

Contextualization; End of Christendom

In our own settings, the Gospel ministers who must deal with fresh contextualizations of Christology as much as any are those involved in youth ministry. In their seeking to speak in relevant ways, I hear Jesus Christ referred to as “the Boss,” “the Coach,” or “the President.” They are ways that seek to give a fresh, equivalent, English, contextual translation of *kurios*. It is not to discard the good and proper word “Lord,” but rather it is recognizing that the English word “Lord” was also first used and has been continued to be used in a contextualized way. That word “Lord” might not register with some people. That does not mean that we ought to therefore discard it. Yet to have some other words that are fresh and speak to what the Scriptures are saying is something that youth ministers in particular must work hard to achieve.

Our next category is “Christ is Conqueror and Crucified.” I will make only a few comments about that. This rubric comes from various non-Western theologians. It is not exclusively from non-Western theologians, but I am thinking specifically of a well-known Japanese author named Shusaku Endo. You may be familiar with him. His best-known work, *Silence*, was about how God was seemingly silent in the early 1600s in Japan when so many Christians were suffering such awful persecution. They were being stamped out by the government authorities. It was one of the most horrific, systematic, and successful persecutions of the Christian church that ever took place. Endo was a Japanese Roman Catholic who wrote a number of books; he died a few years ago. One of his books, which was later than *Silence*, was called *The Samurai*, which was a story that was also set in the 1630s. Some local samurai travel on a ship to Mexico and eventually to Spain and Rome. It is a fascinating novel that I urge you to read. Endo writes autobiographically. What comes out of it Christologically is that the Japanese sensibility tends toward the weak, suffering Christ, the crucified Christ. For example, it focuses on the type of Christ that is being experienced and lived out among the poor indigenous Indians in Mexico that the Japanese travelers in the novel meet. The conquering Christ is what was brought into Mexico by Spain and is exhibited in Spain and Rome. There is a dual Christology that Endo presents in this book. He does not throw out either one. He notes his own instinctive longings for the crucified, weak Christ. Endo indicates that how Jesus is understood is related to where He is understood.

It is striking to me, when you read our hymns about Jesus, that more often than not, we sing about the exalted, glorious Christ. It is not exclusively, but it is the case more often than not. It strikes me that perhaps it is related to the last several hundred years of our own history in this part of the world, seeing Christ as the conquering King.

“Cross-cultural Dialogue as Theological Conversation” is one of the readings I recommend by William Dyrness. He was the former dean of the school of theology at Fuller Seminary. He spent a number of his working years in the Philippines. He gained a deep appreciation for the value of cross-cultural theological sharing. That reading is from a book he wrote entitled *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology*. He notes that in evaluating different theologies originating from different places, one can extrapolate and see what sorts of characteristics are important and which can be correctives for different settings. He cites the need for historical perspective. Not all theological formulations that he has surveyed from around the world embody that characteristic. He notes the importance of critical thinking. That is a particular heritage of those of us in the West, along with historical thinking in some cases. He also notes an instrumental or functional understanding, as opposed to a substantive understanding. This is thinking about who Christ is for us and what He does for us rather than substantially defining Him metaphysically and ontologically. In the end, he notes that those can be correctives in different settings. As the Gospel comes into a setting, it is going to take fresh shape. An understanding of Jesus Christ will

take fresh shape in different settings. We ought to listen to each other across cultural boundaries and contextual boundaries within the Christian church. That is important to gain an ever-increasingly full understanding of who Jesus Christ is in all of His universality, complexity, beauty, glory, and majesty.

