

CHRISTIANS IN THE CULTURE

**Pursuing Jesus in the 21st
Century Western World**

Lessons by:

**Matthew Allen, Mitchell Stevens, Keith Stonehart,
Ken Weliever, Clay Gentry, Todd Chandler, Roger Shouse,
Reuben Prevost, Max Dawson, Buddy Payne, Art Adams,
Shane Scott, Andrew Roberts, and Don Truex**

**Edited by:
Matthew Allen**

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The lessons you are about to read in this book were presented at the Cornerstone Church of Christ in Centerville, Ohio, over the summer of 2021. Videos and presentation files of each can be found at cornerstone-coc.com.

Cornerstone Church of Christ, formerly known as Kettering Church of Christ, is a family of believers in the Dayton, Ohio area. Comprised of over 90 families who live all over southwestern Ohio, the growing congregation is committed to glorifying Jesus in His kingdom through reverent worship; a continuing commitment to local and foreign outreach; and internal spiritual upbuilding and development. The congregation is served by three shepherds, Rich Walker, George Wacks, and Russ Robins. Matthew Allen and Cain Atkinson serve as ministers.

We heartily commend each of the lessons you are about to read and hope you will find them to be not only informative and relevant to our day, but also uplifting and encouraging.

Be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverted generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world (Philippians 2:15).



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Foreword

For us, living in this world could be likened to being a fish swimming in a river against the current. Every decision we make plays a role in the direction we swim. It is always easier to go with the current—the way of least resistance. For some fish however, going downstream leads them straight into the jaws of a predator.

For a long time, Christians have not had to do much “swimming against the current.” Generations before benefited from the Judeo-Christian worldview that dominated western culture. Now, the sun appears to be setting on those days. We do not need to panic or react in unadulterated anger toward this reality. We should understand it, accept it and learn how to swim God’s way no matter how strong the current against us becomes.

An entirely new framework and value system not built on Christian principles has taken root throughout our nation and the western world at large. Many of these implications, values, societal doctrines and creeds come from a stream of thought flowing down from the basin of secular humanism. The current is strong, and it is pulling many people away from the true stream that leads to the river of life.

Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God (1 John 4:1).

Christians have the responsibility to address these current issues. But this must be done objectively and carefully. As ambassadors of Christ, we must engage people in a way that allows us to minister to a sin-sick world. It should not be our aim to debate an invisible opponent, preach politics, rehearse long-held beliefs, or to “show how righteous we are.” Rather, our job is to provide grace, humility, and transparency in love to all who hear. We hope this book can be used as a productive tool for others in leading the type of conversations that bring the kingdom increase, and ultimately, bring glory to Christ.

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:13–16).

Christianity is inherently a counter-cultural movement. It is not a political movement that bends to the right or to the left. Rather, it transcends every human system by its being designed to bring people together around the cross of Christ. It has the power to bring all people to experience the depth of God's goodness in whatever culture they live. Christians have been imperfectly seeking to achieve this goal since the first century. It is our prayer that no matter what perspective you are coming from, that the text in this book will offer a perspective that is based in God's character, as being eternally just and righteous, as well as eternally loving and merciful. We pray for open minds and humility on all sides of the conversation, and we pray you, the reader, are blessed.

