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Evangelicals

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Bridging the Sacred-Secular Divide

TOM NELSON

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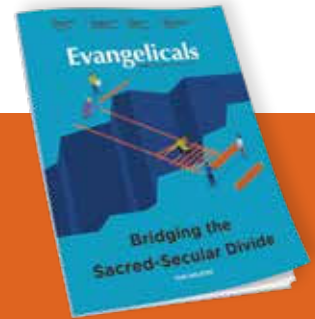
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The Magazine of the National Association of Evangelicals



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As finite human beings, we tend to put God in boxes — not only by having a miniscule vision of what he can do, but also by limiting what domains his rule encompasses. With just one or two boxes, we have a better shot at figuring out how God might work in those few areas of life.

We have done this in our personal lives by sidelining God in our workplaces, or by believing that we can have a personal relationship with God without being deeply connected to his Body. We have also done this collectively in the Church. Our discipleship has focused on areas of discipline, marriage, parenting and evangelism. However, we have been mal-formed when it comes to how followers of Jesus ought to engage in a pluralistic environment or with science, digital devices, civic life, government and more.

But in Jesus, all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him (Colossians 1:16). Paul continues, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” God’s rule is much more expansive than we can fathom.

In the cover article, Tom Nelson reflects on the prevalence of the sacred-secular divide in much of contemporary

evangelical missional thought and practice, and raises four questions toward a more integral and robust theology. The other authors build on this understanding for every channel of culture, for discipleship implications, and for our common life together. NAE President Walter Kim assesses the cultural moment and presents a path forward that requires a public theology to shape our public discipleship and guide our public engagement.

Of course, God cannot be contained in any boxes we try to put him in. He will not be deterred in his control or in his plans. But the lengths to which we submit to his authority cannot but reflect the level of flourishing we and others around us will experience. May we walk with Jesus in every aspect of life and be witness to his reconciling power in all things. **E**



Spiritual Openness and Revival

“ Some of the greatest signs of hope for the Church come from our recent study — our largest one to date — of teens around the world, including in the U.S. ...Overwhelmingly, Christian teens today say that Jesus still matters to them; 76 percent say, ‘Jesus speaks to me in a way that is relevant to my life.’

In a culture that has generally downgraded the reputation of Christians and relegated Sunday worship and other church-related activities to the sidelines of society, teens remain refreshingly open to Jesus as an influence in their lives.

It doesn't really matter where they are coming from, people are weary of the constant tension and division we see played out on the public stage and in our social media feeds, of hurtful rhetoric and of love with limits. But it seems that this coming generation still believes that there is a person who reminds us that there is a good and right way to live.”

David Kinnaman, CEO of Barna, on Barna's Rising Spiritual Openness in America report

“ The outpouring of God's love started here at Asbury, but the story is so much bigger than this community. I am beyond grateful to get to stand in the river of God as it pours forth.”

Sarah Baldwin, vice president of student life and dean of students at Asbury University

“ Revival is not a special season of extraordinary religious excitement, as in many forms of latter American revivalism. Rather it is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which restores the people of God to normal spiritual life after a period of corporate declension. Periods of spiritual decline occur in history because the gravity of indwelling sin keeps pulling believers first into formal religion and then into open apostasy. Periods of awakening alternate with these as God graciously breathes new life into his people.”

Richard F. Lovelace, evangelical scholar, summarizing Jonathan Edwards' definition of revival in “The Dynamics of Spiritual Life”

“ I've often wondered why the Civil Rights Movement is not considered a revival. In 1957, the Civil Rights Movement was started by Black Christians in the South ‘with the goal of redeeming the soul of America through nonviolent resistance’ in response to the evils of racism and injustice. I cannot imagine how deep a person's discipleship must be to stage sit-ins in restaurants and other nonviolent protests in the face of lynching, brutal beatings from police, dogs ripping into your flesh, church bombings and racial injustice, all for simply wanting to exercise my rights as an American.”

Derwin Gray, lead pastor of Transformation Church in North Carolina, in Church Leaders



Unfavorable Views of Evangelicals

“ Overall, similar shares of the whole public say they view evangelical Christians favorably (28 percent) and unfavorably (27 percent). But among Americans who are not themselves born-again or evangelical Protestants, the balance of opinion is much more negative (32 percent unfavorable vs. 18 percent favorable). Some of this sentiment is tied up with politics: Democrats who are not born-again or evangelical Protestants are far more likely than non-evangelical Republicans to view evangelicals negatively (47 percent vs. 14 percent, respectively).

Among respondents who are not born-again or evangelical Protestants, views of evangelical Christians are far more negative than positive. About a third in this group (32 percent) rate evangelicals negatively, compared with 18 percent who rate them positively, making evangelical Christians among the most negatively rated religious groups by people who are not members of the group.”

Pew Research Survey, “Americans Feel More Positive Than Negative About Jews, Mainline Protestants, Catholics”

“ We are in a season in which the evangelical faith is being narrowly defined and misunderstood by many, with long-term ramifications for our gospel witness. Too many, especially young people and people of color, have been alienated by the evangelical Christianity they have seen presented in public in recent years.”

Walter Kim, NAE president, in a Christianity Today article



However imperfectly, Catholics have always had a beautiful consistent life ethic/whole life/seamless garment ethos: teaching communication & action — as you have demonstrated so beautifully. I never saw it mirrored in my circles — awesome exception is @NAEvangelicals.
Kelly Rosati @KellyMRosati

A consistent gospel witness in a chaotic time stands out.
Ed Stetzer @edstetzer



Tribalism is destroying the church. Jesus didn't come to divide but to create one body.
Dr. Eric Mason @pastoremase

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EVANGELICAL CALENDAR

Please join the evangelical community at these events hosted by the NAE and its members. **Your prayers are welcome too.**

Many of these events include downloadable resources for promotion and participation.

