting in a large leather chair, holding a glass of bourbon, puffing on a nice cigar – or in my case, a pipe properly packed with Majestic 586 – and discussing sports, movies, family life, religion, culture and certainly politics.

Faithful Presence, the ministry I founded, operates with a methodology of providing whole-life discipleship to servants and leaders working in cabinet agencies, think tanks, policy centers and lobbying groups. While our podcasts, written content and studies are frequently commended, the most effective ministry exchanges take place in person.

Just two blocks from the White House sits Shelly's Back Room. For almost 20 years, men, and a fair number of women, have come to dine on a wide variety of dishes, enjoy a frosty beverage or premium cocktail, enjoy a leisurely smoke, and sit in leather chairs arranged for conversations – and do just that: converse.

In-person office visits are frequently interrupted by the tyranny of the urgent, coffees and lunches are tightly scheduled, but saying yes to, "Want to meet at Shelly's around 3:30?" is a commitment to deep conversation. During these conversations we can move naturally from the latest political news cycle, to waxing eloquent on sports match-ups, to the deep pain of trying to save a child addicted to fentanyl, the mentally exhausting work of writing legislation for cryptocurrency knowing that the worst that could happen is a global depression, and even hearing a former special operator say, "I have killed women and children and cannot get the sight of that 13-year-old girl's head exploding out of my head."

Conversations like that come in the context of a relaxed and comfortable environment, with just enough background noise to not make a person feel like everyone is listening. When people are willing to be fully known in this way, it becomes a precious opportunity for ministry – one that allows

for thoughtful application of spiritual, emotional, relational, vocational, ideological, cultural and evangelical biblical truths to their lives.

Now, as I travel the country speaking at churches and conferences, I always make time for a cigar lounge visit. No matter where I am, there are chairs arranged facing each other for the purpose not of working on your computer, but talking with one another. Perhaps this is why the smoke-filled back rooms of Washington existed – and still exist. The very nature of these contexts fosters hours of conversation in which two people who might disagree on any number of political topics might find that after deeply discussing the matter, and getting to truly know each other, they can find a way to work together for the common good and the flourishing of our country.

Conversations that lead to encouraging what is good, restoring what is broken, creating what is missing, and opposing what is evil – foretastes of the New Heavens and New Earth – found in a cigar lounge.

*Rev Michael Langer is the founder & president of Faithful Presence in Washington DC. He has been an ordained minister for 20 years, and planted churches in Iowa City and Chicago. Michael is a Fellow at KLC and a PhD candidate at Stellenbosch. He is also the author of the forthcoming First Peter: Whole-Life Discipleship for the Public Square.*





# Meeting Christ in Sundry Places

JONATHAN EVENS IN CONVERSATION WITH FRANCIS HOYLAND

JONATHAN EVENS

Francis Hoyland has had a long and impressive career as an artist, one that has spanned over 70 years (he is now 94) and has also included writing, teaching, television and radio.

He has held teaching posts at Royal West of England Art School, Chelsea School of Art, Camberwell School of Art and The Royal Drawing School; taken part in radio and television broadcasts; was art critic for "The Listener" during the 1960s and has written three books, including *Alive to Paint* (1967). Along with David Hockney, Edward Ardizzone and other artists

of the time, he illustrated *The Oxford Illustrated Old Testament*.

He has works in numerous public and private collections, including the Methodist Art Collection. *The Life of Christ*, a suite of 91 etchings originally commissioned by Aimee and Monroe Price (US art historian and her lawyer husband), is in the British Museum and Yale University USA. Each print represents both a meditation on Christ's life and an account of something that had recently happened to Hoyland at the time of their creation. In this way, he hoped to show some relation

Francis Hoyland, *The Life of Christ 32: The Parables by the Sea*





Francis Hoyland, *The Life of Christ 82: The Crowd Call For Barabas*

between interior meditation and everyday events. As a Catholic painter, Hoyland's art has always been an expression of his faith. This has been so regardless of whether he is painting from observation or imagination.

An exhibition of his work – a series of 87 paintings of the life of Christ – was held at the Chappel Gallery from the 5th until the 24th April 2025; the dates having been specifically chosen to continue throughout Easter. Of this exhibition, Hoyland says: "During the last five years I have made many drawings and paintings, both in gouache and acrylic. Maybe I have been attempting to integrate the demands of intellect and feeling."

**Jonathan Evens:** What would you say have been some of the highlights of your career?

**Francis Hoyland:** Getting married and becoming a Catholic. I was married for 66 years and the life and death of my wife affected me deeply. Her presence doesn't leave me, as she is my muse in a way that has some similarities to Beatrice for Dante. As regards Catholic faith, I was teetering on the edge of faith when I went to Italy on a travelling scholarship – I had

my 21st birthday in Assisi – and rethought my whole language of painting as a result of that trip.