The first sermon that I ever preached as a student of homiletics at Covenant Theological Seminary was on Romans 1:1-7. It has stuck with me all these years. I recall specifically verses 3 and 4. I was not thinking missiologically and contextually at the time, but in retrospect I can see how it was a contextual corrective for me when I dealt with those verses. In Romans 1, Paul was dealing with the Gospel. I will read from the end of verse 1 through verse 4. Paul wrote, "The gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord." When I first encountered those verses and when I went to the commentaries to confirm what I was sensing, my belief was that it was talking about the humanity and deity of Christ. Verse 3 says, "Concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David," which is referring to His human nature. Verse 4 says, "Who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord," which is referring to His divinity. That is true. One or two commentaries, however, noted that what was in Paul's mind was an historical progression of Christ the humiliated One who became exalted as the Son of God and was declared to be so by the resurrection from the dead. It is an historical progression. That does not mean that noticing the human and divine natures of Christ is wrong. It does not mean that this passage does not lend support toward seeing the two natures of the second person of the Trinity. Yet that is looking through later lenses.

My instinctive reading in that way was because of my inheritance of a context. It was a positive development, given the situations through which Christological understandings have come. When you read what Paul is writing here, however, it is focused on the historical progression of Jesus being humiliated and then exalted. That was the point. Realizing my own instincts because of my background, and realizing the contextual settings in which those formulations were developed, can help allow us to hear the Scriptures afresh in all their fullness. Then we will not be locked into particular interpretations only. They may be right and orthodox interpretations, but they may not be complete and fair according to what the Scriptures meant in their original sense. That was merely a personal example of how fresh hermeneutics is closely tied to what we are talking about.

Let me mention some books that are on the supplemental reading list for the course that I have not mentioned before. One work is *Moving Out*, by David Howard, which is about the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century student volunteer movement. There are two other books by Patrick Johnstone. The first is *The Church is Bigger than You Think*, which is the source of some of the graphs that I use in this course. The title of that book means something different than I originally thought. When I first read the title, I thought he was going to write about the worldwide scope of the church. What he is speaking about, instead, is that too often our ecclesiologies keep us from fully embracing so-called parachurch organizations as part of the organized church. He suggests that when you look at what has happened in Christian history, those parachurch organizations have been needed to carry out various ministries of the church. They have always been there, and we should see them as part of the organized church. He uses some of Ralph Winter's terminology, distinguishing between "sodalities" and "modalities." Sodalities are the more specialized organizations such as monasteries and modern mission organizations. Modalities are the more recognized established church structures. He says that we should recognize all of them as part of the organized church. That brings certain questions to the fore regarding the issues of church discipline, the sacraments, and those sorts of things. He also offers helpful historical information about missions activities.

Another well-known book by Patrick Johnstone is *Operation World*. This book has a country-by-country description of the religious situations in those places. It is a helpful prayer guide. It is also available on CD-ROM. This could be a tool for congregations, Sunday school groups, families, or for your personal study. It is designed to be one of the most comprehensive prayer guides for all parts of the world. It has been widely influential in evangelical missions circles.

The next section is called "Modern Empires and the End of Christendom." One of the main points to realize from this topic is that when you consider Christian history in general and the cross-cultural missionary spread of the faith in particular, you must realize it takes place within history. It is intertwined with general history. For the sake of analysis, we can separate those histories. God works in particular ways in redemptive history as He is providentially governing general history. Those two are going to be intertwined. We will consider the cross-cultural spread of the last 200 years. The closely intertwined nature of that missions movement and general history will become clear.

Consider the port town of Hakodate in northern Japan. It is on the northernmost tip of the main island of Honshu. It was an important port town for Western powers, as they began to encroach on Japan and wanted to deal with Japan in the mid-nineteenth century. Japan had been in seclusion for over 200 years, since the 1630s. By the 1850s, the Western powers all wanted to relate to Japan. It was important for many reasons. For example, it is right next to China. That is why it was particularly important to the Americans. When you consider the development of Hakodate as a city, and when you see some of the buildings that were constructed in the 1860s, you will see some church buildings that are quite striking in downtown Hakodate. You will see an Orthodox church, a Catholic church, and an Anglican church all close to each other. They are all beautiful buildings. Guess who built and who worshiped in the Orthodox church building. It was the Russians. Guess who built and who worshiped in the Anglican church building. It was the British, and they would let the Americans come in as well. The Catholic church building was built and used by the French. France was Catholic, Russia was Orthodox, and Britain was Anglican. There was a close alliance between those countries and those particular branches of Christianity. They were closely intertwined. You cannot separate out the national identity of those particular churches from their denominational affiliations.