JULY 27-28, 2023

Illumine Conference

Fort Wayne, IN

Fellowship of Evangelical Churches
[FECministries.org](https://www.fecministries.org)

The Illumine Conference offers two days of sharing in worship, teaching and fellowship to unite, encourage and empower FEC leaders for their specific contexts and ministries.

SEPTEMBER 27, 2023

See You At The Pole

National Network of Youth Ministries
[SYATP.com](https://www.syntp.com)

Since 1990, students have gathered around their school's flagpole to pray for their school, friends, families, churches and communities.



SEPTEMBER 12-15, 2023

Chaplains Training Workshop

Location TBD

Evangelical Chaplains Commission
[EvangelicalChaplains.org](https://www.evangelicalchaplains.org)

The Chaplains Training Workshop is open to NAE chaplains and candidates, as well as chaplains from NAE denominations. The sessions highlight faithful approaches to ministry, training on religious accommodation issues, and other practical issues facing chaplains today.



SEPTEMBER 27-29, 2023

Shift

Orlando, FL

Missio Nexus
[MissioNexus.org](https://www.missionnexus.org)

The 2023 Mission Leaders Conference will focus on how to fulfill the Great Commission in the midst of many cultural shifts. Topics will include race, immigration, artificial intelligence, shifting human identity, a church in a culture of identity crisis and more.

OCTOBER 17-18, 2023

Amplify Conference

Wheaton, IL

Wheaton College Billy Graham Center
[AmplifyConference.org](https://www.amplifyconference.org)

The Amplify Conference brings together church leaders who are focused on building thriving local churches that will show and share the message of Christ for decades to come. Participants learn church-tested ideas from innovators and emerging voices in evangelism and outreach.



OCTOBER 4, 2023

Washington Briefing

Washington, DC

National Association of Evangelicals
[NAE.org](https://www.nae.org)

Top-level evangelical leaders gather in the nation's capital to interact directly with leaders in government, think tanks and advocacy organizations.



SEPTEMBER 20-22, 2023

CAFO 2023

Oklahoma City, OK

Christian Alliance for Orphans
[CAFO.org](https://www.cafop.org)

The CAFO Summit is a gathering of leaders, professionals and parents passionate for adoption, foster care and effective service to the vulnerable worldwide. It serves to both grow and to guide a movement of Christians who are leading the Church to be God's answer for children who lack the love and protection of a family.

OCTOBER 17-19, 2023

OneAccord

Ridgecrest, NC

Accord Network
[AccordNetwork.org](https://www.accordnetwork.org)

At the annual meeting of the Accord Network, representatives of relief and development organizations help one another reach their full potential by operating in community — sharing knowledge, skills and support.

WORTH NOTING

✔ NAE Student Conference Focuses on Restoring Hope

The way in which Christians engage in the public square is not always pretty. But if the students from this year's Christian Student Leadership Conference (CSLC) are any indication, there is reason to be hopeful about how the next generation will engage in the political space.

Nearly 80 students representing 10 colleges attended the 2023 CSLC, which was held in Washington, D.C., for the first time since the pandemic. The theme of this year's weeklong conference, hosted by the National Association of Evangelicals, was Restoring Hope. Students were equipped and trained to be part of a new generation of faithful advocates who are motivated by love for others and sustained by the hope they have in Christ.

"I took the class because I thought it would be fun, but I never knew how much I would be stretched and challenged to think deeply about what I believe," said

Sarah Mehesy, a business major at Lancaster Bible College.

The CSLC helps students explore public policy issues, careers in government or public service, and how to apply biblical principles to today's complex issues. In addition to hearing from speakers from across the political spectrum, students met with their federal representatives to ask questions and to advocate for issues of concern.



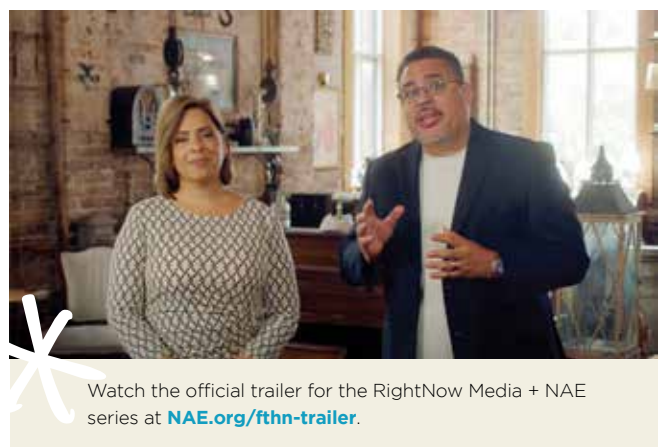
✔ RightNow Media & NAE Video Series Coming in July

For more than a decade, evangelical Christians across the political spectrum have used "For the Health of the Nation" to apply biblical principles to complex issues. Now, in partnership with RightNow Media, an 8-session video series will bring the content to life through dynamic biblical teaching.

Each teaching session (about 10-15 minutes) is complemented by a discussion guide that will enable small groups to have rich conversations as they go deeper into God's Word. Christians will not always agree on the specifics of governance or the best roads to social transformation, but as part of holistic discipleship, Christians should be able to apply biblical principles to the issues of the day.