Lecture 1
Engaging Modern Culture
Matthew Allen

A Look Back

I came of age during the 1980s and early 90s, growing up in a small town in southwest Arkansas, a little less than halfway between Little Rock and Texarkana. Affectionately known as the *Brick Capital of the World*, Malvern was, and still is, a close-knit community. What I remember about it is mostly good. Looking back, if a person didn't know you, they most certainly knew who your parents or grandparents were ... or they would know someone in your extended family or church family. Just about everyone was connected in some way. It was common to walk into the *Food Center*, where my uncle still works, and see people from all over the community stopped in the aisles asking about friends and family ... catching up on life. We knew just about everyone on our street. Clint Fuller, who lived on the corner, was a referee for the Southwest Conference who sometimes got to work some of the Razorback games when they would play in Little Rock. Mrs. Frances Rutherford and Mrs. Merle Hardin, both widowed, lived next door to us with our little house in between. They each knew my grandmother from her earlier life when her first husband was a deacon at First Baptist Church. Merle's husband, Ed, worked with my grandfather in the post office after WW2. Across the street was Mr. Fred Giles and the Collins family lived next door to him. Guy Collins worked for a HVAC company and his wife, Sheila, attended pharmacy school in Little Rock. Their son, George and I played together all the time. Around the corner was the neighborhood grocery store, Mitchell's. Mitchell Burris had owned the store for years and his two sons, Mike and Mark, were in the process of taking over the business. They both went to school with my mom and were leading members in the Pentecostal church where my future wife grew up.

I remember how most families spent their entire life in Hot Spring County and people moving in were a big deal. With those who left, we never could figure out why anyone would want to ever move away. It was a big deal for us

to go to Little Rock for a shopping trip. *If you had been up there, you had been somewhere.* Our community was safe. Mom and Dad never minded me riding my bicycle all over town on those hot, humid summer days. Fishing with friends, floating on the river, being out in the woods with your 410 or 22, was just a part of regular life. Our high school parking lot was filled mainly with trucks ... most of them with gun racks in the back window ... with shot guns and rifles ready for hunting. *No one thought anything about it.* Some of the rural schools in our county cancelled school during the first week of November when deer season began. They knew hunting was a family affair.

There was a basic trust and expectation among people to do the right thing ... work hard, be honest, and treat people right. Most people were religious. On Sunday morning as we drove to church, every parking lot of every local church was full. I remember the uproar in town when the big retailer Wal-Mart decided to open from 12–5 on Sunday afternoons. Our elderly Southern Baptist neighbors resolved they would never shop in any store that was open on the *Christian Sabbath*. Like many counties in Arkansas, Hot Spring County was a dry county with no alcohol sales allowed. No school district in our county would have ever decided to schedule a sporting or extracurricular event on a Wednesday night or a Sunday. Those times were reserved for church. There was a basic Christian morality that permeated everything we did. Even though there were big doctrinal disagreements between us, Christian influence was strong everywhere you went.

Looking back, my world revolved around that area and that culture ... and I loved it. And maybe, as you've read my trip down memory lane you can feel the nostalgia. When I'm back for a visit, there are things about it that I miss. Other things, not so much. And while I've painted a mostly positive picture (I think all of us do as we reflect on culture decades in the past), it must not be misunderstood that I think everything was perfect. There were dishonest people. Immorality was rampant. Liquor stores abounded at the county line. All of that was in the background. If you looked for it, you would have seen broken marriages; abused kids; and racism rearing its ugly head. The court system had plenty of work. People went to jail. Churches had their scandals and squabbles. It would not be fair to pretend those things did not exist.

Today's World is Much Different

But the way of life I remember growing up seems, in many ways, so much simpler and innocent now, especially as we consider our present world. I'm writing just days after mass shootings in the Atlanta and Denver suburbs. The media is desperately looking for someone or an ideology to blame. Two weeks ago, a major music awards show featured an act that was little more than soft pornography danced to a "song" with explicit lyrics. The broadcast was rated TV-14 and did not include any warning about the nature of the performance beforehand. Pop culture raved about it. Last week a transgendered man became the first person of that lifestyle to become a Senate-confirmed government official. It was applauded across the Washington punditry as a major step forward in the battle of equality for transexuals. This week a columnist for USA Today has called for Oral Roberts University's basketball team to be booted from the NCAA basketball tournament because the schools "deeply bigoted anti-LGBTQ+ policies can't and shouldn't be ignored."¹ And finally, this past Monday the U.S. Court of Appeals denied an appeal of a Washington football coach who was fired after his seven-year practice of praying with players at the 50-yard line at the conclusion of each high school football game. It was said that some players felt they were not in an inclusive and welcoming environment as they prayed.