**JE:** In your 1967 book *Alive to Paint* you described your own life and formation as an artist alongside the development and constant evolution of your own visual language, and so pointed your readers to consider their own stories because, as Picasso remarked, all artists are self-taught and each must re-create an entire language from A to Z. How would you describe the development of your visual language in more recent years?

**FH:** I wrote that book for education explorers, so it was specifically aimed at young people. Picasso was right. I had the experience of rethinking my whole language of painting as a result of a travelling scholarship to Italy. I had been trained in the Euston Road approach to painting, which I came to find limiting, and the Italian paintings I saw enabled me to find a way of painting from imagination. I realised, too, that it is not good to be absolutely cut and dried about technique.

**JE:** You have said that, as an artist, your task is to meditate on separate things in such a way that you sense the context in

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which they and everything else are held and, as a result, you sometimes dare to hope that in this way you have a kind of back-door glimpse into the all-holding mind of Almighty God. What have you glimpsed of God by this means?

**FH:** This was part of finding a new language for painting after the Euston Road language. A feeling of unity can be built into the technique used. I start from the ratios of one side of the canvas to the other with each rectangle being made of three Golden Section rectangles. Each mark that I then make is made relative to the first rectangle. As one of my students described it, each mark is made in the spirit of the first. It is possible to be conscious of these relationships as you paint, up to a point. However, it is possible to overdo the geometry, as was the case with some work by Seurat and Uccello.

**JE:** Your practice of painting the life of Christ dates back to your time in Italy. You found there many versions of our Lord's life and were inspired with the need to somehow follow suit as it gradually became obvious to you that you found no other stories to be so full of meaning or had so deep an effect on you. What were you responding to in those stories and images then, and what are you responding to now?

**FH:** I was particularly influenced by the self-giving and fluency of these artists; the way that their lines flow and go

around the form. In terms of the stories of Christ, my sense is that no other stories have the sheer reality and sense of "isness" found in the Gospel stories. I was particularly influenced by predella pictures; the story of Christ's life told in a series of panels that I loved, with Giotto being the supreme figure in that regard. Giotto was a storyteller; an approach that I also recognised in Philip Guston's *I Paint What I Want to See*, Guston being a terribly truthful author. In relation to the concept of "isness", I love the idea of instress as found in the ideas of Gerard Manley Hopkins, particularly his marvellous poem "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection." This poem begins with an intense vision of the sky, then reflects that, alas, everything has to die before saying, "Enough, the resurrection!" It moves from creation to incarnation to resurrection.

**JE:** By painting the life of Christ, you are painting scenes that many other artists have already painted as well as some scenes that are less frequently depicted. Does your practice differ at all when you are painting a scene that has frequently been depicted by others and one that has only rarely been visualised?

**FH:** It is hard to forget images produced by the likes of Titian, for example, but I have to discover the image for myself each time. I am currently working on a painting of Christ with the Syrophenician woman and, in painting her

Francis Hoyland, *The Life of Christ 87: The Journey to Emmaus*





Francis Hoyland, *The Life of Christ 70: The Widow's Mite*

arm stretching out, had a flashback memory of an image by Tintoretto in mind. However, when I visited *Goya to Impressionism: Masterpieces from the Oskar Reinhart Collection* at the Courtauld Gallery, I saw Courbet's *The Hammock* and realised that he had painted the woman's legs too long. As a result, I realised that I had also been over-expressionist in my rendition of the Syrophenician woman's arm and repainted it in a more effective manner.

**JE:** Can you tell us about your use of the Ignatian model of meditation in your work?

**FH:** Where are you in the story? What is happening around you? The Ignatian model is a very direct form of meditation and a great discovery for a painter. It becomes a way of thinking. Painting is meditation.

**JE:** From where does your wish to paint large pictures of religious subjects that illustrate your Catholic faith, and to have those paintings housed in churches, derive?

**FH:** I am looking at present at a large painting of the Last Supper which I have depicted from above, giving it the point of

view of an angel. It looks good and couldn't be anything other than large. At the moment, however, I am simply focused on painting stories from our Lord's life as I am aware that the stories themselves are no longer well known. I remember, for example, talking over lunch with an external assessor at Camberwell School of Art who told me that he had never really understood what is meant by the Holy Spirit. Painting

the story of our Lord's life one scene after the other to capture the flow of his life seems of importance to me and is a little like banging a nail in with a hammer in terms of awareness of the story. Just as Ignatius, through his meditation technique, wants you to make a decision, so I want to stir it up and preach the word, having, through my art, come into a personal relationship with Jesus.