NAE President Walter Kim hosts the series with teaching from Nicole Martin, Ed Stetzer, Gabriel and Jeanette Salguero, and Eugene Cho. The series will be available

at no charge through an NAE portal on the RightNow Media platform by the end of July. Make plans to incorporate this series in your church small groups, college classes and adult education opportunities.



✔ Workplace Religious Freedom at High Court

In April, the U.S. Supreme Court heard a case of a former postal worker who wanted to honor the Sabbath by not working on Sundays. The National Association of Evangelicals joined the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and others in supporting Gerald Groff and workplace religious accommodations.

The key question in *Groff v. DeJoy* is how to interpret and apply Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In his case, Groff argues that his desire to observe the Sabbath does not pose an “undue hardship” on the U.S. Postal Service and highlighted his willingness to cover extra shifts on other days, as well as the willingness of coworkers to claim the Sunday shifts. The decision from the court is expected this summer.

✔ Financial Health & Generosity Videos

The Financial Health and Generosity training videos were designed to help pastors and church leaders discover, discuss and decide how to create a growing culture of joyful generosity in their churches. The training videos focus on areas of church generosity and personal finances, and include assessment surveys, videos and best practices resources.

The training sessions are led by Brian Kluth, national spokesperson for NAE Financial Health. Kluth was a senior pastor for 10 years and has written biblical generosity materials that have been used by thousands of churches to help people understand God as their true provider and to inspire generous living and giving.

Get started at NAEfinancialhealth.org/trainingvideos.

✔ Preserve Global Health Funding to Fight HIV/AIDS

New HIV infections are down 42 percent from just 20 years ago when President George W. Bush made combatting HIV/AIDS a priority. The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and The Global Fund have inspired generous giving of developed nations to save over 50 million lives since the program started. However, PEPFAR is in need of reauthorization.

The National Association of Evangelicals joined with 210 other faith-based leaders to urge Congress to support \$2 billion for the Global Fund in fiscal year 2024. The Global Fund in design and practice prioritizes the poorest and most marginalized. It also has proven experience in fragile, crisis zones worldwide that face layered threats like disease, hunger and violence. In Ukraine, the Global Fund has surged millions in emergency funding for HIV and TB services, mitigating disruptions to care and helping millions of displaced people weather health challenges.



Send a letter supporting global health funding to your representatives today at NAE.org/takeaction.



Far as the Curse Is Found

How the NAE Advances a Comprehensive Understanding of the Gospel

The third verse of the beloved Advent hymn “Joy to the World” includes the following phrase: “He comes to make his blessings known far as the curse is found.” It’s an audacious claim, really. As evangelicals — people of the good news — we understand that good news to be wide and deep, bathing every corner of the cosmos in the love, mercy and justice of God.

The National Association of Evangelicals seeks to help followers of Jesus understand and embrace the comprehensive scope of the gospel, which includes the public as well as private dimensions of life. Last year, the NAE hosted the Flourish conference for pastors and ministry leaders as a forum for engaging in difficult issues from a biblical framework, recognizing that the gospel touches every aspect of our world. Reflecting on her experience at Flourish, Mary Frances Giles said, “In addition to personal salvation,

the gospel is very much about the work that Jesus is doing to bring God’s kingdom to fruition in the world right now, not just in the world to come.”

“Over the past few years, I have been incredibly encouraged by the work the NAE is doing in areas that many evangelical churches have historically ignored or resisted,” she said. “For me, three areas of significance are issues surrounding immigration, race and creation care. Through articles, interviews and advocacy, I’ve been grateful for the work the



NAE has done in each of these areas to increase my awareness of how our love and care for neighbor and creation are fully within a scriptural and historical Christian framework.”

Shirley Mullen first experienced the NAE as a college student in the mid-1970s when she attended the Christian Student Leadership Conference (CSLC). “The CSLC is one of the most powerful things that NAE does. It changed my view of what Christians can do, and gave me a broader sense of how Christians are involved in society.” Mullen eventually became a leader in Christian higher education, serving for 15 years as president of Houghton University, and has served on the NAE board since 2010.

“Throughout my whole life, the NAE has called me out of what I currently know,” Mullen said. “Every board meeting, I learn more about the global Church and what is going on in different sectors of society. The NAE has expanded my worldview.”

Similarly, Ryan Alexander, lead pastor of Hosanna! Church in Twin Cities, Minnesota, and NAE board member, reflects on how the NAE has broadened his view of the good news. “Engagement with the NAE stirs my prophetic imagination and stretches my vision for how the gospel of Jesus Christ is to touch all aspects of life, private and public. The NAE is committed to maintaining biblical foundations and frameworks as well as effectively engaging culture in a humble, nuanced, faithful, Spirit-empowered, Jesus-like way.”

Recognizing the breadth and depth of the good news in Jesus Christ, we acknowledge that no Christian has it all figured out. Perhaps most important is the NAE’s role in creating an environment for evangelicals to grapple honestly with complex issues. Lisa Treviño Cummins, founder and president of Urban Strategies, celebrates how the NAE fosters an atmosphere of humility and encourages a posture of learning. As an NAE board member, Cummins testifies that it is “refreshing to be in a space in which I can grapple with issues among people who may have different experiences but have a shared commitment to live and love faithfully.”


Mullen also attests to the NAE’s unique capacity to convene gatherings of diverse leaders such as the group that developed the NAE’s guiding framework for Christian civic

engagement, “For the Health of the Nation,” of which Mullen was a member. “I really enjoyed the diversity of thinking on the project and the fact that the document reflects different strands of the political spectrum.”