Looking across the landscape, many of us see a world that is hard to recognize as we remember the unique experiences of our past American culture. So many things have changed. How much farther can we go as these things not only continue, but grow more prevalent? What will happen when we are told to not only be silent on speaking out against immorality, but instead to actively affirm and celebrate it? Why is the topic of Christian persecution inside the United States even entertained as a growing possibility in the not too far distant future? Why are our children growing up thinking the country will dissolve into a bitter civil war over the next few years?

1 Jhaveri, Hemal. "Oral Roberts University Isn't the Feel Good March Madness Story We Need." Retrieved 03/25/21 from <https://ftw.usatoday.com/2021/03/oral-roberts-ncaa-anti-lgbtq-code-of-conduct>.

It is not the same world many of us grew up in. We're more educated and wealthier. Our access to information is instantaneous. As a result, we're more impatient. We are the center of our own universe. We're arrogant, thinking we know more than we do. We get around more than we used to, decreasing the level of connectedness we used to take for granted. For example, families have become more transient, often living hundreds or even thousands of miles away from where they were raised. Most have brought their own culture, language, and value system along, which may look very different from our own.² Here in the Midwest, while most people in our communities may identify as religious, now Christianity is only one of many religious varieties from which to choose. And while religious identity may still be the norm, it certainly feels like those who identify as Christian are part of a growing minority, especially if you intend to live out the principles and be faithful in attending worship.³ While this is certainly not the first time in world history Christians have ever found themselves in a minority, it is the first time in this country's existence that there is an active resistance to and wholesale rejection of Christianity by American society at large. Many of the values we took for granted just a few short decades ago are now being lost to the passage of time.

Today it is normal for our children to go off to school and be confronted with immorality on a scale we could have never imagined when we were children. Each day our young people are being trained to question authority and the Biblical virtues we have raised them on. They are told their parents have subscribed to antiquated and fundamentalist views. And not only that, they are also shamed into thinking that those who espouse traditional Judeo-Christian morality are the ones with dark hearts, who are nothing more than racist bigots and nationalists who are just mad that their time of domination, "privilege," and exclusivism has passed.

2 The wife of a preaching friend of mine who lives outside of Seattle reports that there are over 140 languages represented in the school system she works for.

3 A Gallup Survey from March 29, 2021 reveals church membership inside the United States is now less than 50%. See "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time." <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx?>

At younger and younger ages, they are being bombarded with sex ... and the other side seems intent on acquainting them with every possible form of deviance ... all in the name of tolerance and open-mindedness. Anyone who would dare question these new cultural crusaders must be silenced at all costs. Our institutions of higher learning have become a moral cesspool where godliness is resisted not only among the student body, but the new, *enlightened, and informed* secular-humanist system is championed by administrators and faculty alike. Any diversion from the agenda must not only be silenced, but it also must be *punished and destroyed*. As we observe our world, the appearance is that young minds are being not only swayed ... but fundamentally and permanently changed.

Impact on the Church

The impact is spilling over into the church. Today, a typical congregation in the church of Christ will lose half its young people to the world once they leave home. Flavil Yeakley¹—who almost a decade ago in his studies of growth patterns within the churches of Christ—found that around 42% of our young people are leaving the church. In my own experience, working with two Midwestern suburban congregations over the last 18 years, the number of young people who have left hovers between 50–60%. Kids now, on a daily basis, confront matters Gen X'ers and Boomers once took for granted. At younger and younger ages, they're facing matters on the existence of God, the validity and authority of Scripture, sexual morality, gender issues, legalization of drugs, cohabitation, and many other things. Many local church curriculum programs fail in addressing these matters in a modern/relevant way. Some have dismissed these concerns by refusing to budge in their teaching methods, using the same teaching style of the 1950's and 60's. Kids simply do not learn this way anymore. Others operate with dismissive tones and sweeping generalizations regarding our young people all in direct earshot. Still others take it for granted that our young people know how much we love and care for them. They may hear words, but actions are lacking. And yes, while some of the criticisms of young people