*Jonathan Evens is a priest in the Church of England and coauthor of a book on music and creative practice, The Secret Chord. His work has appeared in Artlyst, International Times, Seen and Unseen and Stride, and in several poetry anthologies.*

*This is a modified version of the article that originally appeared on artway.eu on 7 July, 2025*

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# Mary Cassatt:

## *The Crocheting Lesson*

REBECCA NUNES

The stretch of time post-Christmas and pre-Spring is difficult, a coalescence of failed New Year's resolutions, the slow trudge of work, low motivation levels and grey winter days can often leave us struggling to keep going. The promise of enchantment that hung over Christmas passes away and returns us with a crash to the reality of the everyday. This dissatisfaction is capitalised upon by travel companies as visions of utopian destinations burst out of our screens and into our living rooms, promising us relief and escape from everyday life if we buy in. Our apparently dull domestic spaces pale in comparison to the excitement and colour that we might find "out there."

The work of American artist Mary Cassatt serves as a corrective to such notions. For Cassatt it is not in escaping from, but in attending to, the domestic setting that vitality can be found. Cassatt worked much of her adult life as a painter in France, concerning herself with attention to modern life through a focus on the domestic space. She is celebrated as a modern painter of women and children, centring her focus often on maternal relationships and women's work in the home. Critics of her work have taken aim at her focus on "dull" domestic scenes. Edgar P. Richardson in a 1954 review in *Art News* dismissed her work, commenting "there is an odd contrast between the boldness of her style and the world of perpetual afternoon tea it serves to record."<sup>1</sup> Whilst some looked at her scenes of slow-paced, bourgeois life as conventional and uninteresting, others recognised her achievement: the elevation of women's work and her ability to make visible the tender beauty and intimacy of the everyday.

*The Crocheting Lesson* (1902) is an example of this. The work lacks Cassatt's characteristic bold and open pastel treatment

<sup>1</sup> E.P. Richardson, "Sophisticates and Innocents Abroad," *Art News* 53 (1954): 23.



Mary Cassatt, *The Crocheting Lesson*. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

but retains her preferred subject. In this print we see the outline of a woman, fixed on the craft in front of her. Her arms are hooked round the figure of a young girl, simultaneously working and holding her in a one-arm embrace. The young girl grips her mother's wrist, fixing her eyes also to the craft in hand. The mother's hands are in action, rehearsing movements that echo the absent hands of generations before her. Cassatt's tender print holds us at this ordinary moment where creative productivity is being once again shared and passed down across a generation.

Many have referred to Cassatt's works as "modern Madonnas," noting parallels between her work and depictions of the Madonna and Child from Old Masters such as Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510). Cassatt admired how Botticelli stretched his "love of truth to the point of painting her hands with the fingernails worn down with field work."<sup>2</sup> Cassatt was attuned to the realism of Mary and her relatability as both mother and worker. Cassatt's *Crocheting Lesson* particularly recalls Botticelli's *Madonna of the Book* (1480-81), where Mary is intent on her reading and devotion, as the Christ child is hooked in her arms and watches his mother's focused gaze. Cassatt's print faintly echoes Botticelli's emphasis on the work of Mary, imagining the everyday acts of motherhood. Though we learn little of

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Mathews, *Cassatt and Her Circle: Selected Letters* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 306.



Sandro Botticelli, *The Virgin and Child (Madonna of the Book)*

Mary Cassatt,  
*The Picture Book*



Mary and the childhood of Jesus in the Bible, we might join Cassatt and Botticelli in imagining that Christ's childhood was characterised by its relative normalcy – a child growing into adulthood through the nurture and care of his parent.

In borrowing the sacred visual language of the Madonna and Child from Old Masters, Cassatt's *Crocheting Lesson* is weighted by the sacred icon. And it is the resonant beauty of this reference in Cassatt's work that serves to highlight the dignity of the everyday. Her work calls us to contemplate the wonder of the smallest acts of creativity and the responsibility of this being shared generationally. Far from seeking delight through an escape from our everyday, Cassatt helps us to recognise that the beauty of life is found right in the heart of it. As we consider this, we might ponder how this demonstrates a central aspect of our humanity – work and creativity as a calling built into each one of us, an instinct echoing God's creativity as we pursue our own. *The Crocheting Lesson* becomes for us a lesson in resisting the urge to escape the difficulties and mundane moments of life as we struggle through lack of motivation and grey days. Rather, we are reminded by Cassatt to seek the meaning hidden within ordinary moments, uncovering the beauty, honour and dignity with which they have been endowed. Faithfulness to God is so often tied to moments just like these, small acts of obedience, of encounter, of resting in God's arms, watching him and seeking to follow in his way.

Mary Cassatt was an American painter and printmaker, born in 1844 Pennsylvania. Cassatt died in 1926 near Paris after spending most of her adult life in France. She is closely associated with the Impressionist movement in France and had notable friendships with artists such as Edgar Degas. Her interest in colour, light and the inner life of her subjects was typically depicted in domestic life and maternal relationships.