Joe Lee, chair of the Highrock Network of churches in New England, recounts his journey of faith from a narrow, private enterprise to an increasingly broad engagement with the world. “I grew up in an evangelical tradition where the main focus was being saved and being in a personal relationship with Christ. I looked down on some mainline churches who neglected evangelism and personal salvation. To me, social justice and liberalism went hand-in-hand. However, the NAE has demonstrated for me that the gospel is not ‘either or’ but ‘both and.’ I am learning that I have defined the gospel too narrowly.”

“I am learning that I have defined the gospel too narrowly.”

Reflecting on his experience of Flourish, Mike Haddad of the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference shared, “Flourish was an encouraging picture of the unity of the Body of Christ even as we wrestled with topics that have often bred division in the Church. We need more opportunities just like this to practice open and biblical conversations regarding such complex issues with great humility and grace.”

Indeed, the gospel we proclaim is both personal and public, encompassing every aspect of our world, and it is witnessed not only through words but as a way of life. May God empower us to bear faithful witness to this good news, which sin’s curse cannot outrun, and which culminates in the reconciling of *all things* in Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:20). 

Bridging the Sacred-Secular Divide

TOM NELSON





Do you want to spend your life rearranging chairs on the deck of the Titanic, or do you want your life to have an eternal impact? This was the probing question we asked college seniors who were exploring God’s vocational direction for their lives at a weekend conference.

As a parachurch organization we were recruiting students to join our campus ministry. With youthful idealism and the best of intentions, we asserted only two things lasted forever: God’s Word and people’s souls. If students wanted their work to really matter, they would join our organization and do the Lord’s work.

Looking back, I realize that underlying much of our persuasive appeal was an impoverished theology reinforcing a sacred-secular divide. Are human souls all that matter? Is what we do for the majority of our daily lives really meaningless and of no eternal significance? Reflecting on the prevalence of the sacred-secular divide in much of contemporary evangelical missional thought and practice, I would like to raise four questions aimed at a more integral and robust biblical theology emerging from original creation and continuing to final consummation.

Has God Changed His Mind?

When God spoke the material world into existence, he declared it good. After the sixth day of creation, we read, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good...” (Genesis 1:31). In Genesis 3, we encounter the tragedy of humankind’s fall into sin and the resulting disintegration of God’s very good world. Material creation and its downward spiral is marked with increasing corruption and wickedness.

In Genesis 6, God has what we might call creation remorse. God is grieved so much he considers completely wiping out humans and the material world. It would appear as if God has changed his mind about his good creation so badly gone awry. Yet against this black hole of darkness, a sparkling glimmer of hope arises as Noah finds favor in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8).

Instead of wiping out all of human and animal life, God rescued and preserved a small remnant of his very good creation. God’s redemptive action is important for us to grasp a more integral theology of our material world. When we devalue and deemphasize the material world and focus exclusively on the important task of rescuing souls for eternity, we miss the mark.

Paul Marshall aptly names this approach “lifeboat theology.” In “Heaven Is Not My Home” he writes, “However, a truly Christian viewpoint is not ‘lifeboat theology,’ but ‘ark theology’ instead. Noah’s ark saved





not only people, but it preserved God's other creatures as well. The ark looked not to flee, but to return to the land and begin again."

If we are going to bridge the impoverished sacred-secular divide we must embrace a more robust theology of original creation, knowing God's very good material world, though badly fallen, still matters to God and it must matter to us. God has not changed his mind about the goodness of the material world, nor his image-bearers' unique place in it. Our cultural dominion mandate to cultivate and guard material creation has not ended (Genesis 2:15). Every part of material and spiritual reality rightly belongs to God. Abraham Kuyper put it this way: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all does not cry, Mine!"

God has always loved and valued his material creation. Redemption's broad scope and future telos includes the now fallen created material world. Original creation has a disintegrated reality as well as a future glory.

What Is Creation Waiting For?

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul looks to Jesus not only as our personal Lord and Savior, but also as a cosmic redeemer. Paul makes the point that the material world is presently groaning, longing to experience the glory it once had in a sinless garden long ago. Paul writes, "For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed" (Romans 8:19).

N.T. Wright speaks with illuminating clarity in "Surprised by Hope": "What creation needs is neither abandonment nor evolution, but rather redemption and renewal; and this is both promised and guaranteed by resurrection of Jesus from

the dead." In many ways, the eighth day of new creation began at Jesus' bodily resurrection. All creation is now waiting on tiptoe to be set free from its enslaving bondage to decay. Sacred-secular thinking diminishes material creation's remaining goodness as well as its future glory.

Is It All Going to Burn?

The Apostle Peter's eschatological language of the heavens and the material earth being burned with fire (2 Peter 3:10) has led to an errant conclusion that "it's all going to burn." The logical implication of this assertion is to devalue the material world, minimizing any continuity and asserting a radical discontinuity between the now and the not-yet future. Few theological errors have contributed more to the sacred-secular divide.

When we view the Apostle Peter's language of fire in light of the entire canonical context, the eschatological burning description is better understood as a fire of purification rather than eradication. As vitally important as leading souls to Christ is, our vocational stewardship and kingdom mission is more comprehensive. N.T. Wright makes the point, "...the split between saving souls and doing good in the world is a product not of the Bible or the gospel, but of the cultural captivity of both within the Western World."

Examining the Apostle John's eschatological writing in the book of Revelation, we hear the bodily resurrected Jesus declaring not the eradication or destruction of material creation, but its stunning and glorious restoration and healing. Jesus says, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5 ESV). It is important to note Jesus does not say, "I am making all new things." God still deems his original yet fallen material creation as good with a glorious future.