Those sorts of intertwined relationships are characteristic of much of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century spread of the Christian faith via the West. In Africa, for example, French colonies were primarily Catholic in terms of the spread of Christianity. The same was true for Portugal. British colonies were primarily Anglican. Thus today in the post-colonial period, for example, when you talk about the Church of Ghana or the Church of Kenya, you are talking about the Anglican Church, because they were former British colonies. That is the reality of how Christianity spread with the spread of modern empires.

Let us consider the ancient and medieval European background of the modern imperial powers. There were characteristics that were picked up over the centuries. With the ecumenical councils, the need to define the faith, the need to define what heresy is and what orthodoxy is, and with the close association of the calling of those councils and the definition of orthodoxy, there was a defined creedal precision that developed along with imperial power. That was certainly how it took shape after Constantine. There was the division that arose after the fall of the Roman Empire, with the continuation of the Byzantine Empire and the vestiges of what the Roman Empire was in other parts of Europe. There was the rise of the Roman church. Nestorianism was cut off and defined as heretical, because the precise language was different. The political and cultural differences in that controversy were clear. That is one part of the background, the need to be creedally precise, combined with imperial power.

As the Christian faith spread into and took hold of various European nations, there was the strengthening of the notion of territorial Christian nations. The idea was this nation under this kingdom is Christian, and that was the religion of this territory. Other kingdoms may have had different religions, but that ruler's and that kingdom's Christianity was alone tolerated in that territory. That was viewed as their religion, and what was elsewhere was viewed as different. That notion developed and strengthened over the centuries, particularly as Europe became threatened by Islam. Islam began to threaten Europe rather early, especially after the Crusades. The Mongols spread in the thirteenth century, and the Ottoman Turks spread in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Europe was in danger of being overrun. Hungary was the eastern outpost of Christendom in defense against the infidels. Remember that there was not the global consciousness that we have today. The world was much smaller, much more closed and insular for people.

It is interesting to note that with the Protestant Reformation, when you consider where it occurred, for the most part in northern and western Europe, you can see a similar divide between where the Protestant Reformation took hold and where the Catholic Church stood strong as the divide between the old Roman Empire and the northern European nations. It was similar, with some small exceptions. When you think about what remained Catholic and what became Protestant, you can see a correlation. Some people have pointed out, therefore, that the underlying civilizations and cultures were not unrelated to the Protestant Reformation. There was the old Roman Mediterranean culture into which the Roman church took firm hold. With the spread of that Latin Christianity into northern and western Europe, it remained somewhat foreign. With the Protestant Reformation and the translation of the Scriptures into indigenous tongues—English, Luther's translation into German, and others—there was more of a contextualization of the Christian faith into those northern and western European settings. It became contextualized in their settings in the same way the Latin faith had become contextualized in the Roman church's settings.

Some people want to use that as the total explanation for the Protestant Reformation. That is simplistic and reductionistic. There was much more at work there than simply cultural factors. Yet it was part of it. Even with the coming of the Protestant Reformation, however, there was not a removal of the notion of Christian territories. In the wake of the Reformation, there were many religious wars fought. That was because only one type of religion was tolerated in certain areas. That was just the way it was. One area was Lutheran territory, one was Reformed territory, and one was Catholic territory, or whatever it might be. That remained the case in Europe until the spread of the Christian faith out of Europe.

The Orthodox Church in eastern and central Europe, and beginning with Cyril and Methodius in the late nineteenth century into Russia, took its own shape. Later in the course, we will consider Russia and the role it played in the modern missions movement. The rest of the Orthodox Church did not have the political and economic might for those nations to spread. They were right next to Islam and Islamic countries. They were sandwiched in between other European powers and Islamic nations. They did not have the ability to spread, but Russia was an exception. I will point out that Russia played an important role in the modern missions movement.