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# FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST BROTHERHOOD and the Power of Sin

WORLD KIM

Just a couple of months ago, *Christianity Today* published an article titled, “Welcome to Youth Ministry! Time to Talk about Anime.”<sup>1</sup> In this article, Gravley made a compelling case for watching anime to engage with the youth about Christianity. As someone who has been watching anime for over two decades now – with no intentions of stopping anytime soon – I cannot express the joy I felt while reading this article. However, it’s not just the youth who are watching anime; as someone in my mid-thirties, I have many friends around my age who also watch anime. In fact, earlier this year, I made an Instagram account and named it “pastors and anime.” There’s only a couple of poorly recorded posts on the page but many of my friends, many of whom are pastors, have seen this account and have asked when I was planning on doing more content – maybe one day I’ll return to it. For now, though, I want to share just one example of how anime not only helps us engage people with

Christianity, but how it can inform the way we think about various aspects of Christianity.

*Full Metal Alchemist: Brotherhood (FMAB)* is one of my all-time favorite anime. It is the only anime that I have asked my wife to watch with me, and she thoroughly enjoyed it! It tells the story of two young boys (Ed and Al) who attempted to bring their mother back from the dead through alchemy. Their use of forbidden alchemy not only fails to bring their mother back, but Al ends up losing his body, requiring Ed to sacrifice his arm to bring Al’s soul back and bind it to a suit of armor. *FMAB*, then, tells the story of these two young boys trying to recover their bodies.



In the midst of their journey, Ed and Al encounter creatures called homunculi, artificial humans created through alchemy by a figure named “Father.” What is fascinating about the homunculi is that they are named after the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, greed and sloth. The homunculi embody and personify each of the seven deadly

<sup>1</sup> Austin Gravley, “Welcome to Youth Ministry! Time to Talk about Anime,” *Christianity Today*, October 1, 2025, [christianitytoday.com/2025/10/youth-ministry-anime-pokemon-death-note-one-piece/](https://christianitytoday.com/2025/10/youth-ministry-anime-pokemon-death-note-one-piece/).



sins they are named after. Throughout the anime, these homunculi persistently prey on human weakness by deceiving their victims and killing them.

The actions of the homunculi recall the action of sin in Romans 7:7-25. In Romans 7, sin springs to life (7:9), deceives the self (7:11) and puts the self to death (7:11). This sort of language stands in stark contrast to language that is commonly employed by Christians with respect to sin. For many Christians, sin is simply an action; it is disobedience to God, to miss the mark, as many Christians might say. While I firmly agree that sin is an action, several passages in the Bible also portray sin as an active power. Sin in Romans 7 can be found deceiving and killing just like the seven deadly sins in *FMAB*.

As a scholar who works on the topic of sin, I have found this similarity to be illuminating.<sup>2</sup> To a certain degree, everyone has felt the active power of sin before. The power of sin that makes the I of Romans 7 lament “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (NIV) is the same power that is at work within humanity. As in *FMAB*, sin in Romans 7 has the power to overtake a person. Sin is not just an action that people perform, nor is it simply a weakness of the will; rather, it is an active power that must be broken and

defeated. Unlike *FMAB*, though, the power of sin over us is broken not by might but through Jesus’ taking on flesh (Rom 8:3) and dying in the stead of sinful humanity and *with* sinful humanity (Rom 6:6). Having died with Christ through union with Him, the body ruled by sin has died and sin’s reign over us has been broken, even though sin still remains within us.

To be clear, the concept of sin as a power is well established in academic settings, and it continues to generate lively and exciting discussions in such circles, but it has yet to garner much attention in churches and the public sphere. *FMAB* provides a helpful connection to bridge this gap by providing vivid language and imagery to inform Christians and non-Christians alike about the power of sin over us and its remedy in the work of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, it is necessary to parse out the differences between sin in the Bible and its portrayal in *FMAB*. Unlike the homunculi, sin in the Bible is not a thing – it is no-thing as some theologians might say – nor is sin external to the self as it is often argued.



Kamran Abdullayev





# The Grapes of Wrath

JORDAN PICKERING

*The Grapes of Wrath* is the story of the Joad family, forced from their land by “progress,” lured to California by the Promised-Land stories of unscrupulous labour brokers, and thrust into the battle for their survival and their humanity against unrelentingly brutal state and corporate machinery. Springsteen’s *Ghost of Tom Joad* envisages the spirit of Steinbeck’s protagonist – Tom Joad – moving among the people of his own day, opposing the abuse of the vulnerable at the hands of the powerful. Springsteen’s song was influential upon controversial 90s metal band Rage Against the Machine, who took up Tom Joad’s spirit in their art, spitting fiery challenges to the racist machinery that would provoke the L.A. riots. In our own day, the faces are different, the machinery often virtual, but the Joads’ story is as relevant as it has ever been.