Does Our Daily Work Matter?

Is it true that much of our daily lives have little ultimate meaning and no eternal significance? Are we pretty much rearranging chairs on the deck of a sinking Titanic world? Does our daily work matter?

God has put eternity in our hearts, but he has also placed our feet on solid earthly ground. Yes, we were made for more than time, but God who is outside of time created us in time. Our glorious eternal destiny does not diminish our very time-bound earthly callings, knowing our redeemed and restored future actually enhances our present lives with truth, goodness and beauty as we love and serve our neighbors.

The good news of the gospel is not only that it makes possible an eternal life in the future, it also makes possible an eternal kind of life now in the present.

When we bridge the sacred-secular divide, we value both the temporal and eternal, keeping in mind the eternal is of the highest value both in its infinite duration and glory.

Growing up, I often heard the affirming description of someone who was so heavenly minded they were not much earthly good. Yet, if we are truly heavenly minded, we will be of great earthly good. In “Mere Christianity” C. S. Lewis makes this point: “If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.”

The good news of the gospel is not only that it

makes possible an eternal life in the future, it also makes possible an eternal kind of life now in the present. The gospel properly understood speaks into every nook and cranny of everyday time-bound material life as we live in God’s already, not-fully-yet kingdom.

After encouraging them to set their minds on things above, Paul instructs the Colossian Christians to really get down to earth displaying God-honoring diligence in their daily work. Paul writes, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23–34).

Heeding Paul’s words, we are to view all paid and unpaid work as sacred. If done unto God for the glory of God and love of neighbor, all work God calls us to do is to be an act of worship. Dorothy Sayers wisely bridged the sacred-secular divide when she declared, “The only Christian work is good work well done.”

Looking back to those weekend conferences with college students, I would have encouraged them to prayerfully consider pursuing a pastoral or missionary calling, but I also would have reinforced the goodness of other work God may be leading them to embrace in the world. I would have prayed that they would have great imagination for all the ways in which God may call them to serve him. **E**





Gabe Lyons is the founder and CEO of THINQ Media (formerly Q Ideas).

Every Channel of Culture

The Posture, Discipline and Practice of Engagement

In 2002, I found myself in the small crowd of a Fast Company conference, surrounded by young, like-minded Type A leaders looking to make a mark on the world. We listened as industry leaders shared insights about the future. In breakouts, we peppered experts with questions about emerging technology, changing business practices, the ideas of the future.

The energy was crisp. The people were curious. The atmosphere was intoxicating. But where were all the Christians? More to the point, why didn't Christian thinkers have a place to gather and discuss how to participate in shaping a kingdom-influenced future?

Those questions gave rise to a simple idea. We'd create a third space where Christian leaders — both pastors and laity alike — could examine the most pressing questions of our time through the lens of the gospel. We'd call the space Q Ideas, and we wouldn't shy away from any question, any topic, no matter how contentious.

Our foundational premise was that the gospel was sufficient to answer every angst in an increasing complex world. After all, what was the gospel but the proclamation of the kingdom of God into every broken space, which included every occupation, every sphere of influence, every economic and political sector?

If we believed that gospel truth, the practical implications were clear: The entry point of the gospel was through us — ordinary individuals following Christ in the routine places of

our own lives.

Over the years, we've watched as our working premise came to life. We've seen a generation of leaders who've brought Christ to their board rooms, hospitals, artists' studios, accounting firms, basketball courts, and every other place of influence.

How does this good news of the kingdom show up in their lives? It shows up through a particular *posture*. It shows up through a certain *discipline*. It shows up in *practice*.

The Posture: Stay Curious

Jesus came asking questions.

What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? (Matthew 16:26)

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? (Matthew 6:25)

Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill? (Mark 3:4)

Jesus asked hundreds of questions throughout the Gospels. Even though he was God, he demonstrated a posture of curiosity. Gospel-minded leaders embody Christ's posture of curiosity. They love asking questions, they're hungry to understand others' stories, and they draw them out conversationally.

Though curiosity may begin a conversation, grounded thinking helps kingdom-minded leaders penetrate the noise in their discussions.

The Discipline: Think Well

Christian thinkers shaped so much of the modern world. Hildegard of Bingen, a German Benedictine abbess, artist and naturalist, is credited as the founder of scientific natural history in Germany. Blaise Pascal, a French Catholic, is known for his contributions to math, physics and theology. C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and G.K. Chesterton are noted for their impact on literature. How did Christianity become seen as anti-intellectual?

In the last two decades, I've seen Christian leaders take back the intellectual heritage of the faith. They're applying clear thinking to every issue they encounter in today's world. They discipline their minds, refusing to get caught up in hyperbole, polarization and politicization, and instead, ask how to pursue wisdom.

Thinking well begins with good theology, rooted in a biblical foundation that helps us see through a trustworthy lens.

Thinking well begins with good theology, rooted in a biblical foundation that helps us see through a trustworthy lens. It also considers history and context. It asks whether there are social, political or economic forces influencing thought. It asks what certain powers gain from a particular ideological conclusion. Thinking well requires Christians who can engage in complex conversations, using logic and scientific reasoning to demonstrate eternal, unchanging, everlasting truth.

The Practice: Advance Good

Curiosity and clear thinking are only two legs of a three-legged stool. Without the third leg — informed Christian action — what good is all that heady stuff?