1 Yeakley, Flavil. *Why They Left: Listening to Those Who Have Left Churches of Christ*. Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 2012, p. 39. Yeakley says that around 21% leave for denominational groups and another 21% leave their faith behind altogether.

today are valid, the bulk of the responsibility lies on their adult parents and influencers who have refused first, to become aware of the type and breadth of problems young people today face, or second, become so wrapped up in their lives that their kids have had to teach themselves about morality and religion through YouTube or TikTok.

Sadly, as they've come of age, our young people are leaving the church and not coming back. Some of our congregations now have mostly empty classrooms and little hope of younger families moving in to change the dynamic and turn the growth trajectory around. As the remaining members sit there, Sunday after Sunday, turning grayer while they stare at empty pews and classrooms, it is easy to become jaded and maybe just a little embittered. Instead of looking with introspection, externalizing the problem requires much less effort. And that is what happens. Everything becomes "us vs. them," "we are right, everyone else is wrong," or "why can't they just see and accept the truth?" "They don't love the truth as much as we do and want something soft and more lenient." "They aren't interested in working in a church ... they just want to hide in the background in a larger church." The statements could just go on and on. A generation down the road when these congregations close their doors forever, some will only then begin to ask in dismay, *How did this happen? How did we get here?*

What Can We Do Now? How Do We Respond?

Many more paragraphs could be written as we try to properly frame the problem we face. (It is so wide and encompassing that I'm not sure I've done it justice in the paragraphs you've just read.) The hearts of most are pure. The last thing they want is for their congregation to die or those they love to drift away from God. But a new reality has come upon us, which may be hard to accept. This is no longer a culture where Christian influence is in the majority. I take no pleasure in saying this. As we come to grips with this, we may feel shell-shocked as the hits keep coming with increasing rapidity. In these moments we may not be certain on how to respond. In fact, many of us are probably somewhere along a progression as we access the cultural landscape ... dealing with all sorts of emotions ... much like the key points of what is referred to as the *five stages of grief*.

In her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross outlined a basic five-step progression¹ on how people cope with terminal illness and dying. Her book has sold millions and been printed in over 40 different languages. Over the last 50 years the model she outlined has been adapted to apply to almost any dramatic life changing situation. In a 2014 book published after her death and co-authored by David Kessler, Kübler-Ross writes that the five stages of grief can happen after any form of personal loss.² In other studies, some academics now identify this as *The Change Curve*.³ They describe it in three stages, with the second stage being the lowest emotional point.

As you cope with the changing moral standards and rejection of Christianity, you may go through periods of:

- **Shock and Denial.** Some of the things we see, read, and hear about are shocking. We don't know how to respond. So, we cope by holding onto a reality that no longer exists. Our thoughts drift to the past. Mentally and emotionally, we reject the clear and obvious truth before us. We ignore the problem by turning off the news, getting away from social media, or avoid other ways of "being in the know" as to what is happening with the culture. Others try to convince themselves that change isn't going to happen, or if it does, it won't affect them. They try to carry on as they always have and may deny they know about the changes and avoid planning in how to deal with those changes.
- **Anger and Depression.** This is where we decide to fight back against the fear. We're still living in denial, thinking that we have power to change the problem. So, we begin to blame others or an ideology. We reinforce our stereotypes and lash out at all who may be different or younger than us. I believe this is why our social media feeds are so

1 The Five-Step Process outlined by Kübler-Ross is: 1) Denial; 2) Anger; 3) Bargaining; 4) Depression; and 5) Acceptance.

2 Examples might be the loss of a job or decrease in income; major rejection; the end of a relationship or divorce; drug addiction; incarceration; the onset of disease; or even minor losses such as the loss of insurance coverage. See Kübler-Ross, E., Kessler D. *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through Five Stages of Loss*. New York. Scribner, 2014.

