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Leah Libresco Sargeant on How to Value Caring Work • Tessa Carman in Conversation with Paul Kingsnorth • Brad Littlejohn on a Theology of Money • Andrew Arndt on the Magnificat • Matthew Milliner on the Mega Church Born Again • Myles Werntz on Why Corporations Can't Love Us • Rory Groves on Discipleship and Work • Charlie Clark on Good Work • Katelyn Walls Shelton on Belabored by Lyz Lenz • Chris Krycho on Remote Work • Colin Redemer on Unions and the Benedict Option

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T.S. ELIOT

I confess, however, that I am not myself very much concerned with the question of influence, or with those publicists who have impressed their names upon the public by catching the morning tide and rowing very fast in the direction in which the current was flowing; but rather that there should always be a few writers preoccupied in penetrating to the core of the matter, in trying to arrive at the truth and to set it forth, without too much hope, without ambition to alter the immediate course of affairs, and without being downcast or defeated when nothing appears to ensue.

What happened to good work? There are worse questions to ask if one wants to get a handle on the problems vexing both individuals and communities in this cultural moment. If "work" is increasingly not only the means by which we make a living, but also regarded as a large part of our identity (and a very large part of our days) then it seems a significant problem that the latest numbers from Gallup indicate that only one in five workers globally is "actively engaged" in their work. For Gallup's purposes, "active engagement," refers to "the involvement and enthusiasm of employees in both their work and workplace." The US's numbers are little better: one in three American workers is actively engaged. What that means is that something between 66% and 80% of the people you and I encounter every day are dissatisfied with the means by which they earn a living and the activity that they spend more time doing than anything else in their life. A society marked by such frustration and discontentment will not be a particularly healthy one. So: What happened to good work?

This issue suggests a variety of answers: Leah Libresco Sargeant explains how we have ceased to value some of the most significant work any person can do: the work of providing care to someone in need. In his conversation with Tessa Carman, Paul Kingsnorth explains how our work has become dislocated from our places, creating a felt loss of agency and responsibility that leaves many feeling powerless and discouraged. Brad Littlejohn explains the ways that idolatrous ideas about money have poisoned our culture while Andrew Arndt reminds us of the relationship between the spiritual and the temporal in his essay on Mary's Magnificat, a prayer full of significance for how we imagine our work in God's world. This alienation has left us floundering, searching for love in places where it can never be found, as Myles Werntz explains in his essay on corporations. Where we ought to turn, instead, is to home and toward the ordinary practices of Christian discipleship, which can and must be woven into our work, as both Rory Groves and Charlie Clark explain in different ways. Doing this well will, as with anything, require wisdom and good judgment, two qualities abundantly present in Chris Krycho's careful evaluation of two books, one old and one new, on remote work. Where all of this thinking and laboring must end is on display in Colin Redemer's review that closes this issue and which fits thematically with our cover: with solidarity.

In addition to these essays and reviews, we have a lovely meditation on how the American church might be renewed from Matthew Milliner of Wheaton College and a review of Lyz Lenz's book *Belabored* by Katelyn Walls Shelton, a longtime advocate for women's health who brings a charitable but critical eye to Lenz's *cri de couer*.

If you wish to find help in thinking about issues of work, community, and money—and given the state of our world, I think everyone should be desirous of such help—then I can happily and eagerly commend this issue of *Mere Orthodoxy* to you.

JAKE MEADOR

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How to Value Caring Work

LEAH LIBRESCO SARGEANT

Immediately before Jesus institutes the sacrament of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, he kneels before his disciples to wash their feet. Peter objects to being served by his Lord, finding it improper, but Jesus tells him that, "Unless I wash you, you will have no share with me" (John 13:8). Peter fervently acquiesces, and Jesus instructs all the disciples, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." (John 13:14).

Moments later, Jesus gives the disciples His broken body, which they will offer in the Mass. But the preparation for the supernatural gifts of priesthood is the habit of care for the natural needs of the person. The disciples will hold God in their hands, but their hands must be ready to be dirty with the dust of the world as they care for Christ in the poor, hungry, and sick.

In some ways, Maundy Thursday could be considered the feast of care workers. Those who care for others, whether they are paid or unpaid; family, friend, or professional; consecrated religious or layperson live out Jesus's commandment to love one another as He loved us. But the love and service

that Jesus shows us lies uneasily alongside the way our culture treats care workers and the vulnerable people they care for.

The slogan "Learn the dignity of serving, rather than being served," is nearly a recapitulation of Jesus's instruction to his disciples that, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35). But what was lovingly taught by Jesus to his friends is soured in its later context. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn reports in her book *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America*, this particular instruction to be humble came from the Bureau of Indian Affairs' 1901 "Course of Study for the Indian Schools."

Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Philippians 2:7), but the people who are His hands and feet are subject to exploitative practices, wage theft, and sometimes slavery and human trafficking. Our throwaway culture does not treat them with the dignity befitting people made in God's image. And when it uses a call for humility as an excuse to humiliate and dehumanize, it does deeper damage.

How could attendees of the Indian schools have heard Jesus's call clearly, if they had first heard it distorted by their teachers? Misvaluing care work and care workers can, at its worst, approach spiritual abuse, as the relationship that Jesus calls us to is distorted. Our culture becomes an anti-catechism, hiding the face of the Father.

Jesus calls us to be humble, and to be content to offer hidden sacrifices that will be seen only by the Father. It can be hard to know what challenges we should offer up as penances and which we should push back against as injustices. In the secular world, the dignity of workers is often safeguarded by strikes and political action, and victories are measured in minimum wages and maximum hours.

Any advocacy for the elderly, the disabled, the ill, or the very young runs into a tricky clash of rights. If people who need care have a *right* to be cared for, from whom can they demand that right? Other kinds of claimed rights, to housing, to food, to schooling, etc. don't involve the degree of intimacy that care work frequently entails. Parents seeking childcare for young children are entangled in a system that is both too expensive for many families to afford *and* pays such low wages to workers that turnover is high and there is a shortage of teachers. Care is expensive, and frequently beyond the means of the people who need it most.

Who steps into that gap? In some times and places, the need is answered by religious orders, who don't need to worry about fair wages or the sustainability of their business model. Modern hospitals have their roots in the care for pilgrims offered by the Knights Hospitaller. And when the profit-minded medical establishment turns away the poor, they are met today by orders like the Missionaries of Charity founded by Mother Teresa. These consecrated religious offer service without counting the cost; they

have already given all through their total gift of self to Christ.

But the model that suits a religious vocation and the total abandonment to providence does not fit the life of a teacher who needs to pay for his own children's daycare or a home health aide who is sending remittances home to support her family half a world away.

Care work doesn't fit neatly into the paradigm of wage work. In her book, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*, Eva Feder Kittay notes that when your work is taking care of someone who depends on you, you don't have the power to walk away from a job the way someone on a manufacturing line might. In group homes and some other 24/7 care situations, Kittay notes, "workers are mandated to work overtime if their replacements fail to show up and must remain on duty until relieved." Preschool teachers similarly can't simply clock out if a parent doesn't show up at pickup.

Even when no worksite policy mandates that a care worker remain on watch, many workers stay for overtime or take on tasks that go outside the work they are compensated for, because they know their charge intimately and are moved by their need. This can be framed as a kind of emotional blackmail—the worker has their "no" taken away. But Kittay sees an alternative way of thinking about it: the worker *wants* to be able to say "yes" to their charge's need, but the "yes" can be too costly for them to be free to offer.

Workers who care directly for the vulnerable have the relief of knowing they aren't working what David Graeber terms "bullshit jobs." They can see that their work *matters*. Without their help, their charge could not use the bathroom, might not eat, would die. But that means they lose the leverage other workers have to strike, engage in work stoppages, or sometimes even to quit.

In *Full Surrogacy Now*, author Sophie Lewis claims that abortion is the kind of strike available to surrogate mothers. When they face exploitation, Lewis suggests, they can refuse to work, which means severing the connection between themselves and the child who depends on them, delivering a corpse where their employers hoped for a child. Few consider this option, no matter how dire their circumstances. Care workers are close to the people entrusted to them; they learn to see the world through their charge's eyes in order to understand their needs.

To be able to demand more, it can help to bring a third party into the relationship. Kittay sees an advantage when care work is paid by a centralized, governmental program. The care worker has new leverage, both to advocate for themselves and for their charge. "Where the provider is not privatized and individualized as it is in families," Kittay writes, "the dependency worker has an option that is available to other workers—and that is to organize."

In Kittay's view, care is never a private matter,

something that can be contained in a single dyad or family. Dependency creates a chain of need, which extends out into the wider world. She takes the relationship of mother and child as paradigmatic: "The relation between a needy child and the mother who tends to those needs is analogous to the mother's own neediness and those who are in a position to meet those needs." Caring for a child makes the mother more dependent, and gives her a just claim on others, just as the baby has a claim on her.

Kittay terms this framework *doulia*. She adapts *doulia* from *doula*, a person who offers care to a laboring mother. In her broader term, she encompasses "a concept of interdependence that recognizes a relation—not precisely of reciprocity but of nested dependencies—linking those who help and those who require help to give aid to those who cannot help themselves."

Governmental support can be a response to the claims of *doulia*. A public, universal benefit recognizes that need is universal and that it does not obey a law of reciprocity. A baby cannot pay back the time and attention he needs from his mother; a mother does not need to earn or recompense the care she receives from others. Instead of clean-cut transactions, there is a circulatory system of care and need, where each gives to the one they can, and receives from the person who cares for them, without concern for balancing the books.

This is the spendthrift logic of the communion of the saints, who know that "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matt 25:40). It is the action of the woman with the alabaster jar, who pours out perfumed oil over the feet of the Lord without calculation. But the economy of grace, drawing on the inexhaustible power and love of God, doesn't map neatly into the economy of appropriations bills and state-run welfare programs.

Secular programs are more focused on preventing fraud and minimizing waste than meeting need. Their pinching ways are sometimes motivated by contempt for the poor and an anxiety that anything could be received without being recompensed. Other times, the straitjacket regulations come from a sense of scarcity—if we can't meet all need, we need rules and priorities to sift out the *greatest* need.

With every additional bit of red tape, the scope of care work becomes narrower. To be legible to state programs, it must be possible to track hours and enumerate duties. As Glenn recounts, this is why American law excluded care work from many employment protections—it seemed unnatural for the home to operate like a workplace, with carers clocking in and out. Legislators appealed to privacy, calling on the logic of *Griswold v. Connecticut* avant la lettre. The home should be spared from surveillance, they argued, and any law that would require auditing the everyday relations of the home should be

treated skeptically.

This delicacy left caregivers vulnerable to exploitation by their employers and made familial caregivers frequently ineligible for assistance. Vulnerable people receiving care through Medicaid can *sometimes* arrange payment for caregivers of their own choosing, including family members. These programs, known as "consumer directed care" are authorized under Medicaid waivers. That is, when a vulnerable person chooses a caregiver themselves, rather than having one assigned to them or entering a facility, this is treated as an exemption that the state *may* choose to allow, rather than as a natural way of approaching an intimate relationship.

Because this program is all administered through states waiving particular Medicaid rules, each state can set its own terms for payments and programs, since they are creating their own variants on the law, rather than the law providing directly for the most natural kind of care. Many states specifically restrict "the legally responsible individual" (i.e. the person who is already most closely linked to the vulnerable person, like a spouse or a child who has taken a parent into their home) from receiving payments.

The person who cares most for the person who needs care cannot be paid, because they are viewed to simply be doing their duty. In the eyes of the state, compensation is for *extra* work, something that would not be done but for the money changing hands. A few states (including Virginia) made temporary exemptions to these exemptions at the height of the coronavirus pandemic. With a shortage of professional care workers (and added risk in having them enter the homes of vulnerable patients), the state made an exemption to their exemption and allowed some spouses to be paid.

This framework of careworker compensation sees payment through a market lens—what would it cost to change someone's mind about providing care? What does it cost to get them to sell their services to this particular client? The programs are worried about fraud, auditing timesheets, requiring licensing and certifications. These programs are built as though the primary risk is giving money to someone who may not have earned it.

But, in Kittay's model of *doulia*, the reason for payment isn't to *persuade* a caregiver to provide care. It is to *enable* them to offer the care they frequently already wish to provide. Compensation is often framed as wiping out altruism. If money changes hands, then the caring doesn't count the same way it would if it were offered for free, or even at considerable cost.