Steinbeck often features protagonists who would ordinarily be despised or forgotten. His heroes are the labourers, the simple, the unemployed, the nobodies. These are rugged, craggy people that he treasures for their common quirks and uncommon depths. The story of the Joads is, among other things, a meditation on the rare hospitality of those who have the least to share, on the earthiness of their folk spirituality, on the good and the bad of communities whose scars are worn on the outside.

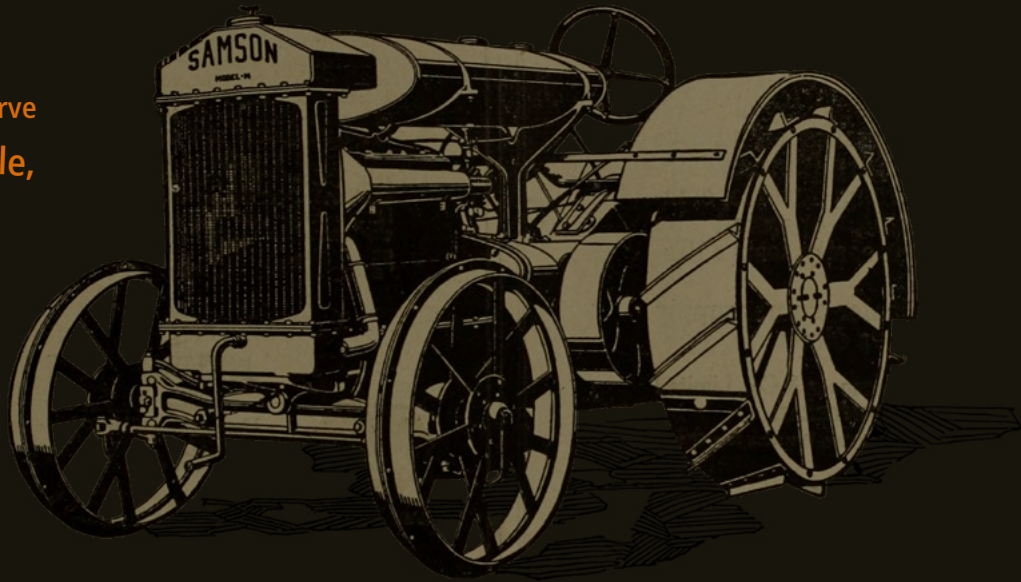
“You talk about Pa,” he said. “Maybe you never seen Uncle John the time they baptized him over to Polk’s place. Why, he got to plungin’ an’ jumpin’. Jumped over a feeny bush as big as a piana. Over he’d jump, an’ back he’d jump, howlin’ like a dog-wolf in moon time. Well, Pa seen him, an’ Pa, he figgers he’s the bes’ Jesus-jumper in these parts. So Pa picks out a feeny bush ‘bout twicet as big

as Uncle John’s feeny bush, and Pa lets out a squawk like a sow litterin’ broken bottles, an’ he takes a run at that feeny bush an’ clears her an’ bust his right leg. That took the sperit out of Pa. Preacher wants to pray it set, but Pa says, no, by God, he’d got his heart full of havin’ a doctor. Well, they wasn’t a doctor, but they was a travelin’ dentist, an’ he set her. Preacher give her a prayin’ over anyways.”

At the heart of *The Grapes of Wrath* is the question of place. The book is set in America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time when banks used drought and dust storms to make landowners into tenants, and traded a love for the land for



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a lust for profit. Year after year of cotton crops drained the soil of its lifeblood, and dwindling yields only fortified the argument for industrialisation. And so the banks traded tenants for tractors, ploughing farm and farmhouse together into vast corporate deserts. In Steinbeck's vision, the growing inhumanity of his society makes the banks and corporations monstrous; people created the banks and people operate the banks, but people no longer control the banks. These institutions possess a compulsive force of their own. And so those who serve the banks can't afford to care what their behaviour does to their fellow man; they become part of the monstrous machine. Dislocation of people from place is a kind of death.

The driver sat in his iron seat and he was proud of the straight lines he did not will, proud of the tractor he did not own or love, proud of the power he could not control. And when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses.