3 [the_change_curve.pdf \(exeter.ac.uk\)](#)

negative. Christians have become adept at expressing their frustration, irritation, and anxiety through the outlet of social media as they cope with political and social change. It is seen in our suspicion, skepticism, and frustration. While most of the time we keep this hidden behind a keyboard, sometimes it comes out through rude behavior or ... worse. This is all before we reach the lowest part of the emotional curve, where depression sets in. Now, reality is beginning to be acknowledged. This often leads to feelings of being overwhelmed which morph into apathy and isolation. Our self-talk may sound like this: *What's the point? Why even try? It's never going to get better.* The situation appears to be locked in with no possibility of change. Things are hopeless. There is the thought of flight. How many people have you heard speak of their desire to move to a different part of the country that aligns closer to their values ... or even move to another country? These are real conversations people are having.

- **Acceptance and Integration.** This is the final stage where a person comes to terms with the reality of the situation, i.e., we've lost the culture war and that's okay. And it's okay because, as Brian Mesimer writes, "the Christian hopes not in solely the political process but in the active working of God."⁴ It's not easy to get this final part of the process, but as we do, our emotions will improve and we will learn to work inside the change instead of against it. Christians and local congregations will look for new opportunities and move in faith, hope, and trust.

Defining and Living inside Culture

What do we mean when we use the word *culture*? Sometimes we use it to refer to what we might call *high culture*, i.e., the arts, music, sculpture, paintings, etc. At other times, we might be referencing *pop culture*, i.e., TV shows, movies, Hollywood, or music. And finally, there may be times we use it to describe anything that is against what we believe as a Christian. We tend to only use the word when we're referring to ungodly music, immoral lifestyles, liberal politics, social agendas, movies, and immodest dress, just to name a few. Generally, we use the word to refer to worldliness.

4 Mesimer, Brian. "The Five Stages of Evangelical Grief." Mereorthodoxy.com. Retrieved 03/26/2021 from *The Five Stages of Evangelical Grief* | *Mere Orthodoxy*.

Two Definitions

In its most basic sense, *culture is what people do with the world*.¹ This includes good things and bad, things morally neutral and morally complex. Stonestreet and Kunkle explain that people make culture and are shaped by culture, but it would be wrong to equate them with culture. Culture is what people do as a people.

Bruce Ashford's definition is similar. Culture is:

Anything humans produce when they interact with each other and God's creation. People produce food, build things, develop worldviews, and practice religion. Humans produce culture and simultaneously allow it to shape them, affecting who they are, what they think, and how they feel.²

Broadly speaking, culture encompasses the totality of life in this world. It is constantly changing. It is never in a fixed position. Some of us have been around long enough to see things come into style, go out of style, and come back into style. The way we use language is also an example. Yesterday, our second preacher walked in the office and complimented me using a word that twenty years ago I associated with an insult. What was out then is cool and hip now. Culture is dynamic. "Culture changes according to human innovations, inventions, fashions and ideas. What one generation considers normal, the next generation thinks of as odd or funny. In the same way, grandparents shake their heads at the fashions, entertainment choices, values, and lifestyles of the young, and vice versa."³

Cultures are perpetuated through ideas. These are often generated by artists (songs and books, etc.), storytellers (books, TV shows, movies, documentaries, etc.), entrepreneurs (and their marketers), and educators. These ideas are then maintained and circulated by institutions. Our system

1 Stonestreet, John & Kunkle, Brett. *A Practical Guide to Culture: Helping the Next Generation Navigate Today's World*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook.

2 Ashford, Bruce Riley. *Every Square Inch: An Introduction to Cultural Engagement for Christians*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015, p. 13.