In his prayer for generosity, St. Ignatius of Loyola asks the Lord to teach him, "to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil, and not to seek for rest; to labor, and not to ask for reward." The labor of uncompensated caregivers, caregivers who are strained past exhaustion, who are consumed

and eaten up by their work, can *sound* like the fruit of this prayer. But St. Ignatius concludes his prayer by specifying the one reward he hopes for, "to know that I am doing your will."

Although it is admirable when someone makes tremendous sacrifices to care for others, there is always something tragic about it, too. We see the saintly person at the center of the story, disregarding their own needs for the sake of another, but, at the peripheries of the story, there are others passing by, like the priest and the Levite who hurry by the man left broken and bleeding on the side of the road. The Catholic Church recognizes certain lives as embodying "white martyrdom"—the laying down of one's life not in a single moment of death, but denial of self through poverty or celibacy. The martyr's witness is always a testimony to God's goodness, but, as with the "red martyrdom" of those killed for the faith, the actions of the person demanding the sacrifice can be wicked. It is good to serve the poor, it is sinful to impoverish. It is not God's will for anyone to be neglected or left for dead, whether they are the initial victim of misfortune or someone who, in giving all they have, is newly vulnerable as a result.

We are not called to stand by and admire the white martyrdom of hard charities. We are called to answer need with our own gifts. But too often, our systems of care work presume that they can wring more and more work out of the families of the vulnerable, trusting that they will sacrifice themselves if we hold back our own help.

One egregious example of this that Glenn discusses is the case of Tina, a 40-year-old high school teacher, whose brother needed a bone marrow transplant for his leukemia. After the transplant, he would need 24-hour care for a period of time, and the hospital and insurance company viewed it as Tina's job to arrange it. Her brother's insurer had approved the procedure, but wouldn't pay for the prerequisites of the procedure. It was as though they greenlit a surgery, but required Tina to supply the doctors or the operating room.

The hospital wouldn't approve her brother for treatment without a post-discharge plan. The hospital social worker repeatedly suggested to Tina that she would need to quit her teaching job for her brother to receive the treatment he needed to live. Tina eventually won her brother care by coordinating the schedules of 30 friends and relatives to provide 24/7 care for him. Her work was admirable, as was that of her friends and relatives, but it is hollow to praise her without condemning the hard-hearted system that handed her this cross to carry, and then abandoned her.

Care work isn't folded into a holistic picture of health—specialists focus on one part of the body and disclaim responsibility for everything else. Tina's brother's surgeon and his insurance adjusters saw their jobs as narrowly defined. The problem isn't limited to medicine. Just as doctors outsourced Tina's brother's medical needs to her, our policy makers frequently rely on the free labor of the

people they are ostensibly helping to make programs run.

Welfare beneficiaries face a skeptical bureaucracy that disclaims responsibility for correcting errors or explaining their procedures, forcing people who are in dire straits to take on the part-time job of navigating red tape. Private insurers use similar tactics, making it their customers' jobs to correct erroneous bills or negotiate with hospitals. The true price of any policy or procedure is hidden, since so much work is being done, unpaid and unlogged, by the person supposedly being served.

There is no sacrifice we make out of love for another that God disdains. But when we leave caregivers and their charges without support, we are like the Pharisees, who, Jesus says, "tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them" (Matt 23:4). From the beginning of the Church, the martyrs gave testimony of the depth of their love for God in their willingness to die rather than to renounce Him. We benefit from their witness, but we have no reason to be grateful to their persecutors. Paul addresses this question in his letter to the Romans, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" (Rom 6:1-2).

Persecution can make visible the love that might have otherwise expressed itself in more hidden ways, but we must learn to see the quiet virtues, rather than rely on sin and suffering to expose these loves to light. In answering the needs of caregivers, in living out Kittay's vision of *doulia*, we respond rightly to others' willingness to become lowly out of love. We honor the willingness to suffer by not demanding sacrifice. Love answers love, and our strengths are given to us only that we might be good stewards in spending them.

LEAH LIBRESCO SARGEANT HAS WRITTEN BOOKS ABOUT RELIGION AND COMMUNITY BUILDING AND RUNS AN ONLINE COMMUNITY THAT FOCUSES ON THE DIGNITY OF DEPENDENCE.

Following Christ in the Machine Age:

A CONVERSATION WITH PAUL KINGSNORTH

TESSA CARMAN

How do we stay human in a technocratic age? How do we live rooted lives—spiritually and otherwise—in an unsettled time? How do we make sense of life in the modern world?

English writer Paul Kingsnorth has been exploring these questions for decades. Since his conversion to Christianity in 2020 (recounted in "The Cross and the Machine" at *First Things*), he has deepened his reckoning with our moment at his Substack, *The Abbey of Misrule*. Through a series of essays over the past year, he has been examining this age's "Great Unsettling," and the influence of the Machine on our lives.[1]

We "are all uprooted now," Kingsnorth writes:[2]

The rebellion against God manifested itself in a rebellion against creation, against all nature, human and wild. We would remake Earth, down to the last nanoparticle, to suit our desires, which we now called "needs." Our new world would be globalized, uniform, interconnected, digitized, hyper-real, monitored, always-on. We were building a machine to replace God. …

Out in the world, the rebellion against God has become a rebellion against everything: roots, culture, community, families, biology itself. Machine progress—the triumph of the Nietzschean will—dissolves

[1] Paul Kingsnorth, "Under the Spreading Walnut Tree: An Introduction to These Essays," *The Abbey of Misrule*, April 7, 2021, https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/under-the-spreading-walnut-tree?s=r.

the glue that once held us.[3]

Kingsnorth has also explored these questions through poetry and fiction. His Buckmaster Trilogy of novels begins with *The Wake*, a tale of the Norman invasion through the eyes of an Anglo-Saxon landholder; continues with *Beast*, a story of spiritual reckoning set in contemporary times; and concludes with *Alexandria*, set during a future apocalypse.

His short stories have also appeared in several outlets such as *Emergence* ("The Basilisk," 2020) and Dark Mountain ("The Light in the Trees," 2020).

In his 2003 book *One No, Many Yeses*, he reported on local movements resisting globalism across the world. His *Real England: The Battle Against the Bland* (2008) gives an account of the erosion of local cultures in England. *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist and Other Essays* (2017) collects powerful pieces on Google Glass, scything, and the sacred. His memoir-essay *Savage Gods* (2019) explores "what does it mean to belong," and which "sacrifices must be made in order to truly inhabit a life?" He's published two books of poetry, *Kidland and Other Poems* (2011) and *Songs from the Blue River* (2018). In 2017, he edited and introduced *The World-Ending Fire: The Essential Wendell Berry.*

In 2022, he released an ebook, *The Vaccine Moment: Covid, Control and the Machine*, that seeks "to understand the stories we tell to make sense of the Covid era."

"We have always been offered the same choice," Kingsnorth writes. "Surrender or rebellion; sacrifice or conquest; death of the self or triumph of the will; the Cross or the machine." [4]

A former environmentalist and journalist, and co-founder of the Dark Mountain Project,[5] he now works and lives on a smallholding in Ireland with his family.

I talked with Paul Kingsnorth on February 10, 2022.

SMALL PLOTS, BIG SOLUTIONISM

TC: What's going on at your smallholding right now? What's it look like this time of the season?

PK: Spring is trying to arrive. We've had a very mild winter actually. Often the winters are—it's never too cold in Ireland, but often you get a lot of storms in the winter, a lot of frost. It's been a very mild winter, very calm and strangely warm—well, perhaps it isn't so strange anymore for the winter to be warm. At the moment things are starting to slowly wake up: the birds are starting to sing to each other, the crocus bulbs are coming up, so it's moving towards spring. Which always makes me slightly panic because it means an absolute ton

[2] Paul Kingsnorth, "The Great Unsettling: Simone Weil and the Need for Roots," *The Abbey of Misrule*, April 18, 2021, https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/the-great-unsettling?s=r;

[3] Kingsnorth, "The Cross and the Machine," *First Things*, June 2021, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/06/the-cross-and-the-machine.

[4] Kingsnorth, "The Cross and the Machine," *First Things*.

[5] https://dark-mountain.net.

of work outside is going to appear, and I need to balance that with taking the children to school and trying to write things. So when winter arrives it's always a bit of a relief because you get a few months off. At the same time, spring is always gorgeous over here. It's always great when the land wakes up again.

TC: You need that time when you can tell sagas over the fire until it's time to get up and go outside again.

PK: It's interesting—since we've lived here, you really get to know what the rhythm of the land is, and the way it always would have guided people's lives, except for most of my life I didn't live by it at all. If you live in a city or a town, you don't have to slow down in the winter and you don't have to stay inside when it rains because you're staying inside anyway. And just a small thing, like moving to the country and having a bit of land, retunes your sensibility to something much more natural, and you realize what you've been missing for most of your life. It's quite interesting.

TC: You've written about "Real England," but it was in Ireland where you could start a smallholding. When were you most in tune with the seasons in England?

PK: Well, I never lived from the land until I moved here. We moved to Ireland because we couldn't practically afford to live in England, if we wanted to have a tiny house and a bit of land, because it's ludicrously expensive and overcrowded, alas. We did try to see if we could make it work there, but we just couldn't, especially if my wife was going to stop working as a doctor, as she was doing before, and homeschool the kids, which was what we wanted to do. So that's why we ended up moving here.

But I had an allotment when I was in England, and I grew vegetables on that. And when I was young I used to go on a lot of mountain walks with my dad. I don't know if I was in tune with the seasons so much, because I would only go in summer usually, but I always had that sense, that sensibility, that that's the natural way to live. And I think it's in the human body, and I think we know it's there. Even if we don't know what makes us itch when we're stuck inside a city under artificial light all day, we know that it doesn't feel right. Otherwise we'd all be happy—we'd all be living in paradise, and we're not.

So we sort of know it, and even here I've got my computer and my electric light bulb, so I'm living a modern life in that sense. But if you have a little patch of land and you have to go and tend it—it doesn't have to be much, you don't have to have a big farm—it takes you outside yourself, and it takes you into the wider rhythm of things. And you realize you were always supposed to be a part of that pattern, and that you've broken off from that. Not through your own choice, because we grow up like that, most of us. We don't know what the pattern is anymore.

And that's part of the crisis we're in, I think. It doesn't get talked about much—the severing of all of us from our animal natures. I mean, there are kids growing up in London who have absolutely no idea what anything is at all that grows in the countryside. They don't even know what a nettle is, or an oak tree. They don't know where the food comes from—no idea that milk comes from a cow—basic stuff like that. And there's no reason they would know, because they've never seen it, and they've never been taught it. And so it's not their fault, is it? They don't have an option.

But if you walk on concrete all day, and you're

under electric light all day, even at night outside, and you don't know any of that, and you see nothing that's real, you can't even see the stars, then you've already become part of this Machine that surrounds us. As more and more of the world gets urban—most of the world is urban now—more of us are living like that. And the more of us are living like that, the less we're able, firstly, to notice what's going on with nature, but also to care about it. And we've been given this environmental politics where we're all supposed to talk about things like climate change in a very abstract way, but that's not a substitute for actually having a relationship with a piece of land—because that's what really makes you care about it. If you notice that the birds are disappearing in your neighborhood, that's what's going to turn you into an environmentalist, not getting a lecture about climate change from Greta Thunberg or anybody else. It's a real tragedy, actually, that we just get that animal part of our nature sliced away from us. I suppose we were just trying to reconnect a little bit to it by coming out here.

TC: It strikes me that a lot of the connections that people used to have are not that far off in time. My dad grew up on a farm, a small-scale farm where they milked cows, raised fruit and vegetables, and didn't use the bigger machinery, and the farm is still there. And then all my grandparents had the usual plot of land, but they had a garden and chickens and such, and that was just normal. You were close enough to see where your food came from, and now it's interesting how a lot of people panic at questions like the one that Wendell Berry gets asked:"Are you saying everyone should be a farmer?" And the answer is: Well, no, but maybe more than 2% of people should be farmers, and we shouldn't be so disconnected and helpless as we are.

I'd be curious to hear more of your thoughts on the way we think about that sort of thing—the idea that we either have to do this big thing or this other big thing. It seems the hard critique of that is to say, well, that's the whole problem: It's not this big top-down thing where you all just become farmers, and it will all be okay.