When you see the modern empires spreading, much of that spread was due to them rivaling each other. Spain and Portugal spread around the world. The English and the Dutch spread, although not in the same kind of colonial way. There were differences between the way Spain and Portugal spread. Spain went out and conquered territories. Spain conquered the Americas, and it conquered and named the Philippines. Portugal did not have the resources nor the will, nor was the setting around Africa and Asia suitable for setting up new colonies. The English and the Dutch were not ready to become the same kind of world power that Spain was. That changed with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in the 1580s. It was

through the trading companies into Asia and America that the English and Dutch spread. Wherever they went, they were rivals with the Spanish. In various places around Africa, Asia, and the Americas, the Protestant and Catholic powers did battle in various ways. They took over slave castles and forts across the coast of Africa. They said bad things about each other in Japan in the early 1600s.

Russia was ever spreading eastward. Russia signed a treaty for the first time with China in 1689. Russia was ever spreading across Siberia. Russian sailors and traders, for example, occasionally showed up on the Japanese coast in the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. It was forbidden at the time, and often they were jailed and killed, or they were sent back quickly. With the spread of Russia, and with it the Orthodox Church, there was tremendous missionary success among native peoples in eastern Russia and in what we call Alaska. They had tremendous success in the nineteenth century and in the late nineteenth century in Japan. The Russian Orthodox Church spread significantly. All the time that Russia was spreading, it had its eye on what the British were doing, and the feeling was mutual. The Crimean War was in the 1850s, and other wars fought later were because of the rivalry between Russia and Britain and France.

As Russia spread around Asia, the rivalries spread. As the 1900s began, for example, Japan and Britain signed a military alliance in 1902. They did it because they were both concerned about Russia. They were going to be allies against the Russians. Japan had just defeated China in a war in 1894 to 1895, and after the war, Japan was cheated out of what it should have been given after the war. It was the French, Russians, and Dutch who started grabbing power, land, and resources in the Korean peninsula in the wake of the Japanese victory over China in the 1890s. That led to war between Japan and Russia in 1904 to 1905. They fought it out and almost exhausted each other. Japan was left standing at the end. The Americans helped broker a peace, and British support helped. Russia was defeated. That began the end of the inexorable Western spread around the world.

That alliance between the British and the Japanese showed how the British and the Russians were concerned about each other. These types of rivalries were everywhere in the world. As the European powers carved up Africa, beginning in the 1880s when King Leopold II of Belgium went into central Africa and wanted a monopoly on the rubber trade. The Europeans were competing against each other. The lines between the different colonies in Africa were drawn up in Europe. Many of those lines make no sense from an African perspective. That was simply the way they were drawn, in order to create a balance of power.

Thailand was never colonized by European powers. Thailand and Japan were the only countries in Asia that were not colonized by European powers. Even China was effectively colonized. Thailand was not colonized, because the British and French agreed to leave it as a buffer state between themselves in order to prevent war. It was in that setting that the Christian faith spread through the Western powers.

Then Germany came on the scene. It was formed in 1871, which was relatively late as a modern nation-state. That is why Germany has relatively few colonial possessions in Africa and Asia. When World War I broke out, and they lost their colonial possessions in parts of West Africa and off the coast of China, it was significant, but it was not a major loss. Yet Britain and Germany were always watching each other leading up to World War I. Then the young Americans came on the scene during the mid-nineteenth century, as the United States spread across the continent. The United States became active in Asia. China was a prize for the Americans. Britain was so far away from Japan that although the Americans did not have a monopoly on trade with Japan, they were the most significant players.

It was in all of these different settings that missionaries from these different settings were going, setting up shop, and ministering. For example, the Christian leaders of the European powers met in Edinburgh in 1910 to confirm their comity agreements. They were deciding who would minister where and who would take care of church planting and evangelism in certain parts of the world. Those decisions were aligned with where their countries had colonial authority.