3 Stonestreet & Kunkle.

of higher education is an example. Government is another. Media, family, and the church would be more examples. As you think of these institutions, over the course of your lifetime, which have become of lesser influence? Which have become more? As Satan has worked through educators, media, and government, family and church have declined in the way they impact society. “As the church becomes less important in the everyday lives of citizens, other sources of moral authority become more important, for better or worse.”⁴

So how does the Christian relate to culture? It is essential to get this right. If we do not, it will be detrimental not only to our life, but to the world around us. If we get it right, it will transform our lives and the lives of those around us.

Two Perspectives

Christians Against Culture

In his book, Ashford describes this as looking at the church like a bomb shelter.⁵ It’s very easy to do in our post-Christian world, especially as our theological and moral values are being rejected and mocked in the public square. So, in this viewpoint, the idea is to protect or even withdraw from the culture at large. And, taking in the three levels of *The Change Curve* mentioned previously, it could be very easy to sequester ourselves.

There are good motives and intentions behind it. There are Biblical principles here as well. Christians have been called upon to be pure and holy, as well as to protect themselves from ungodly influences:

- Hebrews 12:14⁶: *Pursue peace with everyone, and holiness—without it no one will see the Lord.*
- 2 Corinthians 7:1b: *Let us cleanse ourselves from every impurity of the flesh and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 Ashford, p. 12.

6 All my scripture references are taken from the *Christian Standard Bible*.

- 1 Peter 1:14–16: *As obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires of your former ignorance. But as the one who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct; for it is written, Be holy, because I am holy.*
- 1 Peter 2:11: *Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and exiles to abstain from sinful desires that wage war against the soul.*

It is very true that the church is a place of refuge and protection and a place where we can be spiritually healed, renewed, and refreshed. But the battle is not in our buildings, it's out in the world. We must never retreat behind our four walls and sit down and wait for the world to end. The battle rages outside and we need to see ourselves as vessels transmitting the power that can change hearts and minds.

It was Jesus who said:

I have given them your word. The world hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I am not praying that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world (John 17:14–16)

As you read this verse, did you discover the two takeaways? We are in the world, but not of it. Isolation is not an option. We can't remove ourselves from this world.

Christianity is not only about militant resistance. When we frame Christianity as being against culture, we view everything primarily from the perspective of warfare. And yes, we are at war:

- Ephesians 6:11 instructs us to put on the whole armor of God.
- 1 Timothy 6:12 tells us to fight the good fight of faith.
- James 4:7 contains an imperative to resist the devil.
- 2 Corinthians 10:4–5 urges us to cast down philosophies that are against God.

Spiritual warfare is not the totality of our existence. We must remember as we look out across the culture that it is full of lost *people* in need of rescue.

Christians help people. Like Jesus, we have a heart for the lost (Mark 2:17). We have been called to exhibit the love of God (John 13:34–35).

Christianity In and For the Culture

Going back to our passage in John 17:14–16, *Christianity in and for the culture* is the essence of these verses. We don't withdraw from the culture, leading lives of isolation and fear, we engage with it where we can, viewing ourselves as representatives of Christ who live for the good of others. We accomplish this by consistent obedience that glorifies Jesus and by providing effective testimony for the gospel.

It is very easy to see how the world is running off the proverbial cliff ... away from God as fast as possible. All around we see people worshipping themselves, sex, money, power, or *anything* other than God. It is our job to speak out against these things *from the perspective of pointing the way to help*. This is what we mean by living *for* the culture. We're speaking out for their sake. We point the way to healing. We are there to help. We show people how to redirect their lives. *We bring solutions, not condemnation and judgment*. This is the spirit behind Jesus' instruction in Matthew 5:13–16. Notice how we are:

- Salt, preserving all that is good, right, and wholesome (Matthew 5:13).
- Light, acting in a way to bring God glory in all we do (Matthew 5:14). Whether it be how we engage others in social media, on the job, in the public square, wherever.

Our Directive for Responding to Culture

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God." He made the

one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:17–21).