Advancing the kingdom takes shape in the tangible, everyday expression of our lives. Consider Brian and Julie Mavis, who created a nation-wide effort for Christians to take the lead in the foster care movement. Or take Dan Cooper, who created an index fund built on the character of CEOs reshaping Wall Street values. Look at David Bailey, who's leading racial reconciliation efforts through education and music. It's not just them, either. It's the myriad unknown leaders — nurses, engineers, paralegals, stay-at-home moms — who are shaping a kingdom-focused future.

Thoughtful Christians are committed to seeing the truth of the gospel play out in their industries, cities, workplaces and communities. There is no insular thinking about the reach of the gospel. If it's good news for us, it better be good news for everyone encountering it.

The Evolution of an Idea

As we embark on our third decade of work, we are looking at things a little differently. We still want to think clearly and reach good answers. But the acceleration of change and the new questions humanity is asking demand wisdom only found in a kingdom orientation. That's the goal of our new organization, THINQ: to help parents, teachers, pastors, small group leaders, executives, and even online influencers create conversations with a seeking world that leads to biblical wisdom.

In a chaotic world, it's this approach that will help us answer those who ask the reason for our hope (1 Peter 3:15). That is the work of modern evangelism. It's not the street preaching of yesteryear. It's not even inviting people to church (though there's a place for that). Instead, it's an evangelical approach that creates space for answers in a perplexing culture.

It's going to take all of us. We've curated talks and thought leadership to set the stage for meaningful conversations a new generation is demanding. You're invited. Come along. **E**



In Pursuit of Public Discipleship

Counter-Formation for the Kingdom of God

By now, we are well aware of our predicament: The evangelical movement has lost much of its public credibility, and as a result, our witness has been deeply impacted. I won't rehash all the reasons we got here, but I do want to hone in on two questions: At heart, what has gone wrong? And where do we go from here?

For the past eight years, I have served as a national discipleship leader, and I am convinced: *At heart, our problem is one of discipleship.* Our quandary concerns how our people have been formed — or, more precisely, *mal-formed* — as followers of Jesus Christ. Today, in multiple realms of life, many who claim the label “Christian” too often conform to the patterns of this world rather than to the person of Christ. The core work before us isn't to win political battles, perfect our doctrine, or engage more forcefully in culture wars. The core work is to engage in a more comprehensive counter-formation for the kingdom of God.

We have been mal-formed, and what we need is to be re-formed. Our charge is to recover a kingdom approach to forming disciples — disciples who truly reflect the character of Christ and the kingdom of God. Only in this way can we fulfill our missional mandate to be salt and light to the world.

Our Call to Counter-Formation: A Case Study

Some time ago, I embarked on a church pilgrimage called Sankofa. The purpose of the journey was to explore historic sites of the Civil Rights Movement so that we might connect the racial struggles of our past to our present racial realities. I fully expected to engage in hard conversations about justice, so it came as a surprise when the facilitator clarified: “People usually associate race with justice. But at a deeper level, race is a matter of discipleship. Actually, when it comes to race, what we really need is to be *re-discipled*.”

This was a paradigm shift for me: My racial discipleship journey was not just beginning. *We have already been racially discipled.* We have been shaped in countless ways by the racial dynamics of our society, family, culture and generation. Our true task is to see how we have already been *mal-formed* by the world so we might choose to be re-formed into the new





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way of the kingdom of God. This, of course, sounds a lot like Scripture: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

In the Bible, we find metaphors for spiritual formation like *baptism* or *wardrobe change* (e.g., Colossians 2:11–12, 3:9–14; Romans 13:12–14). These metaphors speak of a dual process: We must first do away with the old *before* we can put on the new. This is also what Jesus taught throughout his ministry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17).

Our king calls us to reflect his kingdom in every realm of life.

In the Sermon on the Mount — Jesus’ most extensive teaching on the kingdom of God — Jesus makes two things clear. First, God’s kingdom is *comprehensive*. Our king calls us to reflect his kingdom in every realm of life. In this one sermon, Jesus engages spirituality, money, lawsuits, sex, marriage, food, clothing and more (see Matthew 5–7). Beyond this, the kingdom is also radically *counter-cultural* and so, by necessity, deeply *counter-formational*. Consider that the Sermon on the Mount is essentially a series of counter-formational points: “You have heard it said...but I say to you.”

Reaffirming Christian Formation for the Sake of the World

Where do we go from here? If we hope to restore our public witness, we must begin with both comprehensive public theology and public discipleship. As discipleship leaders, let’s develop creative, holistic and counter-formational discipleship pathways that engage the whole person — head, heart and hands.

Let’s double down on our development of robust *public theologies* (“head”) that reflect God’s counter-cultural kingdom values in multiple realms of life. We’ve done much good work in this area in recent years, but we also need to make

that work more accessible for everyday disciples. A beautiful example of robust-yet-accessible public theology can be found in the NAE’s resource, “For the Health of the Nation.”

Public theology must then be incarnated into the hearts of our people through counter-cultural *public discipleship* (“heart”) — discipleship that majors not on information, but on transformation. The formational opportunity before us is to engage disciples in ongoing spiritual practices and embodied discipleship experiences that have the power to reform us over time.

This type of discipleship is what leads to transformational *public witness* (“hands”) — a humble, collaborative witness that is less about asserting Christian dominance than it is about contributing to the common good and becoming a faithful presence of salt and light in a dying world.

A Framework for Counter-Cultural Public Formation

| | | |
|-------|---------------------|--|
| Head | Public Theology | Accessible Counter-Cultural Education & Wisdom |
| Heart | Public Discipleship | Formative Counter-Cultural Practices & Experiences |
| Hands | Public Witness | Faithful Counter-Cultural Presence & Partnership |

Restoring Our Salt and Light

We seek to reflect God’s kingdom not simply for our sake, but for the sake of the world, for our very purpose is to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16). But Jesus also made it crystal clear: It is all too possible for us to lose our saltiness and stifle our light. I submit that this is what we’ve been experiencing in our time.