PK: Yeah, there's a kind of top-down solutionism that intellectuals like particularly. What's the big plan—I mean, you get asked this all the time—what's the solution, what's the solution, when you talk about any of the problems that the world faces. And of course there isn't a solution—there might be a series of small solutions to some things, but some things are just not solvable. The bigger framework is that people are seeing the world like a math puzzle. Here is the world and here is the problem—what is the solution? And then you end up inevitably with a technological response.

Climate change is a great example of that. It's really interesting to me that we talk about climate change as if it were somehow disconnected from all the other things that are happening to the planet. The industrial economy's assault on the earth, which has been going on for a couple hundred years, has basically wrecked the health of the planet in all sorts of different ways. And there are a lot of things happening—large rates of extinction, soil erosion, ocean pollution, a changing climate, all sorts of smaller, subtler things as well—but it's climate change that's just a one-off, almost self-contained phenomenon that has somehow grabbed the headlines and has become this enormous thing that we somehow have to stop. That's the problem, so what's the solution? And the solution inevitably is always technological, because nobody can think about anything else. That's the way we think in our culture: we've

created the problem with technology, so we must have to solve it with technology. So the issue has boiled down to, the wrong kind of gas is going up into the atmosphere, so we need a fuel technology that doesn't put it up there, as if that were the problem, rather than the way we're living our lives, the entirety of the economy, the value system that it's based on. It's the kind of notion that we're extractive individuals and we just live in a market system. All of these complex things have happened over the last hundred years where we've completely retooled the way we live—we've disconnected ourselves from nature and culture and community, and we've made ourselves consumer individuals living in a machine. And the problem then is seen as, the Machine is using the wrong fuel, so let's do something else. It's not going to work, anyway, but even if it did work, what would the solution look like? Is that the world we want to be living in? Are the values correct? Is our disconnection okay as long as it doesn't pollute the atmosphere? Is it okay to live in this kind of radical individualistic machine world as long as we're not putting carbon up into the air?

It's very difficult to ask the bigger questions because, as you say, relentlessly, as soon as you do, there's an immediate backlash, which usually comes in completely familiar clichéd language—"So you're saying we should go back and live in caves?" etc. And there's not really much you can do with that.

I have a friend, Mark Boyle, who's an Irish writer—he lives near me—he once spent two years living without money, and he wrote a book called *The Moneyless Man*. He's been exploring all his life the reason for our disconnection, as have I, and having lived without money for two years he decided he was going to live permanently without modern technology as much as he could. So he built himself a hut in the woods not so far from me. And he just lives there—he doesn't have electricity, he doesn't have running water, he never uses the internet, doesn't have a phone, doesn't have a car. So he's living as simply as he can. And he wrote a series of articles about this for *The Guardian* a few years back, which were not political at all—they were just talking about his lifestyle and what things he discovered—and the comments from a lot of people were really interestingly angry and defensive, as if they felt personally attacked by this. They'd say, "What would you do if you had to go to hospital?" "I bet you use the dentist!" and "All the rest of us have to pay our taxes so you can live like this—everybody can't live like that." And all this stuff. It was very interesting because he wasn't writing pieces suggesting that anybody else should live like this. It wasn't a political project he was doing; he was just exploring what it's like to live without technology. But people felt really threatened by it—really threatened, and they felt they needed to go on the attack, as if everything that they valued was being attacked in itself, and as if somehow they must have felt—I don't know what they felt. Did they feel guilty, or did they feel attacked, or did they feel like he was right, or what were they feeling like? There's a defensiveness where people end up defending the very system that's cut them off from life. So when they see somebody else living differently, it just makes them inexplicably angry.

There's something I read the other day, I was reading some Orthodox Christian writing, and there was a similar statement about how some people when they see a holy man will just be furious. He just has to be walking past, he doesn't have to be evangelizing them, but the notion of seeing somebody holy, who is living the way

we actually know we ought to be living—it just triggers something in a lot of people, and that was what happened with Mark, and sometimes it happens with me. And so like you say, people get very, very defensive and can't hear. You see this in the movement of people pretending climate change doesn't exist and attacking the environmentalists day after day, coming up with ludicrous theories about how the whole thing's a fake. It's just denial that the system we live in is actually catastrophic, and I think at some level a lot of us know that it is. Because we've grown up associating with it and identifying with it, we can't afford to say this whole thing is a disaster, because we're psychologically almost tied into it. It's a common thing to see. I don't really know what to do about it.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHURCH

TC: Speaking of Mark Boyle, I really enjoyed his *The Way Home*, the one about life without technology. One thing that struck me about his story was how the breakdown of community was wrapped up in his search—the pubs are closing because the young people are leaving, and it used to be people would gather round and heat up drinks around the fire, but now we can do it separately. And that's why it's such a lonely thing sometimes, to live without technology, because sometimes the community that used to be there isn't anymore.

Another thing that struck me in his book and also in your work—your essays around the Dark Mountain Project, up through *Savage Gods*—is this sensitivity to what is fake. I remember Mark Boyle mentioning someone talking about artificial uteruses—that everything will be okay once this could be invented. And he was just like, *but that's the Machine*. It's similar to your realization of, W*ait a minute, I'm in it too much, the thing that I'm objecting against*, and then you search for the real thing.

You've compared your story to C.S. Lewis's conversion story, being similarly reluctant. I actually read *Savage Gods* right around the time I read *The Pilgrim's Regress*, and I was struck by another similarity where there's this sense, even if you don't know where the real thing is, you see that this isn't it—this is fake, this is not getting there. Maybe it's showing you something about the true and the real and the good that you're on your way to hopefully discovering, but at the very least, you're distinguishing between what is fake and what is the real thing. And I think that sensitivity is rare to see. It's hard, because all of us are so ensconced in the world of systems, as Illich says, and how do we step out of that?

Once coming into Orthodox Christianity, do you see peculiar temptations for a Christian to step into machine thinking?

PK: I suppose the thing with the question of the Church is to go back to that original distinction between the Church and the world. Because the Machine rises in the world; the Machine is a thing of Caesar, it's not a thing of God. And it always seems to me that the Church needs to be separate from the world. Obviously it's engaged with the world—clearly we're all living in the world and most of us are not monastics, so we're in the world, we're in the Machine, if you like. So the church, whatever church it is, always has this kind of dance of having one foot in the world and one foot in the kingdom, if you like. That's what it's supposed to be doing, anyway. But if the Church becomes too worldly, it's basically lost, as far as I can see.

I certainly seem to get that impression from American Christianity—that it's very much more political than it is over here. Not all of it, I'm sure, but there's a very particular type of conservative Christianity and then there's a liberal Christianity. As soon as you're doing that, it seems to me that you've just immersed yourself in worldly things. In fact, I have an Episcopalian friend, who said—and he's pretty much a man of the left, I would say—but he said, look, one of my problems with liberal Christianity in America is that it acts as a kind of funnel for political leftism. It kind of brings people in and it says, Jesus would want you to be a social justice activist. And he's a priest! I imagine he knows what he's talking about. And then obviously there's the conservative strain.

So I suppose there's always that temptation. One of the attractions of Orthodoxy to me is that it's been the church which has been most resistant to modernity—not necessarily even in a political sense, but it just hasn't changed, or it's changed very little, in about a thousand years at least. It hasn't changed its liturgy, it hasn't changed its rules, it hasn't changed its moral teachings, it hasn't changed its structures, really. I mean, things have changed here and there—calendars have changed, and there have been various innovations, but nothing like you've seen in Catholicism and certainly nothing like you've seen in the Protestant churches. Because of that, it's ended up being a place where you can go where the Machine is least present, I would say, amongst all the other churches I've ever been to. The process of machine modernity is not there in the same way, at least in the services and in the attitudes.

And there's a kind of robustness in Orthodoxy as well. If I ask a priest what the resurrection means, I'm going to get more or less the same answer from all of them, whereas if I ask an Anglican priest, I'm not guaranteed to find that he even believes in the resurrection, to be honest, at this point. Certainly in England it's got to that point. He'd probably tell me it's a metaphor.

But more broadly, though, the technological question is the interesting one to me now, because although the Orthodox Church has been resistant to modernity in many ways, it also is dealing with modern people. Everyone in the church has got a smartphone; everyone in the church is driving there, including me. So the question is where that goes, and I'm quite interested to see, because I'm quite passionate in a quite fanatical way about the fact that technology is quite demonic at this point—I mean in a literal sense. Things are coming through these screens that are not good things. And you can see that particularly when you see the way that children are addicted to technology—but not just children, so are their parents. You can see the stuff that pornography is doing to kids, and indeed adults.

This is quite dark stuff, and it is quite literally from realms we shouldn't be messing with, in a Christian sense, I would say. So what's the Church going to do about that? What's the Church's attitude, and what is generally Christianity's attitude? Because it's not just an Orthodox question, it's a Christian question. What is Christianity's attitude to this quite Luciferic technological web that we have around us now, that tempts us with all these good things and then corrupts our soul in really significant ways?

I think a lot of the madness in our culture has come directly from social media, it's come directly through people's smartphones. We wouldn't have this kind of insane culture war that we've got going on if it wasn't for smartphones—

guaranteed, it would not be there, or at least it would be there at a much lower level. It wouldn't be anything like as crazy as it is now.

And we wouldn't have some of this really dangerous stuff going into the heads of children. Children in this generation are so confused—they don't know what their gender is, they don't know what they're supposed to think about anything, they have access to all sorts of stuff that they should absolutely not be seeing on phones. My kids don't have [smart]phones, and neither do I, and you know, and if there's one thing a Christian could do to resist the trend it would be to throw their smartphone in the river. Although that would not be good for the river, so maybe just burn it or something.

You know, it's a serious point. I think that that's the question for me now: What are churches going to do, what are Christians going to do about where technology is going to take us? What do we start doing when artificial intelligence really comes online, and the metaverse becomes a bigger thing than it is now? What do we do about that? What's the spiritual attitude, what does that represent symbolically in Christian mythology? Is that just okay? Is that just the wonders of science? Because it seems to me it's like eating the apple all over again every day. It's following what the serpent tells you; it's Cain rather than Abel. As I say, it's quite demonic. And I don't really know what to do about that. But there's a sense, in my mind, that if anybody's got it right, the Amish have got it right, in their intelligent attitude to technology—not that I'm an expert on the Amish, but just from what I know of them, that kind of critical attitude. And you mentioned Wendell Berry—he's probably the best example of a Christian thinker who knows about this stuff. He's thought about it for a long time, and so had Ivan Illich, so had Jacques Ellul, whom I've written about recently as well. So it might be time to start rediscovering these people, because it's not like this critique hasn't been made, but it's getting more urgent now. And I think that's the big challenge for Christians so that they don't get sucked into this dark thing pretending to be light.

TC: Well, I completely agree. And I do not feel threatened by the fact that you do not have a phone, because I do have a phone, but it's a dumb phone.

PK: Yeah, me too, I have the same thing.

TC: There you go. It's interesting because this question has become a divider, in a way. It's something that I didn't think I would have to think about when I was raising kids. You want to find a good community to raise your kids in, and having grown up working on my grandfather's farm, so I want my kids to have the farm experience—we might not have a farm [ourselves], but they need that experience as part of their education. But if we're homeschooling right now, and if we send them to school later on, I've realized that, more than a statement of faith, if I'm looking for a Christian school, it's what you do about technology that will tell me what you actually think. And there are schools not too far from here where the parents have made a pact of no smartphones for their teenagers.

PK: That's good.

TC: So I would send my kid there, and even locally here, there is a group of families who have made a pact—no smartphones, no social media for the kids, *and* we make this pact to be human together and get to know each other in traditional ways. So they're hosting a Scottish folk dance soon—

because they're not on their smartphones, so you gotta go dance. I love it.

I am struck by, in the American context, there's the mixing up of Christianity with America—there's those things that you grow up with and you have to distinguish the culture from Christianity, and ask what's the thing that should be influencing what. But with modern technology—I think I remember reading this somewhere, that pornographers and evangelists have been at the cutting edge of internet stuff. Because they both have their reasons, right? And there's a lot of talk of redeeming anything that comes along. But there comes a point when you need to ask what technology can you just simply not redeem, that you actually have to destroy? And that is terrifying for some people—like, can't we redeem everything?