As we examine this passage, we find a directive for how to live while we live in this world, as we wait on the world to come. Paul instructs Christians to go forward with a ministry of reconciliation—first with an understanding of their new identity, i.e., *they are a new creation*. This is a present reality for every baptized believer. You live in this reality. Your newness results from your being *in Christ*.

In vv. 18–19 we learn three things:

1. God wants to reconcile sinners to Himself through Christ.
2. Upon that reconciliation, we each have been given *the ministry of reconciliation*. Our focus is outward, toward the lost. It is service based.
3. We have been given a *message*. The word for “message” is *logos* in the original language, which in this case is referencing the gospel. The gospel *message* is that *God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them*. Every Christian has been entrusted with the purpose to get that message out to as many as possible.

The Imagery of an Ambassador

Notice 2 Corinthians 5:20. Since God is making His appeal through us, we are *ambassadors for Christ*. An ambassador is a position of dignity and honor whereby a person represents the government in a foreign land. When we travel overseas, we are subjected to different traditions and lifestyles, many of which will run counter to our own. My travels to Colombia have taken me to Manizales during the time of the running of the bulls. It’s a festive time filled with a party atmosphere. Lewd women, abundant alcohol, and the absence of restraint abound. When I’ve been in the country during that time, those are events I don’t participate in. Getting gored is not my thing, plus it’s important to keep myself away from temptation and sin. But at the same time, while I am there, I am on a mission. Bull fighting is not my mission. Representing Jesus Christ is.

The apostles often stressed that we are citizens of heaven dwelling in a foreign land. This world is not our home. But while we are here, we proclaim the message of reconciliation as an ambassador representing the eternal King. It is not our own personal dignity that brings power and influence to our role, it is that of the One we represent. It is not our own message, words, or demands that carry weight ... it is the words we have been given to speak by Jesus through His revealed word. As we speak, we need to remember it is not our job to change the culture, our job is simply to represent the One who sent us.

We Need to Stay on Track

For the last forty years, American evangelicals have been locked in moral, political, and cultural battles. The *Moral Majority* has largely failed in its mission to accomplish lasting and sweeping cultural change through the usage of politics. In fact, most politicians have used and manipulated many God-fearing and noble Christians who were moving with the best of intentions, to accomplish their own ends. Most politicians have no genuine desire to enact laws that encourage moral living. How many years have we been promised real and lasting change on abortion laws? Time after time, when Congress has had the ability, the politicians have found a way not to act. And think about the number of corrupt “Christian” leaders who have held influential positions inside the *Moral Majority* over our lifetime. Every time, those in the media and society have heaped scorn upon evangelicals and unfairly branded us all as being either hypocrites or dumb and naïve sheep. Organizations like *Focus on the Family* have used the courts to fight and protect our children from the cultural left. Little, if any ground has been gained. The tide of cultural rot and decay only seems to grow by the day... as those opposed to Christ grow in their intensity and determination. When it comes effecting national repentance and change, evangelicals have been stymied. It’s only led to more frustration as we’ve moved off track.

And without realization, this has led to some viewing those in the mission field as the enemy. Please reread 2 Corinthians 5:19–20. Our directive is to circulate and promote *the message*; not fix the culture. Our mission is the

gospel, not politics. Our aim is to change *individual* lives because changed lives impacted by the gospel is what will change society. God's mission has never deviated. We see it in the mission of Jonah, who saw the Ninevites as nothing more than wretched and depraved enemies who hated all that was good. He had ample evidence upon which to build his case. The Assyrian nation almost invented the word for *brutality* by the way it slaughtered its enemies and piled their skulls in the entrance of conquered cities. The Assyrian army combined efficiency with bloodthirsty methods to gain for itself the doubtful honor of being the best military machine the world had yet seen.¹

It was for these individuals God called Jonah to go to and preach. For him there could have been no nation more revolting, which explains why he boarded a ship headed as far away as possible.² Finally after his underwater experience inside the belly of the great fish Jonah submits ... goes to Nineveh to preach ... and the entire city repents. Chapter 4 tells us Jonah's reaction. He gets mad and wants to die. There may be times we're more like Jonah than we care to admit.