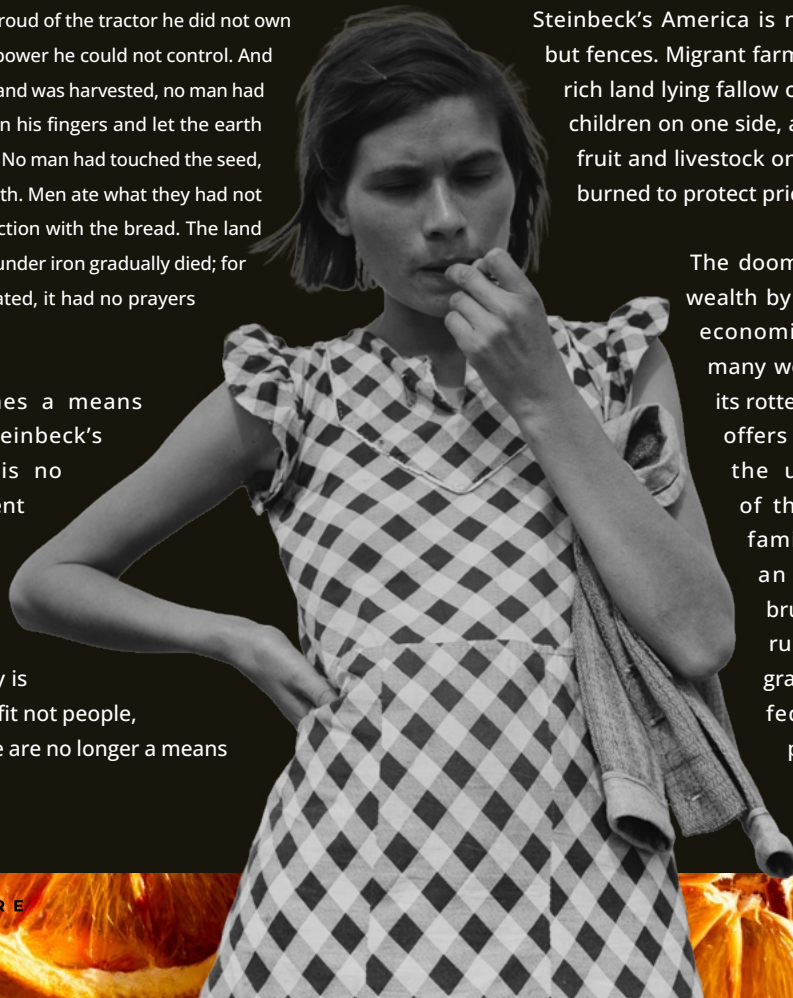
Land itself becomes a means of exploitation in Steinbeck's America. The land is no longer the environment in which people and all other things set their roots; it is a commodity to be amassed. When society is structured to serve profit not people, the land and its produce are no longer a means

of homing and feeding a population, but something to be protected *from* people.

The Joads undertake an arduous journey across the desert into California, lured there by pamphlets promising utopia—good weather, plenty of work, fruit you can eat straight from the tree. These promises prove to be the work of labour brokers who engineer an oversupply of migrant workers and a bidding war for their labour—jobs given to anyone willing to work for starvation wages, with police on the payroll to make sure that unions get busted or agitators disappear. "Be one little line in the paper—know what it'll say? 'Vagrant foun' dead.' An' that's all. You'll see a lot of them little lines, 'Vagrant foun' dead.'"

Steinbeck's America is not a land of famine but fences. Migrant farmers on one side, and rich land lying fallow on the other; starving children on one side, and surplus grain and fruit and livestock on the other, buried or burned to protect prices.

The doomed accumulation of wealth by the few to the total economic exclusion of the many would eventually reap its rotten fruit, but Steinbeck offers an interlude within the unrelenting misery of the Joads' story. The family happens across an oasis within the brutality of corporation-run California: they are granted access to a small federal camp. It is a place with a plot over







which a family could raise a tent, hot water, self-government and the ability to forge a mutually supportive community. In the face of the inhuman machinery of wealth extraction, this small plot of land offers the alternative: a protected place where people can live in connection with their environment and one another, struggling together to gain a foothold. It is especially here, where human interests have created a beachhead against corporate interests, that the powers that be raise the spectre of communism as a pretense to breach the fences of this peaceable camp.

Residents tell how in a nearby state shanty town—one that has a cop for every ten people and a faucet for every two hundred—a quarrel arose between a deputy and a group of migrants. The deputy complained that giving “Okies” (a derogatory term for the migrants) amenities only makes them demand more, and this deputy identified the government camp as a particular problem: “They hol’ red meetin’s in them gov’ment camps. All figgerin’ how to git on relief.” When one of the migrants asks what he means by relief, the deputy answers, “I mean relief—what us taxpayers puts in an’ you goddamn Okies takes out.” The migrant points out they all pay sales tax and that cotton farmers get four cents a pound from the government and railroad and shipping companies draw



federal subsidies too; “Ain’t that relief?” To which the cop responds: “You goddamn reds is all the time stirrin’ up trouble,” and jails him for 60 days for vagrancy. How’d he get such a sentence if he had a job? someone asks.

The tubby man laughed. “You know better’n that,” he said. “You know a vagrant is anybody a cop don’t like. An’ that’s why they hate this here camp. No cops can get in. This here’s United States, not California.”