PK: Well, there's always this incredibly naive attitude to technology, which is that technology is a neutral thing. People are always saying this, *Well, technology is just neutral, it's what you do with it that matters*, which is obviously not true. It's not true of a nuclear weapon—it's not neutral technology, it's only designed for one thing. A gun only does one thing. But a smartphone is not neutral technology. If you use that thing, you are going to get addicted to that thing, you're going to be taken into a certain way of life, you're going to be acting in a certain way, you're undoubtedly going to have your brain rewired by your use of it. Yeah, sure, you could be using it to promote organic farming rather than pornography, but you're still on your phone all day, and so is everybody else who has to do that, and you're still pumping carbon into the atmosphere—but more to the point, you rewire your whole life. Nobody has time to go folk dancing when they're on their phone all the time. It doesn't matter how well-intentioned you are.

So you can always look at any technology and say, *Oh, but this, this, and this is positive about i*t, and yeah, sure, of course it is—here we are talking on Zoom!—but at what point do you have to say, *No, I'm not doing this, forget the positives, I'm not doing it*. Which was Mark's decision. You know, Mark is very puritanical, he's very Amish about it. He just won't touch technology, and the reason he won't touch it is that he knows that if he starts touching it again he's going to go right back down the rabbit hole. Which is one reason I don't have a smartphone. I know that if I had a smartphone I'd be checking my email all the time and looking up websites when I should be looking at my children. I'm just as likely to get addicted as anyone else, so I'm just not going to do it.

This is the reason that Christians have a moral structure—this is the reason why we have the notion of the sins and the passions and the things we're not supposed to do. You know, why is lust bad in Christianity? Not because sex is bad, but because we know damn well that if we just chase after every lust we have, then we're ruined, and so are lots of other people. Christianity imposes limits on people, and so does every other faith, because they know that you have to operate within those limits. Otherwise you just get dragged down into your addictions, rather than focusing on God.

And the same is true of technology. If you don't impose limits, then it's going to control you. And I think there is a point at which you end up having to say, *Yeah, I have to give up the advantages of this as well as the disadvantages*. And smartphones are a great example of that. I think if everybody could do one thing, it would be to get rid of their smartphone, and that would immensely improve

the world, and their life. I mean, there would have been no vaccine passports and mandates without the smartphone either, by the way, if you happen to feel strongly about that, which I do. That's an example of a control system. And even if you thought that was justified, there are other control systems coming along, and if the state wants total control of you, well, it can get it easily because it's got all your information and it's got your little QR code and it's got all the other stuff that you've been mandated to have.

People do forget that this is a monitoring device. It's designed to be a monitoring device, and you can be tracked wherever you are, and all of your activity can be followed all the time. And people want to do it. And people are very naive about that. They still don't understand that companies like Google exist to harvest you, and to sell your information rather than to provide you a lovely free service for nothing.

And so we've been trapped in this spider web, and I think it's quite an interesting thing to think about—dealing with technology the way we might deal with any other passion that could take us away from ourselves, perhaps. Yeah? I'm thinking aloud.

TC: Yeah, it's all good, and it's good to hear.

THE SCOURING OF THE SHIRE

I listened to the conversation you had with Charles Eisenstein recently and *Lord of the Rings* was brought up, the Ring being kind of a metaphor for a kind of technology. A friend of ours, Michael Toscano, wrote an essay about *Lord of the Rings* recently where—and it was the first time I'd really thought about *Lord of the Rings* in this way—he talked about how that there are other rings of power in mythology and legend, but there is nothing like this one. This particular Ring of power could not have existed if not for the modern age, so that kind of power, it is a machine power. The way the Ring controls someone, and the kind of power it wields, or that the Rring-Bearer can wield, is a particular power that came with modernity.

This is one reason that I am increasingly convinced that *Lord of the Rings* is the epic for modern times.

PK: I think that might be true, actually. I think that might be true. It's endlessly fascinating, this. I think the film versions of *Lord of the Rings* are particularly good at conveying it. It's really the battle between industrial modernity and the kind of rooted life—really that's what it is. And you're right about the Ring, the way that Saruman surrenders himself to the Ring and destroys the forest and creates these great hideous machine-like creatures to destroy the landscape, and he's just addicted to the power of the technology.

I was always really fascinated by the distinction between Gandalf and Saruman. Gandalf knows that he can't even touch this ring, because he knows what's going to happen to him if he does, because he knows he's not strong enough to avoid being corrupted by it. Saruman doesn't; Saruman thinks he can control it, and somehow he can use it to manipulate Sauron. And of course he's corrupted and destroyed by that. And so this ring is absolutely the power of technology. It's kind of modernity around your finger. The other thing that happens is that whenever you let this ring near humans; they always want to take it. The humans are always corrupted. He has to give to a Hobbit who's so innocent he might be able to get away with carrying it, but he can't let a human

touch it. Boromir wants it to save his people, and he's all very well-intentioned, but we know what will happen if he gets it. The Nazgûl, the Black Riders, are all corrupted kings who thought they could use the rings as a power but actually got corrupted by them. Because the ring is controlled by an evil force—all of these rings, they're monitoring devices, funnily enough. The other rings of power are given to all of the dwarves and the humans, and they all think, *Oh, great, I've got a ring of power*, but Sauron's using all of them. It's exactly what he's up to; he's sitting there in Silicon Valley, watching all of their behavior.

And what do you have to do to the ring? You have to destroy it. You can't use it for good. You have to destroy it; there's no other way. You've got to take it back to where it came from. You have to destroy it, and it's the only way, and it's a very risky business. But there's no other choice. So, yeah, you're right, I think it really is an epic for the times.

TC: There's this speech that Tolkien made—where, unfortunately, I think he was right as well—where he says, *Okay, we destroyed Sauron, but now there are all these little Sarumans running around*. And "The Scouring of the Shire" chapter—in some ways it's the hardest chapter because we've just defeated Sauron, everything's great, but then we go home, and everything's gray, the green things have been dug up, and now in the homeland you were fighting for, the cozy English village that you wanted to return to and just get away from it all—now it's come to your home. And it's very banal evil, and the Hobbits have to fight it. Sam has to replant things, and then get married. But Frodo can't get married—he's been spent, he can't really live a normal life after this. And that's a question—because it's not over, and it's closer to home, how do you deal with that, when it's not just the orcs—those are clearly evil—but how do you deal with evil in the Shire?

PK: Yeah, that's the interesting thing, isn't it. I've seen interviews that Tolkien gave about this as well when he said, L*ook, you have to not see the Shire as this kind of everlasting rural paradise that you can return to, because it isn't, it's a temporary place*. And even in the books I remember the Elves saying to Frodo at one point, because Frodo says something about how the Shire is eternal, and the Elves say, *No, there were people there before you, and there are going to be people there after you as well. You just have to be there at the moment.*

So there's nowhere to hide—which is horrible to hear, because you want there to be somewhere to hide, but it's also true. It's like today—you can't hide from the Machine. You can come out here to the countryside, everyone's still got a smartphone, and they're all driving about, cutting the hedges down with tractor flails. Because the Machine is in you, you carry it around with you.

So the Shire can get as infected, and the Shire only survived for so long because it was on the edge and no one noticed it, and Gandalf was protecting it, and it wasn't threatening anybody. So as soon as it became threatening, in comes the Machine—well, as soon as it becomes profitable, in comes the Machine. So there's nowhere to hide from it, which is horrible, but also necessary to hear.

It's tempting to want to go off and flee to the hills, and run to the forests. And that's not a bad thing to do—it's a good idea. But it's just that, if you do it, there's no guarantee that that's going to last very long, because the thing you're running from now is everywhere. It's the satellites in the sky and it's the internet cables and it's the 5G networks,

and there's no getting away from these things. Even in the Arctic they're there.

In the world we were in fifty years ago, there were places you could just go. Even when I was a kid when I went walking in the mountains with my dad—you go up into the hills for a few days, you don't see anyone, you couldn't phone anybody. We could phone my mum if we found a phone box in a village, but that was it. You went up into the mountains—even in England, which is a small country—and it would be pretty wild. You might see some other people up there, but there was a danger of you falling off a cliff, dying without being able to phone anybody, and no one was taking selfies on top of the mountain.

You can't do that now. You can't go off and live in a farm in the country and get away from the city because the city is there. And everyone's got their phones, so you might as well be in the center of London in some sense. So, yeah, there's no Shire, there's no Shire anymore. We're all being scoured.

TC: That's the task right now—to regrow roots in an uprooted time, but you have to remember the nature of things, and that humans are yet pilgrims, and the ultimate thing in which we should be rooted is spiritual.

It's an interesting tension, especially because Christianity is an incarnational religion, and the material world—there is a sense in which it's sacramental, and it does matter. At the very least, we're embodied beings and not brains on a stick.

There's this strange undervaluing of the material world in some Christian ways of thinking, where you're saying, *Well, that's not really what's important anyway, so let's not build for the generations and not build beautiful things because it's all going to be burnt to ashes anyway.* And on the other hand, you have, *The material world doesn't really matter because we're going to escape it anyway, we're going to transcend it, we're going to make something better out of it, and go to Alexandria.*

PK: Yeah, I know what you mean. There is that tension, isn't there. I've been reading about this recently in the Orthodox tradition, and what I like about the Eastern tradition of Christianity which is a bit less prevalent in the West is the idea that God is both immanent and transcendent, so there's a phrase in one of the Orthodox prayers that God is "everywhere present and fills all things." So there's a notion that the Creator is not simply outside time and space but is in creation all the time. And that's the difference between the essence and the energy of God in the Orthodox tradition as well. The essence of God is the part of God that we can never understand or relate to, because it's so distant and above us, but the energy of God is what you experience in nature all the time. It's what you see in other people, it's the living part of God. So there's always a bit of a Gnostic temptation in Christianity sometimes, this notion that, Y*eah, you're going to die and go off somewhere else so it doesn't really matter what happens here*. I mean, that's not Christian teaching, it's a bit more Platonic or a bit more Gnostic, and if you look again at the original, obviously the faith for all Christians is a final resurrection—a re-incarnation if you like. It's not that we're fleeing the world and going somewhere else, but the world gets remade. Which I'm really interested in, because maybe a way through that tension is that, this is creation, it's just fallen, it's broken, it's messed up, but it will be repaired. And Christ is already starting to repair it through us—that's the idea—but then fundamentally there's a final repair. But the final rebirth of creation at

some point down the line is not when this place gets destroyed and we go somewhere else. It's the earth that's remade into something that works, something that it was supposed to be—we return to the Edenic state.

But in the meantime, it's still creation, and if you think it's creation, you ought to be nurturing it. And you're right, one of the problems with Christianity has always been a lack of creation care amongst some Christians. Not all of them, but it's definitely not a central part of the tradition, although there have been obviously Christian traditions and Christian saints and teachers who have emphasized it.

I think maybe that's part of Christianity being entangled with the Machine again as well—that we can take a sort of modern consumer capitalist attitude to nature and use our Christianity as an excuse for it. It's like, *Oh, it doesn't matter if we change the climate, because as long as we're following the Way, we're all going to be rescued anyway*, or whatever. It's a kind of irresponsibility.

I think that loving your neighbor means loving all of your neighbors, whether they're human or not. But I don't think that that's very central in the tradition. And maybe that's another thing that we need to think about, as we go into the Machine age. It's kind of embedded Christianity: it's embedded in creation, in the human body. If we're mandated to love other people and to help the poor and heal the sick, then we should be doing the same with everything else that's alive as well, not just people. And if Jesus is telling us to do all those things, then obviously caring for created things matters, rather than just hoping that after we die we go somewhere better. Because this is where we are, and we must be here for a reason. There's got to be something going on that we're supposed to be engaged in, rather than just hoping we're saved for the future.

TC: Yeah, Christians were not untouched by modernity. Especially when there's more uprootedness—I suspect it's easier to treat things like machines if you are used to living amongst machines. And if you're used to taking care of a piece of land, where you have to treat it as a living thing in some sense, even if you don't think of it as a living thing, that's just what you have to do, because there's a living relationship amongst the animals and the land and the people. You see that and live that, and you see the reality of it—the cycle of life and death, how manure brings life. If you're in the city, you can have your image of how the natural world is instead of the reality. And there's the danger of sentimentality, when we have disconnected ourselves from the land such that we think we can decide what's good for the land without even knowing it, without knowing the people, let alone this specific piece of land, these animals and these plants.