Today, as we move *in* and *for* the culture, we will encounter those in need of rescue. We'll get to know unbelievers, people trapped in pornography, those struggling with same-sex attraction, women who have had multiple abortions, and people questioning their gender. How will we react? Will we keep the mission at the forefront of our mind? Preaching the ministry of reconciliation always involves making sure those in the world know we love them enough to show them there is a way out of their sin and that entry onto the road to forgiveness is always open. We must never come across in a way that communicates anger and hate. No one hated sin more than Jesus did, but He still wept over those who would be lost in Jerusalem ... and so must we in the Jerusalem's of our day.

1 Grayson, A. K. "Assyria, Assyrians." Edited by Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005, p. 100.

2 Jonah 1.2-3.

Conclusion

I remember the day in 1999 when the Columbine shooting happened outside Denver. I can tell you where I was as I listened to the news reports. My wife and I had taken some friends to Yellowstone National Park that day and were driving back across northern Wyoming to South Dakota as we listened to news reports on KOA out of Denver. We were all filled with stunned silence. We listened to every word of every report trying to comprehend the details. For days it seemed the entire country was in shock. Today, our nation has almost become numb to mass shootings. More communities than I can count are coping with the aftermath of these tragedies, including the one where I currently live in Dayton, OH. Once a shooting has happened, we all know the drill of how the media and culture responds. A vigil is held. A press frenzy ensues, detailing every detail about the shooter and his or her life leading up to what happened. Politicians and activists call for more laws. A week or two later, everything, for the community, returns to normal.

In all the mass shootings since Columbine until now, the reaction and aftermath of one should not go unnoticed. It happened in the Amish country of eastern Pennsylvania in the days and weeks after October 2, 2006. On that dreadful day, Charles Roberts walked into a one room Amish school and murdered 5 girls between the ages of 6–13. Then he killed himself. How the local Amish community went into action is incredible. Terri Roberts, mother of the shooter, described the grace with which the parents of the deceased reached out to her and prayed for her. On the day of the shooting one Amish man literally held the father of the shooter in his arms as he grieved. Thirty people from the community attended the funeral for Charles Roberts and soon afterward set up a charitable fund for the shooter's family since he left behind a wife and three children. One Amish woman told a reporter, "We can tell people about Christ and actually show you in our walk that we are forgiven, not just say it, but in our walk of life. You know you have to live it, you can't just say it."³ The horror of this tragedy was just as real as all the others, but the loving, grace-filled response of the traumatized

3 Anne Curry. "Curry Commentary: Incredible Forgiveness." Retrieved 5/5/21 from <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna15134112>.

Amish community stands out as a beacon of light. Christian principles were in action. *This is the way of Christ.* This is the ministry of reconciliation. We offer solutions. We don't build walls. We offer open arms—we don't make enemies. We live, in and for the culture.

MATTHEW ALLEN grew up in Malvern, Arkansas. He attended Malvern High School, graduating in 1992. He attended Ouachita Baptist University as an accounting major, before moving to Brownsburg, Indiana, in 1995 to begin training as an evangelist under Carl McMurray. Matthew received his BA in Religion Studies from Wright State University in 2017.



Matthew has previously worked with congregations in Tompkinsville, Kentucky, Brownsburg, Indiana, and Rapid City, South Dakota. He has worked with Cornerstone Church of Christ in Centerville, Ohio since 2010. Matthew has also preached extensively outside of the United States, by conducting evangelistic efforts in Belize (1998), Canada (2007, 09, 11), and Ukraine (2003, 04, 08). Since 2011, He has been making yearly trips to Colombia, working with churches across the country.

Matthew and his wife, Becky live in Waynesville, Ohio, and have two grown children, Emilea and Zackary. Matthew is the owner of Spiritbuilding Publishers.