This line is a profound answer to the accusation that *The Grapes of Wrath* is “red.”<sup>1</sup> The “red threat” was a motivation used for violent government repression of protesters in my own Apartheid South Africa, and it has been a tactic used without interruption in the west. I’m not sure I’ve ever been more ashamed of the Christian church than when in the wake of the George Floyd murder and the protests against racism, the response was not to side with the vulnerable but to demonise critical race theory and to depict calls for a more just America as “cultural Marxism.” The answer that this line provides is quite literal. This government camp isn’t an expression of Marxism, it’s the true expression of the United States.

As someone whose research overlaps significantly with the present state of Christian America, I find myself asking questions like, “What are the things that truly made America great?” People have spent the last decade lampooning the slogan of the current occupant of the White House because, from the “self-evident” founding declaration of all people free and equal, all while its founders kept slaves, it’s hard to identify a time at which America was great for all its people. What has made America great—and arguably uniquely so among the nations of world history—is that

America was conceived of as the antithesis of a monarchy and a place where all its citizens could be free of the coercive power of kings (real or aspiring). America created governments chosen by vote not birthright. They created a free media to liberate people from state propaganda. They granted independence to the judiciary, making even their leaders and law enforcers answerable to the rule of law. Even social mobility is refreshingly anti-monarchic: one isn’t bound to the social class of one’s family; any person may earn the respect of their peers by what they do, whatever their birth. That America was never able to be fully consistent in the application of its ideals does not

<sup>1</sup> Steinbeck himself was accused of being communist in the wake of the publication of this book.



change that these ideals produced a society that was not constructed to serve the few but constructed to protect the many—a society that many around the world have envied and tried to imitate. Steinbeck's government camp is this America in microcosm; outside its calm, California represents the inhuman corporate greed that is free America's *antithesis*, that is the re-enslavement of the commons under the exploitative monarchic rule of power.

It is no small irony that the man lately championing a return to the greatness of America is Steinbeck's archetypal Californian and the antithesis of his United States.

The great paradox of *The Grapes of Wrath* and of America itself is that its great freedom is only achieved by the balancing of all possible freedoms, not their unregulated exercise. Ultimate monarchic power is, after all, as free of constraints as an individual can be. America's freedom is remarkable in so far as it is the freedom of the little man, and achieving this freedom necessarily means greater restriction upon possessors of power—those who would buy and sell short the lives of the small.

The fruits of land appropriation and labour brokering in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the Great Depression. Death, starvation, unrest, economic standstill, banking collapse and ruin even for the powerful. A broken society. It was

eventually overcome, as I understand it, at least partially by the imposition of mass federal employment schemes and the imposition of unions and wage protections—measures of “relief.” In our own age of billionaires buying media outlets, social media propaganda, divide-and-conquer politics, celebrity presidents unravelling restrictions on executive power, a shrinking middle class, stagnant minimum wages lagging behind a galloping cost of living—in days such as these, freedom flounders and the grapes are no doubt ripening on the vine yet again.

They sat silent in the coal-black cave of vines. Ma said, “How'm I gonna know 'bout you? They might kill ya an' I wouldn' know. They might hurt ya. How'm I gonna know?”

Tom laughed uneasily, “Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one—an' then——”

“Then what, Tom?”

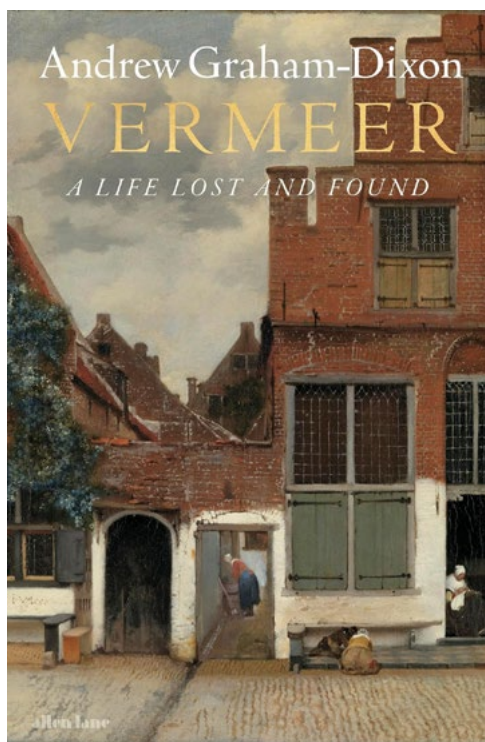
“Then it don' matter. Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there.”