LANGUAGE, MYTH, AND THE BUCKMASTER TRILOGY

I'd like to talk about the Buckmaster Trilogy a bit, and I'd love to hear more about the idea of rewilding and how your thinking of rewilding has developed. In *The Wake*, I love the world you weave through the words: You make this shadow language and help us enter into that world. Can you talk a bit about how the myth of Weyland developed for you? How did that myth become a central one for those books?

PK: It's a good question, actually. "I don't really know," is the answer, strangely enough. *The Wake* was a book that kind of emerged; it went through a lot of planned versions of what it could be, and

it ended up being something in some ways quite different to what I intended it to be. The original notion of that book was to tell Buccmaster's story, to tell the story of this farmer who is resisting the [Norman] Conquest, because I wanted to tell the story of resistance to the Conquest, because not many people know it, and I find it fascinating.

But the angle in there of him being a sort of Anglo-Saxon pagan who is part of the last of his tradition resisting the coming of Christianity wasn't something that I planned when I was writing it, actually. It was something that occurred to me, something that came up, and Weyland—he's always been a figure I've been interested in, I suppose, from mythology—his voice started appearing. And this notion that Weyland is kind of goading Buccmaster on and that Buccmaster thinks he's chosen by the old gods—again, that was something that just developed.

I actually had a weird dream where I saw a very strange figure, and I wondered what the hell it was, and it ended up being described in the book when he describes Weyland. It's very odd. So this voice just appeared, and I had to sort of follow it along, which is also what happened with Buccmaster himself. You know, he was the easiest character I've ever written because he was just there, and his voice was very distinctive, and he's just this bloody-minded guy, and it wasn't difficult to write him, in a way, once I'd got the language right.

So this tension between him and Weyland, again, as I say, it wasn't planned. Although the most interesting stuff in novels is never planned. It's just what emerges in the writing. When you think you know what you're doing—well, you realize after a while that something else is writing a book through you, especially a novel, and you don't really have much control. You have to do your best, but I didn't intend to write that, to have that great spiritual clash at the heart of the book when I started writing, but that was what happened. And Weyland just emerged, and then emerged again in the third book, because I wondered what I could do with him and what he could represent there.

TC: Yeah, that makes sense. I'm interested more in the process too, in the language you use. In *The Wake* of course you use older terms that kind of come back in *Alexandria*, like "holt" for *woods*, and *Beast* is in contemporary language but the prose breaks down, depending on what's going on with the character. What word-hoards are at your disposal, especially in *Alexandria*—it's in the future, but it's like the language of the people who are still caring for the earth is more earth-like. It's not archaic as much as re-focused, I suppose, instead of the "normal" language that K speaks.

PK: No, it is, and what I'm trying to do with those people in *Alexandria* is effectively create a future indigeneity. What these people are is really an indigenous group of people living in—well, it's not England, but it's the same landscape. They are effectively a tribe, they're indigenous people, and their language comes from the earth, which I think all language does, actually, real language. All across the world, groups that have been indigenous to a place, whatever culture they are, their language relates to that place.

Very true here in Ireland, if you study the Irish language, which I don't really, but if you just read about it, you can see that the language that the Irish people spoke, first it was very regional. There wasn't even such a thing as "Irish" really; it was very different in different parts of the country. They had words which were extremely

expressive of the place. They had words for things like "the feeling of standing in a field on an autumn evening," this kind of thing. Very, very, very rooted in the place.

And that's true of all indigenous peoples, and it was true of English, Old English too, when the English people, the Anglo-Saxons, were living in that way. It's kind of everybody's birthright, but K very specifically speaks modern English because modern English is a machine language. It relates to Old English, but it's been cleaned up; it's not regionalized. Even in England a lot of English dialects are constantly being overlaid by a sort of official machine, which is now very Americanized as well, but then it doesn't take account of American regional dialects either, so it's a kind of global-speak that everybody knows how to do in a sort of mid-Atlantic accent wherever they come from. And it's the language of the machine, and that's the language that K speaks. It's not rooted at all, it doesn't have a place, it doesn't have a history behind it. It just happens to be the language that everyone in the world speaks now.

And it's not real. It's the language that you'd expect from an artificial intelligence. It's not the language that you'd expect from somebody who's grubbing around in the soil. So that's what I'm trying to do there. In all the books, I'm using language to relate people to place, and also to show up to some degree the artifice of language. Language is all we've got, but it's also not good enough really to talk about the real things.

TC: Yeah.

PK: Which is why all the really holy people never say much. They're just praying quietly, they're not going on about things, because they don't need to. It's people like me who talk too much. You know, that's a sign of our disconnection.

So, yeah, I've always tried to break down language and see what's on the other side of it.

TC: What are some of the poets you go back to continually or maybe that initially really shaped you?

PK: Yeah, well, luckily I'm sitting next to my shelf of poetry books. You've put me on the spot, but I can answer it. I used to write about Robinson Jeffers all the time when I was working on the Dark Mountain Project, and he was a huge influence on me. He's a very bleak poet, very anti-machine poet, but really incredibly powerful in his no-nonsense writing about the stupidity of modern humanity and also our smallness. But the way he writes about wild places as well—from the cliffs of California back when they were wild—it's quite something. I mean, he's a really incredibly bracing poet, and that's the reason that no one studies him anymore and hardly anyone's heard of him, because he's far too much of a challenge. Jeffers is a real radical poet, he's not one of these fake radical poets who says tame radical things for a metropolitan audience. He's not fucking around, he doesn't care what anyone thinks, so he's always inspirational.

Yeats has always been an inspiration. Actually, I'm a great fan of Robert Bly, whose poetry I discovered a few years back, but he writes really good stuff, very good, funny but also very sharp, mythological poetry, as you would expect from Bly, and it's really very good, some of his best stuff.

Another poet I really like but not many people have heard of is Jack Gilbert, who is an American poet who spent a lot of time living in Greece, and wasn't really well known in his lifetime, but his

stuff is beautiful. Wendell Berry, obviously—goes without saying, I suppose. R.S. Thomas, he was an influence on me. Again, a very bleak kind of poet; he was an admirer of Jeffers, actually. A very bleak figure, but quite a humorous one too. And he was, obviously, a priest; he wrestled with God in his poetry.

I suppose those would be some formative names. When I was sixteen the first poet I really loved was Wordsworth, actually, because we had to study him in school and I didn't think I really liked poetry very much, but Wordsworth was speaking about experiences I'd had up on the mountains, and these great spiritual experiences he'd had in nature, and I didn't know anyone else that had them at the time. I got very much into the Romantic poets for quite a long time. I'm still really a Romantic at heart, as you can probably tell. But yeah, those would be some of the poets I think that would probably be most important to me.

TC: It's interesting that you mention Wordsworth writing about things that you recognize. I've thought of that being one challenge of writing poetry today—not only there being less knowledge of what things are named (one of my self-appointed tasks is to learn with my children what the names of things are, the names of plants and such), but also, how to write about certain things when there are experiences you can't rely on someone having had? For instance, if a kid has never seen something sprout from the ground, they've never really seen that and noticed it, how can you allude to that? To read the best poetry or the best anything, without having lived in the world first, you're not going to get it, I don't think, in the way that you should. So then, how do you write?

PK: That's the challenge, and I think all you can do is write. All you can do is write from your experience, see who gets it. You can never plan who you think's going to read your stuff or who you would like to read it. But you're right about that. I mean, poetry today is just—I don't know even what poetry is. Certainly in Britain it's a tiny little kind of elite thing that middle-class people do to each other—they all just read each other's poetry books, and they've all grown up in the cities, there's no space at all for nature poetry or Romantic poetry or anything so reactionary and dire as that. And there certainly isn't any space for anything spiritual in any serious sense either, because I think poets have been swallowed by the Machine, unfortunately.

Yeah, you just have to write, you just have to write from the margins, I suppose, and then you see who picks it up. That's all you can ever do. All the best writers and all the best artists and creative people are always operating on the margins, and half of the people we now think of as the greats of classical literature were despised or unknown in their lifetime. From William Blake to Shelley, many of the people that are regarded as great figures today were not known at the time. So you just have to do your work on the edges, I think. And there will always be some people who get it. But you're right, there's only so much you can say to people who just don't understand the experience you've had, of course, especially in poetry, because the experience you're trying to convey is especially intense, so you're never going to be able to get that across to somebody who's never seen a sunset on a mountain. They don't know what you're talking about. But I suppose you just write for whoever can hear it.

TC: My other strategy is to do all the things with my kids—decide, okay, we're going to experience

the things, we're going to read the things.

PK: Yeah, yeah, no, that's what we do as well. I mean, you just have to, like you say, you have to give them the things that you think they need, and then they've got those to take with them out to the world with them. That's all you can do. And then it's up to them to find out what they're going to do with it.

TC: I did want to ask, have you read any of David Jones's poetry?

PK: No!

TC: I would be very curious to hear your thoughts on *The Anathemata* in particular. It's a book-length poem. The whole poem basically takes place in about seven seconds of someone at a Latin mass, but tons of things happen in those seven seconds. One thing it is, is the weaving of all these myths that find their fruition in Christianity—but that is a really simplistic way to put it.

I think you'd find it really interesting. But one thing he is trying to do is, he's using Welsh, he's using these different dialects, he's really playing with language to experience myth, the kind of myth that participates in reality. In his introduction he talks about the challenge of signs, what happens when a sign doesn't signify what it's supposed to signify, or when you don't have that shared knowledge of the signs. And then he goes ahead and writes a poem that's pretty obscure, but it's absolutely fascinating, and like all poetry, it needs to be read aloud, but even more so.

Anyway, I commend it to you, and I'd love to hear what you'd think of it.

PK: I'll have a look at that.

TC: Yeah, see what you think. And speaking of, can you talk more about Wild Christianity, and what's your vision for that? And I guess that's partly the project of rewilding language?

PK: Well, I don't know if it's a project, it's just literally a discussion I seem to have started having with a few people, especially if you read my essays on Substack. But I also have a good friend named Martin Shaw who is a storyteller and a mythologist, who I've worked with for years. He's always been a pagan kind of a chap, but he's recently become Christian.

TC: Really!

PK: His father was a preacher, so he grew up in a Christian household. He's had a long and winding journey like mine. So as somebody who's been a storyteller from all traditions and somebody who is very interested in rewilding words, he's very interested as well into looking into what it means to—I hate to use the world "rewild" really because it's so overused now, but there is a sense that Christianity has been quite tamed. Obviously it's been tamed in the West for a long time by its alliance with power, and especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it became a very middle-class, respectable thing to be a Christian. You almost had to be a Christian really in Britain and America a century or so ago, or at least pretend to be, in order to get anywhere.

So it became a [comfortable] kind of faith, while actually at its heart it's quite wild and challenging—well, very wild and challenging actually, and Christ is a wild and challenging figure. He really is; he's very much a marginal character in every way, and his whole life and death is marginal deliberately. And the people he spends time with are marginal. And that's how God acts in the

world, it turns out. There's a wildness to Christ, he never has any place to lay his head, and he does the things he's not really supposed to do and talks to the people he's not supposed to talk to, and he surrenders when he's not supposed to and he fights when he's not supposed to, and he tells you to turn against your own parents, but he also tells you to love everybody, and it's full of paradoxes and strangeness. It's disturbing, in a way, the things that Christ is talking about. He's not a comfortable figure, and he's not telling you to have 2.4 children and to go to church on Sunday. And he's not telling you to become a nice well-behaved liberal social justice activist either. He's kind of not telling anyone to operate in society at all. But at the same time, his is not a political challenge, it's a spiritual challenge. It's not even necessarily about what you're doing in society, it's almost like, *You just leave society over there, leave Caesar what is Caesar's, that's what he does, that's fine, that's the world. I'm calling you out to something else*, and there's a wildness in that which we've lost. And it seems to me that we could find it again.

The tradition in Orthodoxy that attracts me so much is always the mystical tradition, and also the tradition of the monks and the hermits, who are still out there on Mount Athos living in caves and praying all day. And then I live in Ireland, and in Ireland in the early centuries of Christianity the monks would go out to the woods and live in caves. They would go out to places like Skellig Michael and live wild on rocks, and build these incredible monasteries. They were going into what they'd call the green desert, the Irish version of what the desert fathers were doing. And then the desert fathers themselves, and the desert mothers, the beginning of Christianity, going out and sort of burning off everything unnecessary in the desert—that is the part of Christianity, that sort of wild, challenging part that strips everything away, that interests me. That stuff has always interested me, long before I became a Christian. You've read *Beast*, so that's kind of what's happening there, really. That's a man going up to a moor to search for God even though he doesn't know it, and getting everything stripped away from him, even though he doesn't necessarily know what he's looking for. But he gets what he needs.