After Edinburgh in 1910, things began to change somewhat. The colonial era continued through World War II, but Japan had defeated Russia in war. With the two world wars, there was a shattering of European confidence regarding the rest of the world. There was questioning among Christian people, including the rise of theological liberalism out of Germany in the mid-nineteenth century. There was evolutionary thought coming onto the scene. Some European Christian leaders began to wonder whether Christianity would really take over the world as they had expected it would. They wondered about the wonderful Hindu people they saw in India who were not coming to Christ as they thought they would. They saw the wonderful morals and incredible heritages they had. They wondered if they should try to do away with that or whether they should learn from and respect that.

After World War II, the United States increased in prestige and influence. Through the nineteenth century until World War I, the main country that sent out the most missionaries was Britain. They had the resources. They had the British Empire, on which the sun never set. After World War I, however, the nation that had more missionaries elsewhere than any other nation was the United States. It has remained that way until today.

The latest statistics in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* show something that is contrary to what some of us had thought and contrary to what some of us have said. As far as international cross-cultural missionaries are concerned, meaning those who leave their own nations of residency and citizenship, it is not the case that third-world countries produce more missionaries than Western countries. The most Christians, by a large margin, do live in the two-thirds world. Yet it is still the case that the majority of missionaries go elsewhere from Western nations. Approximately 52 percent of missionaries leaving their countries go out from Western nations. That statistic can shift when you factor in cross-cultural missionaries within nation-states, such as India or Brazil, which are large nations with many different people groups. There is much cross-cultural missionary activity going on within those nations. As far as international missionaries are concerned, however, due to economic resources and relative vitality of Christianity in the United States, the majority of missionaries still go out from Western nations, particularly from the United States. The United States remains the single largest producer of cross-cultural missionaries.

After World War II, the world continued to change with nations throughout Africa and Asia becoming independent from their colonial authority. The first nation to become independent in Africa after World War II was Ghana, the former Gold Coast, in 1957. The United Nations was created, and the Cold War shaped the way we viewed the world. The East became the Soviet Block, and the West became the free world, the world of liberal democracies. Now that we are in a post-Cold-War setting, the world has continued to change. That has become even more the case with recent terrorist activities. We must catch up with the worldwide reality of the Christian church within a new sort of world in which we must even determine what war looks like. We must catch up with ever-changing realities.

Nevertheless, Christian churches in the West have a powerful Christian heritage. The material in Wilbert Shenk's book, *Changing Frontiers of Mission*, points this out in some helpful ways. Shenk wrote on page 120, "All churches in the West are heirs, to one degree or another, of a Christendom understanding of the church. This is the basic vision of the church that missionaries from the West took with them to

other parts of the world.” The Christian faith enters, becomes established, and then maintains a consistence and a status quo. Missions, therefore, is only what occurs in settings that do not yet have the church. The essential missionary character of the church wherever we are gets lost, because of this Christendom heritage. People are confused by the notion that missions takes place in places where the church already exists. That feeds the background of our notions of what missions is. Missions is what we do out there.

Is it possibly only a difference of semantics? Perhaps where the church already is we stop calling it missions and we call it evangelism. My answer would be both yes and no. Shenk would probably answer no. Evangelism for us is seeing people come to believe in Christ. Shenk and others argue, and I agree with them, that missions needs to be seen as more than seeing people come to believe in Christ. God's world mission is the redemption of the cosmos of the triune God wherein He grants among all the world's peoples faith in Jesus Christ, maturing of the church, and foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth. That more comprehensive notion of missions is what needs to undergird what we are all about. We must be missional people who are never fully settled at home no matter where we are. In that sense, insofar as the church does become settled and outreach becomes only evangelism, that is a sign of it being a Christendom setting. There is a semantic overlap in that sense, in that outreach always continues. Yet insofar as the church gets settled and is set up to maintain what is there, that shows a Christendom heritage.