Yet, thankfully, our hope is not in ourselves but in the God of all hope (Romans 15:13). As we recommit ourselves to the work of counter-formational kingdom discipleship — in partnership with Christ and through the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit — our saltiness can be reclaimed and our light restored. This is the Church’s purpose. This is the disciple’s call. **E**

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Common Life Together

On a sunny spring morning last year, I walked from my home to a voting booth. As I locked my front door, I smiled at my next-door neighbors, a Muslim and immigrant family with small children who often communicate for their mother. I walked past the row of renovated houses across the street from my low-income neighborhood, a sign of increasing home prices and changing demographics in my gentrifying city. I walked into a church building that normally welcomed worshippers but had opened their doors for citizens to participate in a different kind of liturgy.

tell you this story, because it reframes how we often think about political participation. If social media or cable news tell the story, political participation is about scarcity and survival. It's the good guys vs. the bad guys, "us" and "them," eat or be eaten. Even in our better moments, we can think of politics as a unique realm of human life where the normal rules don't apply: "Turn the other cheek" is good moral instruction for church pews, not voting booths.

But what if "politics" wasn't only about who we voted for, what party we supported, or what national policies we defended? What if the whole realm of human experience was included in our political participation? That's what it felt like on election day in my neighborhood last year. I approached ballot measures and local candidates differently the more that I considered the neighbors who surrounded me on my walk to the voting booth. Their concerns — about affordable housing,

just policing, accessible education, and community safety — shaped my votes. But these were not abstract concerns, these were the concerns of people in my community who I could name, picture and whose life shaped mine.

At its most basic, politics is simply about our common life together. The more that we share our lives with people, including people who are different from us and have different needs than us, the more faithful our political positions will be. How do we overcome the polarization and division in our communities? How do we learn to live with people who deeply disagree with us about important questions that shape our communities? We start by understanding our political life not as an opportunity for individual expression or a combat zone where we must defend our team, but as the forum in which we negotiate our common life together. **E**



Biblical Faith for Our Common Life in Complex Times

He was the tennis version of Yoda—short, old, wrinkled, but strong with the force. My first tennis coach in high school was an elderly man with arthritis in his knees and shoulders. Whenever he stood on the court to run me through some drills, the emphasis was indeed on me running. He knew every angle and spin possible; he knew where to hit the ball, so that I would dash frenetically around the court only to return the ball exactly back to him. This is when the difference between playing tennis and being a tennis player became apparent. The former may have verve, the latter had wisdom.

Evangelicals believe the gospel reaches into every aspect of life, but we have been running around the court of culture, desperately trying to swat back the ideas coming at us. This whack-a-mole response to ideological threats (perceived or real) is frenetic, sometimes furious, and ultimately futile. What is more concerning for the honor and mission of Jesus are ways in which Christians are contributing to making ideological whack-a-mole our national sport.

We need a robust application of biblical faith for our common life in complex times. Instead of the prevailing metaphor of culture war, in which we defend our position, attack our opponents, and seek to win ground, a generative metaphor of culture reconstruction would be more attuned to a Savior who “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to

give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Assessing the Moment

While societal transitions have always occurred as one generation gives way to the next, several unique dimensions mark our current moment. Those under 18 are the first Americans to be born as a majority-minority generation, creating a cultural mosaic far more complex than ever before. Furthermore, the longer life span of Boomers, lower birthrates of subsequent generations, and changing views on family have introduced new dynamics. Differences are also geographical, between regions and even neighboring zip codes. And then we consider civilization more broadly and see that the place of religion has fundamentally changed.



The complexities also exist inside the church. In her work “Apostles of Reason,” historian Molly Worthen explores evangelicalism as a religious movement responding to specific challenges of modernity. She comments that “three elemental concerns unite [evangelicals]: how to repair the fracture between spiritual and rational knowledge; how to assure salvation and a true relationship with God; and how to resolve the tension between the demands of personal belief and the constraints of a secularized public square.”

Those shared concerns, however, do not lead to shared conclusions. The Bebbington Quadrilateral captures unifying and defining beliefs about Scripture and salvation, but how spiritual and secular knowledge relate or how Christians should operate in a pluralistic marketplace of ideas are profoundly unresolved within evangelicalism. What holds together — or pushes apart — young earth creationists and evolutionary creationists, or evangelicals who participated in Black Lives Matter marches and those who are trying to ban CRT? It is easier to get evangelicals to sign a statement of faith than to agree on an approach to culture.

Evangelicals now need to navigate our place in society as a marginal group, or at least, one among many. How are we to engage culture beyond conflict or compromise? How can we contribute to our life in a pluralistic society and live out our commitments to the sovereign claims of Christ over every corner of life? We need a public theology to lead our public discipleship to impact our public engagement.

Public Theology

Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin proposed that “to affirm the gospel as public truth is to invite acceptance of a new starting point for thought, the truth of which will be proved only in the course of a life of reflection and action which proves itself more adequate to the totality of human experience than its rivals.”

Public theology works out and applies the Scriptures for the Church within society as a whole and at a particular time. It is narrower than systematic theology, which arranges biblical revelation into broad philosophical and logical categories; it is broader than political theology, which often concentrates on policy concerns, statecraft and the duties of citizenship. This comprehensive understanding of faith is already central to the mission of the National Association of Evangelicals, and the increasing diversity of the NAE’s network is introducing fresh voices whose questions and contributions are vital to honoring Jesus more fully.