In a world that's coming apart, Christianity can't afford to be a comfortable religion of empire. It can't afford to be a comfortable faith that upholds the systems that are crumbling down. It has to go back to the margins again, which is where it came from. And that's just an instinct, it's not a manifesto, really. But there's other people who I talk to who find it interesting too, and it also is a way of reweaving us back into the landscape, and into nature. Which again, the early Christians were doing, not because they were pagan nature worshippers, but because they were just taking themselves to the edges. And you have wonderful Orthodox saints like Saint Seraphim of Sarov who went into the forest and lived with the bears and learned to talk to them. Obviously you have the likes of Saint Francis in the West, so these people have been there, and some of them are still there. It's part of the Christian tradition, actually. It's one that really fascinates me; it's got a future to it.

What would happen if we did our liturgies outside in the woods, you know? That's a question that really interests me as a Christian, and that's not about compromising the faith or changing the form or anything like that. It's simply, what would happen if you took all the icons and the altar into the woods and did it there, instead of into a building, sometimes? That would have a very different feel to it. I don't know, it wouldn't be

better or worse, but it would be a part of the faith that isn't there at the moment. And it would just be interesting to me. Yeah, I'm thinking aloud. But that seems to be a path I'm attracted to.

TC: It's interesting because there's the narrative that, by the time the Romantic poets come along, the industrial age, or at least the first part of it, has come, and so they're starting to feel the disconnection from nature, and they're trying to hearken back to it and see the beauty in wilderness, but wilderness starts to not mean the same thing as it does in Grimms' fairy tales, for instance: Like when you're in the wilderness, that's a terrifying place. So there's this truth and this desire for recovery and for connection in the Romantics. And I think it's interesting because in a way we've never lost that sense that there is something really to be afraid of with the wilderness, and that's why we're always trying to control it. On the other hand, we can't control creation, ultimately, but neither can we control the Creator. Rather we are supposed to be transformed. I feel like there's that interesting tension where we're drawn to the wild but we're also afraid of it, and there's this parallel with the holy and the divine, where we're drawn to it, but also we might have to change. We might die! We might die in the wilderness—we might die and have to be resurrected, but we have to die first. So, yeah, I don't know. I find that interesting.

And Martin Shaw, I read his book *Cinderbiter*, those retellings of the Celtic poems, and absolutely loved it, and I'm really going to be following his work now as well.

PK: Yeah, he's very good. If you ever get a chance to see him in person, as it were, he's an amazing storyteller. But no, I think what you just said is very interesting, that sort of fear we have of Creator and creation—I hadn't thought of that before. But that seems quite true, doesn't it? They're both kind of nurturing and threatening at the same time, so it's easier to turn away from either of them.

You know, C.S. Lewis talked about the Tao as the way of God, and the Tao being the thing which runs through the world, it runs through the natural world, and your work is to align yourself with it, which is also aligning yourself with what God wants for you, and you can find that more easily in a forest than a city for sure. So there's got to be something there. But you're right, it's having to face up to what you don't want to see, having to go into the dark wood because you don't know what will happen when you get in there. It's an interesting way of looking at it.

But that's what we have to do as a society. We're going to have to go into the dark wood whether we like it or not, because all the things that we based our assumptions on are coming apart. We have to go into the wilderness, so maybe we can either go voluntarily or be dragged there. There's a big difference between an involuntary trip to the desert, which might kill you, and a voluntary choice to go there and transform yourself, like you were saying. Either way is hard, but you're doing something very different.

Yeah, it's an interesting thing. I'd like to keep thinking about it. But I think there's something important in it.

I mean, it feels to me our whole culture is going into the wilderness at this point, you know, is going into the desert. So we're going to be there whether we like it or not, and there's no point in trying to hark back to what it was, even if you want to, because you can't. When the Israelites leave Egypt, they have to go to the desert for forty

years before they get home. And they don't just leave slavery and go home to the Promised Land; they have to go to the desert, and Moses doesn't even get there. And then they're obviously losing their faith and worshipping idols and arguing with him and arguing with each other and then changing their mind and then leaving God and then coming back again—you know, having to get themselves straight before they're allowed in the Promised Land. Which is maybe what we have to do. Maybe that's where we are.

TC: That story of Israel wandering in the desert and the story of Israel in general, recently has struck me when I think of how the Church is affected by the world—well, so was Israel. We're in the world, but there's always the challenge of truly being as we ought to be in it. That has not gone away since Israel's wandering in the desert, and even once they arrived, they didn't quite arrive yet, because that wasn't the ultimate place.

HOW SHALL WE THEN WORK?

Considering that we are creatures and considering all the tensions of how do we live well with integrity—if we grant that there might be some redemptive technology but there's a lot of demonic technology as well—how ought we to think of vocation, of our work in the world, and what are some of the challenges, especially in a world where we're so disconnected from not only nature but just doing things with our hands? How do we think of work in the everyday, and how should those considerations shape our thinking of work?

PK: It's a good question. I suppose you should probably just read a lot of Wendell Berry and he'll answer all those questions for you.

TC: There you go!

PK: It's hard, it's a difficult balance. I suppose you have to know how your work aligns with what you imagine God wants for you, or what you think God wants for you, which is always very hard to know. I suppose also that, at the same time, you know when your energies are being used well, you know when you're doing what you think is true, whatever that is, and it's different for everybody. And you also know when you've been captured, and sent somewhere that you don't want to be. I've always been quite uncompromising about it: I am not going to do anything that I think is really wrong, or that takes me in the wrong direction, at least for not any longer than I have to. I've had to do lots of terrible jobs, I've had to earn a living like we all do—but I've always had a sense that I'm not going to spend my life doing something that is meaningless and destructive. I'd rather be poor than do that.

I was going to say there's always a way out, but it depends on where you come from and how lucky you are in life, but you have to make your choices. It's like with the smartphone—you can have your phone, you can have your technology, and you're going to lose things if you get rid of it. But how strongly do you feel about this? How serious are you? That's the question you have to ask yourself, I suppose. How serious are you about living well, in the way that you think you ought to live as a Christian, or just as a human in the world? And how far can you go, doing that? And it might not be as far as you'd like to go. But you could do something about it. If you feel that the Machine is as tragic as I do, then you have to resist it in some way. And that's not necessarily a kind of head-on fight, but it is about living in a way that aligns you with God and aligns you with nature and with other humans, rather than

aligning you with the Machine.

So what is that, and how many compromises are you prepared to make? Do you want to be like Mark Boyle? I mean, not many people do, but it's an option at one end of the spectrum, you know? And then there's all the other options along the way, depending on the life that we have.

I perpetually would like to get the internet out of my house, but then I wouldn't be able to earn a penny, so I can't. So there it is! So we have to make these choices. I would genuinely like to live without the internet, but I have no idea how I would feed my children, so I can't at the moment. So there it is. But you know, maybe it's just the process of drawing lines, like it is with anything else. You just say, okay, I'm not going over this line. It's just a thing I'm not going to do. So I've said for a long time I'm not having a smartphone. I'm just not going to have one. And I don't care what that means. It's inconvenient for me in all sorts of ways, but I'm just not going to do it, so that's that. I don't have to think about it. And that's one of my lines. There are things I'm just not going to do, that I'm not going to compromise on, and then there are other things I go, *Well, okay, I have to do that because we're all living in the world*. So I think that's probably the way to think about it.

I could come back to the Amish again, and that's pretty much what they do. They say, is this piece of machinery going to negatively affect our community, and our spiritual life? Because if it is, we're just not having it. We don't care how convenient it is; we're not having it. We'll have this one here because this one seems to enhance what we do without destroying the community, but we're not having anything that is going to negatively affect the central reason that we're here, which is to have a certain type of really rooted community and to worship God. That's what we do. And that seems to be a good way of looking at it. What are you going to have in your life, and what are you not going to have in your life? How much of the machine are you going to put up with, and how much are you going to say, "No, this is demonic, this is dangerous, I'm not having this here, I don't care how much pressure I get"? It's that kind of thing. So I think, as I've said in some of my essays recently, what happened with the vaccine mandates and the vaccine passports around Covid was a really useful example of that for me personally, because I thought, *Well, okay, there are some things that I'm okay with going along with but there are some things I'm going to draw the line at*. I'm not going to deal with mandatory vaccination. I'm lucky I didn't have to do that in our country. That was a red line for me—not because of the vaccination but because of the mandate. So that was a personal choice. But these kinds of things bring things into real focus for you. And I think there's going to be more of this as time goes on, because we're just going to have more and more pressure to technologize all of our lives and to put chips into everything and get smart televisions and smart cars and smart this, that, and the other, because the future is the internet of bodies and the internet of things, as we're regularly told. And that's another place I'm not going to go to. At that point if you're really going to start standing up against that, then you're going to have to deal with being marginalized and exiled to some degree. But again, Christians ought to be good at that, you know? We've got a long history of being marginal and exiled. We've just forgotten it. We're going to have to go back to that place where we live on the edges as the weirdos in society and aren't prepared to put up with what Rome is trying to do to us.

TC: We were listening once to Rabbi Jonathan

Sacks talk about this, saying, *You Christians need to learn how to be a creative minority*.

PK: That's a really good way of putting it. Yeah, exactly.

TC: But I really like that way of thinking. And if you think about calling—what ought you to do with your life—you're also asking, "what are you going to say no to? What are the limits you're going to draw so that you can fulfill that calling?" And that's going to be different for all the callings one has, as a parent and writer, and whatever else. What are your bonds and duties in those things, and what are they calling you to step away from, as well as step toward.

PK: Yeah, I would say so. Limits is what it's all going to come down to. And I like the idea of being a creative minority. I think it's going to be really healthy for Christians not to be at the heart of society. I know people get very upset about America de-Christianizing and the rest of it, but you know, I'm European, that happened to us ages ago, and we're still here. Because this is how you reinvent yourself—again, not by compromising the faith or inventing a new version of it, but just going back to the bare bones of what it is and saying, *What's this for?* This religion doesn't exist to prop up empire, it doesn't exist to prop up the Machine. It's an antidote to it, actually. It's an alternative to it. So that's where it is. I think it will do us good as Christians to be pushed out to the margins and probably mocked and despised a bit like we were centuries ago rather than being the guys in the palaces with the emperors. It's not a bad thing, because that's where it comes from. That's where Christ was. There's something there about walking with bare feet out into the world with nowhere to lay your head.

And that's how God chose to manifest on earth—not as an emperor, not as a king, not as a general, not as a businessman, but as an itinerant rabbi. So there's something to that. It's not a machine religion, Christianity, or it shouldn't be, I think. So maybe that's where we go.

TC: Well, here's maybe a novel that needs to be written, then: When Eugene Vodolazkin wrote *Laurus* he wanted to write about a holy fool, and he just couldn't do it in modern times; he had to set in the Middle Ages. Maybe he'll still write that, or someone else needs to write that—of what a holy fool in this time could look like. What are some other writers that have inspired you in the past few years?

PK: That's a good question, again. You mentioned Vodolazkin—I think his *Laurus* is such a good book. I found that very inspiring, actually. It's hard to find contemporary sort of Christian art or literature that's any good and that isn't just a bit cringy. So you go back to Dostoyevsky or something, and Tolkien, people who are writing in some ways obviously Christian books that aren't in other ways obviously Christian at all. They're not Christian in an outward sense very often, and even when they are, like *The Brothers Karamazov*, it's nuanced and interesting enough that all the debates that are going on in there — you don't have to imagine that you're a Christian to read it. And there's something about that. In terms of fiction, there's very little around now [like that]. And yeah, that is the challenge, isn't it? That's the challenge for the future, to see what we can communicate through that kind of method. I mean, apart from Vodolazkin and Dostoyevsky, both of whom are Russian…That's what I'm saying, the Russians know how to do it, you see! I don't know why that is, but they do, and that's the kind of thing—if I ever write a novel again, I

would aspire to write something like that.

It's always good to aspire to be Dostoyevsky, you know, but that kind of thoughtful, creative and readable exploration of the depth of things—it's very rare. You don't get much writing like that now. People are skating around on the surface. There's a lot of nonfiction Orthodox writers that I find interesting, but fiction is much less common.