Does this also include implementing the society that is carried with the missionaries? What happened in the modern missions movement, which we are far more sensitive to now than we were before, is that people were going out from a Christendom setting, and they carried with them what they believed to be their Christian society and the way things are done with respect to law, social customs, families, and other issues. What Dr. Shenk points out as well is that insofar as churches in the West, including the United States, exhibit a Christendom heritage, they are out to maintain the sociopolitical status quo where we are in the West. We basically believe that the social and political system in the way that it is practiced and carried out and all the values that it stands for where we find ourselves is Christian and right, and we are fully for it. We are enmeshed within it, and we are for maintaining fully the way things are, such as liberal democracy, capitalism, the way political rights are understood, and all those things. I do not hear Dr. Shenk saying that the Christian church should therefore be sociopolitical revolutionaries when they do things right. I do hear him saying, however, that the Christian church, if it is going to be properly missional, needs to maintain a critical distance from its setting so it can make critical remarks about the aspects of the status quo that are not right. Is there ever going to be a situation in this world that is fully right? You can be for democracy, political rights, freedom of speech, and even freedom of religion, but does that mean that you are for everything that this society stands for? A Christendom settling in would make you so particularized and contextualized that you would become syncretized to the setting. You would not have the universal character of the Christian faith informing you enough to be aliens and strangers.

Chapter 9 in Shenk's book contains an elaboration of these issues. He notes some of the historical background of the church. The church in the West got settled in missions. Its activist mindset meant that missions was only related to what occurs out there. Shenk argues three things. We need to reclaim a biblically informed metaphor for the relationship of the church and the world. He said that metaphor is aliens and strangers, as Peter talked about, for example. We should consider missionary encounter as the normative description of the role of the church in relation to the world. We would do well to appropriate learning from experience in the past few years about what missionary encounter really does involve.

He continues to say that within Christendom the entire population of society had to be Christian. No place was given to mission. Christianization was a one-time step. Everyone became Christian, and then the political and religious status quo was maintained. Therefore missions had to arise from outside of church structures that were so set in ecclesiastical formalities and a fixed nature.

Then he notes several cross-cultural lessons. One is the sense of frontier that has come out of what has occurred in cross-cultural mission in our days. Whether it is across ethnic or religious lines, we need to rediscover what it means to live on the edge of frontier. We need to learn the objective study of culture. It is difficult in our evangelical circles today to know what we are talking about when we talk about "the culture." When we talk about "the culture" infecting us or controlling us, we are talking about our general surrounding. We have not honed in on the cultures in which we find ourselves being part of different sorts of worldwide cultures. We confuse the word by the way we use it. It is not necessarily incorrect to use the word in either sense, but we need to be clear in our minds which way we are using it.

We need to learn to read culture and have a critical engagement with culture. Shenk notes that the church in the West is being called to rid itself of time-worn habits of thought and engage in the demanding work of rethinking its relationship to contemporary culture through the lens of mission. I believe that is happening in our circles. We have seen how much things have changed in the last generation. We are sensing that we are not fully at home and that the church has been displaced from its place of comfort and being able to issue edicts. It is particularly critical in times like these, during periods of war, to be able to be critically engaged and have that capacity to be fully involved, to care about what is happening, to care about your country and love it, and at the same time to not allow that to become all in all, because the modern nation-state, including the United States of America, will seek to be absolute in its demands for loyalty. There are religious overtones to those who are martyrs for their country. I find it difficult when I hear Christians saying, for example, "To all of you out there in the military, Jesus is with you, leading you." I find that difficult and syncretistic. Being supportive of your country and caring for and appreciating the sacrifices and dangers encountered by those in the military without giving yourself and your soul in an absolute sense to a nation-state is what we are called to do as aliens and strangers. Because of our Christendom heritage, even though we have a separation of church and state in this country, it is not always easy to draw lines. The lines are often fuzzy. I want to encourage you to remember the particular and universal aspects of who we are as the Lord's people to help get that distance for being able to critique what is happening. Do you not see people going to one extreme or another? It is difficult to walk the critical line. Some people want to say you should protest against everything. Some people cannot see beyond the flag. That is all they see involved. How to let the Christian faith inform us is not always easy, but it is important.