Public Discipleship

Human beings are not simply individual brains on sticks. Therefore, writing white papers on public theology will not be enough. We are formed within intertwined communities —families, neighborhoods, schools, churches, sports teams, social media—who share various practices, beliefs, rituals and ways of life.

Whether by design or by happenstance, every Christian

is being disciplined for their public engagements by cultural influences, but many are not disciplined well. Public discipleship requires resources, events, curated experiences, collaborative endeavors, networked friendships, and long-term programs that are responsive to the Holy Spirit and formative in the ways people actually live and learn.

Public Engagement

Evangelicals must pursue a cultural redemption that reflects the call to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7).

Sometimes evangelicals attack the very people they are called to evangelize. While the gospel as public truth must prophetically challenge society, the critiques should be tied to the command to love our neighbor. This is not a marketing ploy to improve the sullied image of evangelicals. It reflects a fundamental conviction about the witness of the gospel and the way of Christ to persuade rather than bludgeon people. Public engagement entails working for and working with others.

Sometimes evangelicals attack the very people they are called to evangelize.

Disciplining the Mind and Mouth

Our intellectual and ethical conundrums are profound. Even when decisive action is required or Christian convictions must be upheld, today’s technological advances, biomedical possibilities, racial turmoil, debates about climate change, and shifting views on sexuality are all matters of immense complexity. These challenges, and a myriad of others, are boiling over in the context of deep social discord.

In developing principles and practices of knowing, Christians should show the kind of intellectual honesty and humility that we are asking of others. We do not want skeptics to reject the faith based upon simplistic assessments about church history or Christian theology. It bothers us when skeptics dismiss faith on the basis of a few articles that they

read or a few conversations that they’ve had.

Conversely, when engaging with non-Christian people and sources of knowledge, we need discernment to receive what is true, refine what is helpful, reject what is false, and reimagine what could and should be. This is not easy. And humans naturally devolve toward the easy.


Doing this hard work demands disciplines of the mind to match the disciplines of the mouth when James exhorts us to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (James 1:19—20).

Instead of a whack-a-mole response or a posture of culture war, the Scripture provides a template for how “to repair the fracture between spiritual and rational knowledge” and “to resolve the tension between the demands of personal belief and the constraints of a secularized public square.” The discipleship of such a biblical theology of knowledge is more a way to think rather than a what to think.

Catechesis of Complexity

The simplicity of our gospel presentation enables us to communicate clearly and quickly about God’s love, human sin and Christ’s redemption. But what enables the rapid growth of evangelicalism at times constrains its deeper growth. A faith so simply explained is too often left simplistic.

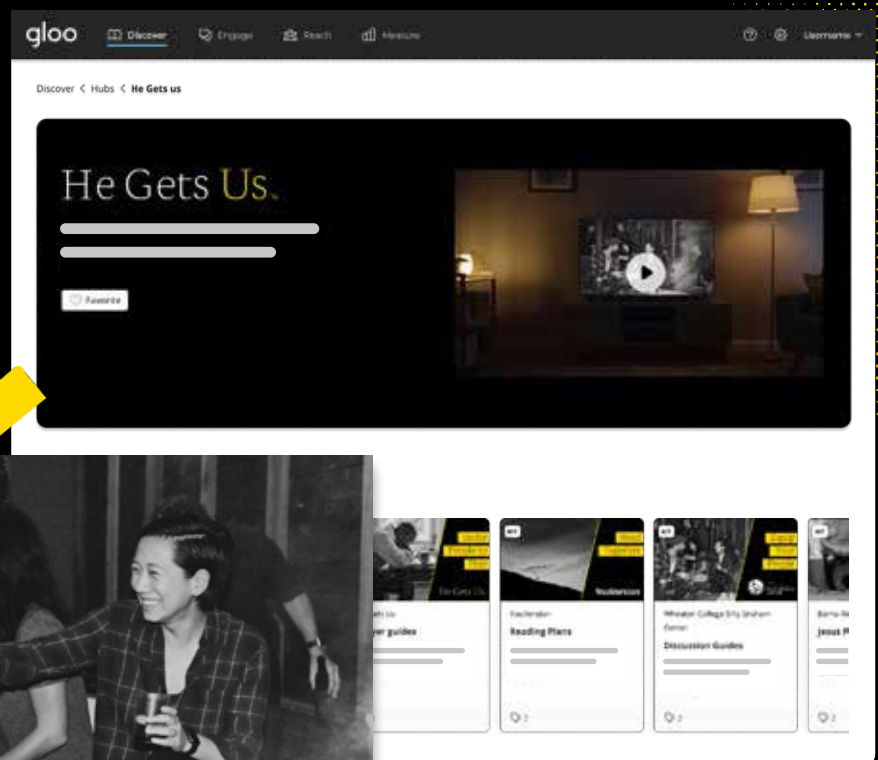
The luxury of thinking in this nuanced way of what and how we receive, refine, reject or reimagine requires time and patience in the study of Scripture and of society. Discipleship in this manner requires resources, events, curated experiences, collaborative endeavors, networked friendships, and long-term programs that are responsive to the Holy Spirit and formative in the ways people live and learn.

When my son graduated from high school, I was struck by what his teachers had asked of him. He studied calculus and physics; he wrote complex arguments about American history; he learned a second language and world geography. Many high school students are given complexity, while churches are far too content with a flannelgraph Jesus, seeking simplicity out of concern to make faith accessible. Our faith needs a catechesis of complexity. 



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