TC: I try to keep a running list of fiction and other forms of art that help the reader become a porous self instead of a buffered self, in Charles Taylor's terms—where the buffered self is the modern self, where there is this screen, this buffer, between you and the world; whereas for the porous self, there is a spiritual world that can affect you—the world is enchanted, is one way to put it—but you can be affected by it, there's not a screen between you and it. And *Laurus* gets into a porous world, where things are alive and time is not linear, and I think *The Wake* does that as well. And it's strikingly different from most historical fiction (insert pretty much any period movie), which is just like, *Okay, I'm going to enter this other world*—actually I'm not, it's going to be moderns saying modern things in period garb, it's going to be cosplay. And you have a lot of clichés to deal with in fiction that you're kind of like, let's get beyond that.…If you set something in a historical time period the heroine has to be "ahead of her time," whatever that means.

PK: Yeah, yeah, exactly, yes.

TC: But I want her to be in her time!

PK: No, exactly, I don't want to see modern people with impeccable attitudes, as you say, in period costume. Yeah, that was exactly what I didn't want to do with *The Wake*. It's the one of the reasons I used that language, because if you use a version of an old language you've immediately taken people out of their present assumptions and into a stranger place. And it's easier then to make the people different. But the past is so interesting precisely because the people were so different. I'm not interested in reading feminists in the 1500s; it's not interesting to me. I actually want to know what a woman's life was like in the 1500s, not what a modern filmmaker thinks they'd like it to be like it. It's much less interesting just to see, *Oh, well I know what this story is going to be telling me*, immediately.

Again, maybe people are afraid of the past in the way that they're afraid of God and afraid of nature, because it also sort of blows up the progressive mythos. If we can find things in the past that were good that have been lost, we can't have that, because the story we have to tell ourselves is that things are always getting better and it used to be awful. And if that turns out not to be true, at least in every area, then the story of progress goes out of the window. So it's easier to have the woman ahead of her time fighting the patriarchy, etc., because that tells us what we want to hear about how much better off we are now because of what our ruling class is doing.

TC: But she's also not just in T-shirt and jeans, and there's more wild land and nature undisturbed behind her, so it's beautiful—but also, thank goodness we've got beyond that time.

PK: Yes, luckily! Luckily, we have our filmmaking class to thank for that, so that's all good. And obviously we've left behind stupid and primitive things like religion so that we can all be good secular people.

There's a kind of terror at the heart of the whole

mythology of modernity that actually it might not be true, and you can see that, in the more populist rebellions and ecological collapses you get, the more the ruling elite is getting obviously nervous about the possibility that this might not be working. And so it seems to me we're getting so much propaganda in literature and filmmaking now because it's like they want to just shove down our throats the story that we ought to be hearing, rather than having the confidence to actually tell stories. I mean, if you compare Hollywood today to Hollywood in the Seventies, when they used to make really great films, today absolutely everything they make is either a remake of a superhero franchise again, or it's something that gives us a lot of progressive pieties, and, as you say, just set in whatever era, telling us all exactly the same things about race and gender that we all ought to be learning. And like they're just saying, *This is how you need to think—we don't even know how to tell stories anymore, we're just going to tell you the opinions you should have through the mouths of these characters*. And it's so poor and lazy and boring. There's a kind of collapse in confidence in the ruling class or the creative class when they're so narrow that they'll only write like that, and they haven't got the imagination or the courage to say, *Well, this is what people would actually have thought five hundred years ago, so let's go with that and see where it leads.*

TC: Comparing this thought with how writing develops, you know, how this came to you as you were writing, this character develops…. It is such a mysterious process that, if you have an artist who is truly listening, they're going to make good art no matter if they're spouting slogans in their real life. It's kind of like, there's an actual reality that you can tell stories about and tap into, but if you're afraid of that, if you're afraid of where that's going to take you, then you're going to make the clichéd art and make sure that the right message is coming across, rather than going with something that might challenge you in the writing of it, in even trying to create it.

PK: Yeah, people are just terrified of that now. The cultural landscape is so hideous that people know that if they say the wrong thing or express the wrong attitude, they're going to be immediately canceled all over social media. And so people who want to make a career in the arts—and I see this amongst novelists all the time—they just play it safe, and they know what boundaries they're supposed to operate in, what they're allowed to say and what they're not allowed to say. And so as those boundaries narrow and narrow all the time, the art just dies, if you're not courageous enough to step outside it and say, "Look, bollocks to that, I'm going to write what I need to write." And that's not a political attitude, it's just a sense of "I'm just going to follow this story, and it will probably take me to some interesting places, and they may be not things you want to hear, but that's what the story is and that's what characters do, because they're human, and they're not just robots spouting the correct slogans."

We're in a very weird place with that, so again, the only place to do interesting stuff is on the margins, really. The center has just become jammed up.

TC: One filmmaker I do find an honest artist and a bright light in all this is Terrence Malick.

PK: He did *Badlands*, didn't he? I love *Badlands*. Haven't seen it for years, though. What else has he done?

TC: *Thin Red Line, Days of Heaven, Tree of Life, A Hidden Life*?

PK: No, I haven't seen those actually, but I have heard things about him recently so I should probably watch them, shouldn't I?

TC: Well, here's the sell: For one of his films, for one of the scenes he told one of his actresses, "Just read this passage of Dostoyevsky, then we'll shoot the scene." So, yeah, *Tree of Life* and *A Hidden Life*. *Tree of Life* is I think a really interesting piece of film—it's playing with the art form in an interesting way, and it's just beautifully done. *A Hidden Life* is similarly just beautiful, but it's also devastating, and that one tells the story of Franz Jägerstätter, who was the Austrian farmer who was recruited into the Nazi army but he refused to fight. It's really beautifully done, but it's also interesting on the level we've talked about, where there's the tension of whether the local church is going to support this guy who's actually being courageous, and also what is his family going to do, and what are the challenges when the war comes home to his village.

RECOVERING THE HOME

You describe yourself as a home educator in some of your bios. What are some things that have struck you about that transition for your family, of basing education more in the home?

PK: Yeah, we've been doing it for so long now I don't really remember doing it before. My daughter, my teenage daughter, has actually started going to school this year. She's going to a Steiner school which is not so far from us, which is rather a quite nice little place in the woods. She was getting to the point where it was good for her to go out and meet some more people. She's quite enjoying it actually, but she was homeschooled until then, and she's still doing a bit of home stuff on the side as well. My son's eleven, and so we're still homeschooling him.

I think it's really just another one of these manifestations of sovereignty. The alternative to machine control is sovereignty, so it comes down to what you're prepared to take back, and that's what it comes down to being, really. And I think schools are really a manifestation of a kind of machine society where the children are being trained in a certain way. Particularly now, they're being sort of pumped into STEM subjects, and there's as much technology and science and computer game programming as possible, and I don't want them to learn that. I wanted our children to learn to spend as much time outside as possible, and keep their feet on the ground and learn some practical skills as well as some intellectual ones. Again, it's a sort of manifestation of taking back control, if you like, taking some sovereignty over your life. It's been very rich. I've been very lucky to do it, actually. And the children really seem to have benefited from it.

And again, if you don't send your children to school, the pressure on them to get a smartphone and wear what everyone else is wearing is much less; in fact it's not there. You've got more chance of bringing up independent-minded children than you have if you send them off to have the Machine educate them. So yeah, it's been a really nice thing to do. I can't imagine not doing it now, actually. If my son decides he wants to go to school as well, then it'll be very quiet around here. It's very quiet when they leave home anyway, which always happens quicker than you think it's going to.

TC: I've been reading a lot of the educator Charlotte Mason, and she's writing in G.K. Chesterton's time, so early 1900s, when the question was, "Is

there a system that can churn out the right kind of educated citizen?" And she argues against that, and says, "It's not a system, it's a philosophy." She starts with, "What is a human being?" First of all, every child is born a person, and not a blank slate, not a machine, not all these other things, not this thing that we can mold to what we want it to be, but a person with dignity that is ultimately meant for union with God, and that's our responsibility, to prepare them for that. It's interesting reading her, because if I had so much technology in my kids' life that is deemed normal now, I could not do this well—and for children up to age six, she says six hours outside a day is good, and instead of reading about something in a book, have kids find out about it themselves, like have them notice this tree in every season, and describe it to you, and then you can tell them the name and such. It's interesting because it's revolutionary, it's countercultural in our time.

PK: Yeah, that's the counterculture now, isn't it?

TC: What have been some of the stories that your family has centered around, maybe stories you've read together, stories you have returned to, whether in film or books?

PK: My son is just reading *Lord of the Rings* actually; he's eleven, so he loves that. *The Hobbit* was always one of their favorites. Well, when they were younger, my daughter was a big fan of *Heidi*, they would read *The Wind in the Willows*.

One of the things I've enjoyed most with my children is just making up stories for them. We've got a number of different versions of different stories with different characters, and I still do it for them sometimes. I used to read them bedtime stories but also just make them, and we have great fun. There have been characters we've been telling stories about for years, and that's actually the most enjoyable thing. It's almost one of the things I might remember most about their childhood—just the fun of making up silly stories. Again, it's one of those things we've forgotten how to do, but it's very easy to do—you just sit down and start inventing something silly, and anyone can do it! Then it takes on a life of its own. It's one of the best things to do for children actually—you know, reading to kids is great, but making up stories for them is really good too. So I've probably enjoy that most. And as a kind of serious writer it also gives me a chance to be silly when no one else is looking, which is great. Should do more of that.

TC: One needs that. Yeah, I think about keeping an oral tradition. My husband makes up more stories with my kids right now. I've thought a lot about family stories too—you know, what do I need to be telling my kids, what do I want my dad to be telling my kids, and passing those things on, and the difference between someone telling that story and it being written down.

I have a question of advice. I'm considering organizing a seminar for high schoolers and adults where we read literature on the Machine, and you've mentioned this idea in other interviews. So reading Illich, reading E.M. Forster, R.S. Thomas.…I kind of want to read *Lord of the Rings* too. What are some other texts on the Machine that have struck you, or that you'd recommend be read alongside Illich, etc.?

PK: Good question. Probably the best thing to do is go through my essays online actually because the stuff I've been writing over the last year is absolutely full of books on this—Jacques Ellul's book *The Technological Society* comes to mind—a bit big, very thick; so is Lewis Mumford's book on the machine, actually two volumes on that—

it's enormous, but *The Myth of the Machine* by Lewis Mumford, it's very good. I'm trying to think of what else—Neil Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is very good; it's quite old now.
TC: There is this course I've heard of, I think Patrick Deneen taught it to his college students, and they read all these utopias/dystopias, as well as a Wendell Berry book. I wouldn't call Wendell Berry's books utopian, but they are to a lot of people. I know I've talked to people who are like, "This isn't real, it doesn't feel real to me," and I've sometimes wondered whether that's because it's so other from one's experience? Although for me it's not as other—I haven't grown up on a farm, but I know some farm people.

But at the end of the course Deneen asked the students, which world would you like to live in? And that was probably the scariest question, because not everyone picked Wendell Berry! Some picked a dystopia, an actual dystopia, like *Brave New World* and such. Thinking about that problem—you can't see the Machine if you're so much in it and you don't know what else is there, unless you just feel that something's off—you can't name it until you see the alternate vision of something.

PK: Yeah, I think that's right. You have to experience the kind of life that Wendell Berry's writing about, which most of us haven't, then it can seem kind of fantastical, but then there are still places like that. And when you experience them, then you know what you've lost, which is painful, so it's easy to avoid it sometimes than to deal with it, I suppose, because it's hard to know how to get it back again.

TC: Yeah, it's an imperfect community but—I guess that's another story I am tired of, when there is a movie or play about some small village, there's always something really evil lurking underneath.
PK: Yeah, it always has to be, can't ever have a good rural community. It's got to be demonized, literally.

TC: Yeah, it's sad. It's easier to portray real evil than real goodness.

PK: No, that's true. That's very true, actually.
Paul Kingsnorth writes The Abbey of Misrule substack (paulkingsnorth.substack.com). Readers can follow his work at paulkingsnorth.net.

TESSA CARMAN WRITES FROM MOUNT RAINIER, MARYLAND.