Thinking in the concrete about the United States leading a coalition against terrorism and bringing proper justice in this current situation, can we not as Christians say that is Christian mission activity in the broadest sense or living out a Christian ideal? That is a tricky sentiment. We must allow for God's comprehensive missional activity and God's providential rule while coupling that with the constant tension that no particular nation is going to fully embody the kingdom of God. It is important to also always add the question, what realities do Christian people in various parts of the world and various countries have to say about matters like justice? All of those questions need to be included in our sense of thinking about and evaluating these issues. We must be for the implementation of justice and yet temper that with the question, what are the concerns of Christians in Pakistan? What are the concerns of so many Christians in Japan who are e-mailing with concerns about military build-up? How do we factor those questions into our own understanding of how God is at work and how we pray?

It is a tricky issue, and it takes sensitivity, close walking with Christ, careful ears to listen, and the sensibility of being aliens and strangers. When you are preaching, insofar as you are public figures, you must consider how your congregation perceives you and how your community perceives you and how other Christians in other parts of the world whom you might know perceive you. You should not merely act to please everyone, but you can allow those considerations to help guide how you act. It is not an easy road to walk, especially when it is a new road.

Recently there was an inter-faith rally to pray for the current situation with terrorism and our nation. Something concerned me about that inter-faith meeting that focused on praying for "our nation," which was the way it was put. There were different spheres of the world, including faith, religion, ethics, politics, economics, and others, all of which are under the rule of God. Each of those areas of life, however, has its own integrity. That inter-faith service on behalf of the nation struck me as one of these spheres, the religious sphere, giving itself to be subsumed within a more comprehensive and all-encompassing religious sphere. It was allowing the nation-state to become all-in-all. That was my concern. It would be fine with me if there were a gathering of a patriotic rally. Yet it becomes tricky in the United States when religion is brought into it because of the civil religion we have. It is not easy to know how to appreciate that. It seemed to me that those different religious representatives were allowing the nation-state to become too comprehensive in praying for our nation. So I did not participate.

Praying with other religions is another issue in itself. I believe inter-religious dialogue can be very helpful. Praying with people who do not pray in Jesus' name and through Jesus and acknowledge Jesus as Lord is something we should not do. That is another factor in that situation. Yet again, a patriotic rally that might even bring in some civil religious matters and would include adherents of various religions, if that was focused more on being a patriotic political matter, it would be easier to participate in it rather than something that is religiously driven on behalf of the nation. God is reduced to a common denominator in the United States.

One important question is how is it that Christian people rightly carry out God's cultural mandate to bring to bear God's standards, His Law, and His kingdom within their particular cultures and societies? That is certainly a calling into which we have been sent as the Lord's people. One interesting factor in that is that for many of us in the West, we have as our heritage the notion that all of society is Christian, and this society in comparison to other societies is Christian while they are non-Christian. The experience of most Christians in the world is that the Christian church is a minority, we are socially displaced, and we truly are aliens and strangers. Those different experiences help color our aspirations and expectations in being about the cultural mandate. Bringing to bear the standards of God and all the Bible has to say about all aspects of life, including social and political matters, and doing it with a realistic notion that we are aliens and strangers and we are waiting for the full redemption of the world, is what needs to be factored into the experience of those of us who have had Christendom as our Western background. That is a helpful reality to consider.

We should note the historical differences between those of us in the West and those in the non-West. One example of that is when I was a Christian in Japan. With all due respect to people like Jack Collins, I find it inconceivable, living as a Christian in Japan, to believe in post-millennialism. It is inconceivable that post-millennialism as an understanding is something that would have arisen there. You are such a minority there. It might just be a lack of faith or reading the Bible. Yet the context you are in helps shape those sorts of notions. The fact that postmillennialism arose in certain places in the West when it did is indicative of its context.

This is not to say that we should be social quietists or reclusive. We are to be engaged. Yet our expectations and our place in society should factor in the actual situations and histories that we have.