*Dr Jordan Pickering is an associate fellow and the Director of Media at the Kirby Laing Centre.*





# BOOKS OF NOTE



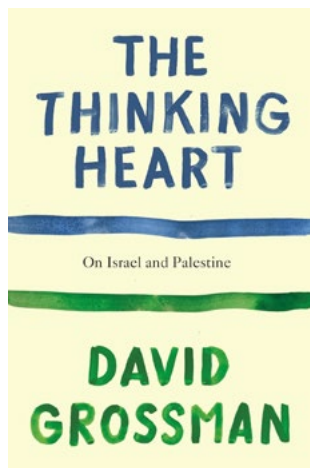
When I travel, I always look for local bookstores. Over Christmas I was in Newquay and found some stimulating recently published books.

**Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Vermeer: A Life Lost and Found* (Allen Lane, 2025).**

Pride of place goes to Andrew Graham-Dixon's *Vermeer*. Vermeer (1632-1675) really is an extraordinary artist but for a long time his works have defied explanation. What is really helpful about this book is that it pays close attention to the religious context of Vermeer's life, the harrowing religious wars and the remonstrant background. Graham-Dixon comments at a certain point: "The distinction that needs to be made is that his early works are religious pictures that look like religious pictures, whereas his later works are religious works that do not. ... They superficially resemble other Dutch paintings of the time, while nagging away at anyone who gives them a second look and wonders at their depth" (p. 204). The author argues that the Mary-Martha story – the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* – in Luke may provide an important key.

**David Grossman, *The Thinking Heart: On Israel and Palestine* (Jonathan Cape, 2024).**

We hear far less of Gaza nowadays, but its wound remains and we must continue to pay attention to it. Grossman is a fascinating Jewish, Israeli author and always worth reading. Intriguingly, the title of his book comes from the diary of that extraordinary Dutch Christian Ettie Hillesum – Grossman refers to her as “the courageous, soul-baring Jewish Dutchwoman ... who entered the Westerbork concentration camp” – who wrote “Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks ... The Thinking heart of a whole concentration camp.” (Hillesum’s *An Interrupted Life* is must reading.)

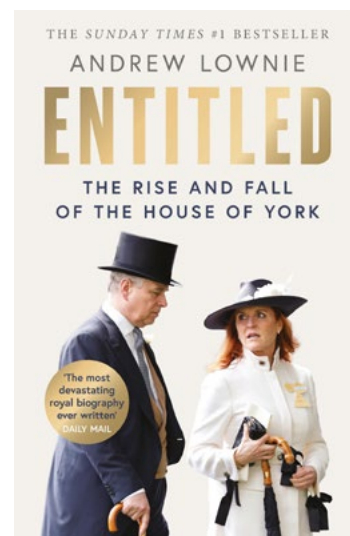


of the Resistance. It was a source of pride to know that that we Europeans had not waited for liberation passively.” (p. 4) In relation to this book, Timothy Snyder’s *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Penguin, 2017) is a short, very useful book. Under his ninth lesson, Snyder writes,

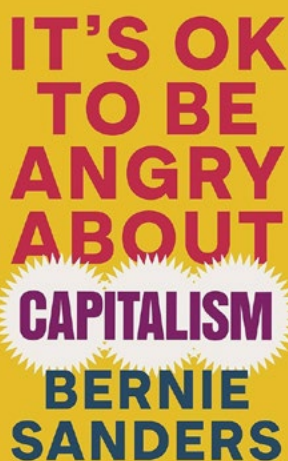
Christians might return to the foundational book, which as ever is very timely. Jesus preached that it “is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” We should be modest, for “whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.” And of course we must be concerned with what is true and what is false: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

**Andrew Lownie, *Entitled: The Rise and Fall of the House of York* (William Collins, 2025).**

This is a well-researched and important book. Overall it is devastating and raises extremely serious questions. Lownie himself is a monarchist but seeks a transparent monarchy. The evidence he amasses is that such accountability and transparency is sorely needed. Lownie has done many interviews available on YouTube and the effect of this book continues.



*Dr Craig G. Bartholomew is the Director of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge.*



**Bernie Sanders, *It's OK to be Angry About Capitalism* (Penguin 2023, 2024).**

I always find Bernie Sanders very stimulating, and this is a well written, eminently readable book. Inter alia it reflects on the 2020 presidential campaign. I differ with some of Bernie’s social ethics, but my hunch is that his economic analysis is seen as far less radical here in Europe than it is in America. Well worth a read.

**Umberto Eco, *How to Spot a Fascist* (Penguin, 2020).**

Eco is a fascinating intellectual. He was ten in 1942 in Italy and thus remembers the currents of World War II. As the US tilts in an authoritarian direction and so do parts of Europe, we need to be ever alert to the possible reemergence of fascism. Here Eco is helpful. He lists 14 characteristics of Ur-fascism. Early on Eco comments: “Some people in Italy wonder today if the Resistance had any real impact on the course of the war. For my generation the question is irrelevant: we immediately understood the moral and psychological significance