A THEOLOGY OF MONEY

BRAD LITTLEJOHN

Among the many sayings of Jesus that have echoed down through the ages, few have continued to sound so loudly or uncomfortably in our ears as his warning, "You cannot serve both God and Mammon." But this does not keep most of us from trying our darnedest to prove him wrong. In every era, Christians have devised systems for helping the wealthy–camel's hump and all–squeeze through the proverbial eye of a needle into the kingdom of God. In medieval times they might endow chantry chapels in the wills, employing a team of monks to pray for their souls. Today, the "faith and work" movement often serves to reassure Christian businessmen that by participating to the hilt in the global capitalist economy, they are doing the Lord's work.

It has been easy — in the thirteenth century as much as the twenty-first — for "radical" followers of Christ to assume a prophetic stance against all such compromises and glorify poverty as tantamount to Christian faithfulness. But although an idolatrous love of money is a great evil, the tension between God and Mammon will not be resolved by righteous rants against upper-class greed or middle-class complacency. The questions that money raises are usually too complex and multi-faceted to be resolved by such responses.

Does setting aside money for your kids' college, instead of giving all your surplus away and trusting God, count as service of Mammon? What about saving for a long and comfortable retirement? What about shrewdly weighing your investment options for maximal return, rather than investing in your Christian friend's business, or spending extravagantly on Christmas gifts for friends and family? These are not easy questions.

Our starting point must be a recognition that while the spiritual and temporal domains are linked, they should not be confused. In the former each individual person encounters God's saving power

and must respond to his call through faith; in the latter, we encounter our neighbors, carry out our careers and vocations, and raise families through faithful and prudent works. In the prosperity gospel, preachers conflate God's spiritual blessings on believers for their faith with worldly prosperity. In some forms of what we might call "Christo-capitalism," the dynamic force of the market becomes the engine of God's redemptive purposes in history, and the Bible is prostituted to economic ideology to encourage an almost religious faith in free-market mechanisms. Alternatively, on the left side of the politico-economic spectrum, many Christians aim to apply the logic of the "divine economy" of unconditional giving to the earthly economic order, hoping to eradicate need and social conflict, and thus incarnate Christ's kingdom on earth, or else buy into forms of liberation theology in which poverty and righteousness, wealth and depravity are crudely equated.

Against all these confusions, we must clearly insist on the contingent, this-worldly character of wealth, without complacently bracketing it off from the demands of Christian faithfulness.

WHAT IS WEALTH?

Let's begin then by asking: what is wealth, really? It may seem like a dumb question, but although everyone seems to want it, I'm not sure we know what it is we want. Consider the common claim (by both cheerleaders and critics) that America is the wealthiest country on earth. And yet, if by wealth we mean net worth, that is hardly the case; America ranks 19th globally in median household net worth. On the other hand, the common image of America as the great consumer society, frenetically scooping up stuff, does hold up to the data; only Norway and Switzerland edge us out in per capita spending, and recent statistics suggest the average American household has 300,000 items. This suggests already an important distinction between money and stuff, one that we are all already aware of on a personal level — we all know that friend or relative who complains constantly about never having any money, even while loading up her shopping cart with the latest top-brand products. It is easy to have a three-car garage full of stuff — even fairly nice stuff — without having much in the way of wealth. Indeed, our culture and economic system encourage us to do just this, so much so that some people can earn a million a year and still be living, as it were, paycheck to paycheck.

Faced with this sad state of affairs, we may be tempted to double down on our definition of wealth as financial net worth, and extol the virtues of the thrifty saver who piles up a mountain of cash. The wise man, we lecture ourselves, is the one who counts the number of zeros in his bank account or portfolio, not the one who counts his cars or golf clubs, or even the number of zeros on his paycheck (so argued the 1990s bestseller *The Millionaire Next Door*). But why? What good is money sitting in the bank?

After all, we forget at our peril that the word "wealth" originates as the noun form of the adjective "well" — wealth is *well-being*. From this standpoint, money alone, unused, unspent, could hardly be wealth. The readily quantifiable nature of money — "cold hard cash" — tempts us to fetishize it, to make it an end in itself. But realistically, it must be a means to some end—some good end—to have genuine value, to

genuinely be wealth. Of course, this highlights at the same time why mere consumption is no more wealth than mere saving is: consumption for consumption's sake, unmoored from the fulfillment of real human needs and real human goods, sounds like the opposite of *well-being*.

It is worth noting that neither the three-car garage full of stuff nor the bank account full of zeros would have been very recognizable to our distant ancestors as wealth. To be sure, in every culture, conspicuous displays of luxury and large stores of gold have been coveted *markers* of wealth — our Bibles are not wrong to put "Solomon's Great Wealth" as the heading of the eye-popping account in 1 Kings 10:14-29. But for most of history, wealth has above all meant *land*. We might give a nostalgic Wendell Berry-esque account of this, along the lines of the importance of place and rootedness for human well-being; the modest yeoman farmer might well *feel* more prosperous than the wandering maritime merchant, whatever the cash balance of the latter. But more basically, the importance of land as wealth for so much of history has been its role as the most fundamental of all means of production. In an agrarian economy, there was little of value you could produce without access to land, and to be landless, whatever one's wits or brawn, was to be largely at the mercy of those who did have land.[1] In this we see the importance of the careful parceling out of land by tribes, clans, and families in the Conquest of Canaan, and the detailed Levitical legislation that sought to ensure these parcels remained well-distributed to the original families. Even as we move from an agrarian to a mercantile and industrial economy, land retains fundamental importance. Raw materials for production must be extracted from the land, and however much value workshops, factories, and offices may add to these materials, they must be built on land, and the resulting increase in land value ensures that wealth accrues to landowners. That said, rapid economic change has steadily eroded the importance of land in favor of other forms of capital.

But this retrospective glance highlights something important for us: the wealth that is truly valued is *capital*, which is to say a means of production—unlike money, which in itself is simply a means of exchange. This obviously makes sense when we think about wealth as the ability to fulfill human needs and procure human goods. Consumer goods may be nice, but they constantly decay, deteriorate, and of course get consumed; money is nice, as something to exchange for such goods, but money will run out. Most important, clearly, is to have the means to produce the goods you want to consume, or to produce goods you can exchange for what you want to consume. Wealth, then, means above all *self-sufficiency*, not just the freedom from want in the moment, but the freedom from fear of want in the future. It's no coincidence that if you consult the promotional literature of wealth managers and investment advisors, you will encounter over and over words such as "confidence," "security,"

[1] This is important to note, in light of how readily modern economists mock the "zero-sum thinking" that dominated pre-modern economic thinking. The fact is that land, the dominant factor in pre-modern economies, is a zero-sum game.

"protection," "safety," even "invincibility." Wealth is our security blanket; or perhaps more accurately, whatever serves as our security blanket is what we consider our true wealth: "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Clearly, this was a root idea of wealth in older societies, but our hyper-financialized economy has intensified it. The possession of land did not totally free one from dependency; the land itself, after all, was prone to any number of natural disasters which could undermine its use and destroy its value. With our modern financial products, we have made every endeavor to transcend earthly limitation. You can buy insurance against pretty much any risk you can imagine, and even buy insurance against the risk of that insurance defaulting. We rarely invest any longer in individual plots of land, buildings, or business operations; if we invest in particular companies at all, it is in shares of stock, where we share ownership with millions of others. More likely, we invest in mutual funds that own small fractions of hundred of different companies around the globe. By thus buffering ourselves against the "thousand mortal shocks that flesh is heir to," we hope that our wealth will bring us full self-sufficiency.

With the detachment of land and wealth, however, a new connotation has also crept into our conception of wealth: *self-determination*. You can see this too in much financial marketing: one asks, "Will you have enough money to live life on your own terms?"; and another declares, "Having wealth can allow you to do anything you want with your time." When wealth meant land, and land meant family land, and family land meant family responsibilities, to have wealth meant more to be tied down than it did to be liberated. But by converting our assets to the liquid forms of stocks, bonds, and hard cash, we aspire to have all the privileges of wealth with few of the responsibilities. We can go anywhere we want to go, buy anything we want to have, be anything we want to be. Wealth, we hope, is a ticket to freedom in every sense: freedom from fear and freedom from constraint.

It is worth pausing at this point to draw our attention to a curious feature of the modern phenomenon of wealth. We are accustomed to thinking of greed, the chief vice connected to money, as being a matter of inordinate attachment to material things. And it is not hard to see examples of such inordinate attachment in our contemporary lives, particularly when it comes to our cars, our homes, and our furnishings. But at the same time, perhaps what is most striking in modern life is our *detachment* from material things. We see it in our consumption patterns—we buy things, and replace them within a year. We see it in our investment patterns—as mentioned above, we invest in ways that leave us as detached as possible from the actual physical assets and people we are putting our money into. Indeed, we even see it in our ownership patterns—those cars and homes we think we are so attached to, we are ready to swap out for a new, bigger, better one within a few years (and the car itself, for that matter, is a means to detach us from geographical dependence). We are less in thrall to greed, perhaps, than to the greater sin of pride, desiring wealth as a means to transcend as much as possible the limits of our worldly existence, free from dependence on labor, land, or even other people. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the heart and soul of the

financial industry, retirement planning. The aspiration of retirement saving is twofold: (1) to be financially secure enough to need no help from governments, friends, or even family when your body starts breaking down, and (2) preferably, to have the freedom to stop work, kick back, and "live a little" for a decade or two while still of sound mind and sound body. I don't mean to say that all retirement saving is bad, but for now it is simply worth noting how at odds much of the rhetoric of the retirement industry is with a Christian ethic of mutual interdependence.

Can wealth, then, ever be a good? If the essence of wealth lies in this desire for transcendence and independence, this striving for godlike infinity, is it any wonder that Jesus declares Mammon the chief rival to God? And yet wealth clearly is a good, not just in common sense experience, but clearly in Scripture itself. Over and over, God blesses his people with wealth, and they in turn, at least sometimes, use it to bless others and to glorify his name. But it is important to be clear about what we are dealing with. Frequently, against the perceived danger of "leftist Christianity," many Christian authors rally to the defense of wealth, describing it in terms of a healthy enjoyment of God's good gifts of creation and materiality, and accusing their adversaries of a Gnostic asceticism that would scorn these blessings. But if the modern pursuit of wealth is more about detachment from and transcendence of materiality, this defense rings hollow: indeed, the lowly subsistence farmer may be far more in tune with God's good gifts in creation than the high-flying Wall Street financier. The more important question, then, is not whether God minds us enjoying material goods, but how much God wants us to pursue self-sufficiency. While it might be easy to answer piously, "Not at all; he wants us to depend on him every day for our daily bread," the very structure of creation warns against taking this dependence too far. To teach humility to Israel in the wilderness, God made them dependent on a daily rain of manna and quail, but that is not how most of mankind has lived. Rather, we raise sheep and shear their wool, raise cattle, drink their milk and eat their meat, plant wheat, water it and harvest it. Which is all to say, God calls us to take possession of means of production and use them to produce the things we need. He calls us, in short, to a *mediated* dependence on Him, not to an absolute dependence or an idolatrous independence. Wealth, rightly used, is the means by which we display the image of God in ruling over the world as his stewards; yet if we are not very careful, it becomes the means by which we seek to become as God, displacing him and ruling ourselves.

A SURVEY OF BIBLICAL TEACHING

When it comes to the question of what the Bible says about money, there are, unsurprisingly, about as many opinions as there are about money itself. Christians who extol money as one of the greatest earthly goods find in Scripture a defense of wealth-accumulation (e.g., Jon Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*). Those who rail against it as almost always idolatrous find in Scripture a sustained polemic against the pervasive power of Mammon (e.g., Doug Jones, *Dismissing Jesus*). Those who see it as a good, but a good that must be well-distributed, see in Scripture an attack on inequality and a blueprint for redistribution (e.g., Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*). It has become common for advocates of different attitudes to wealth to divvy Scripture up

among themselves: the Gospels (minus a few awkward parables) and first four chapters of Acts for the social justice warriors; the Parable of the Talents and the book of Proverbs for the free market zealots; the Deuteronomic code for the distributists. Others have thrown up their hands in despair at the diversity of Scriptural teaching on wealth, denying the possibility of discovering a consistent biblical wealth ethic.

At the level of principle, however, the diversity of Scripture's witness on wealth is overstated. For instance, the Book of Proverbs, often pigeonholed as offering a bourgeois morality in which wealth equals blessing and poverty equals laziness, spends much more time warning the rich against idolatry and oppression than it does warning the poor about sloth. The Gospels, likewise, are less interested in condemning wealth *per se* than they are in exposing—again—idolatry and oppression. As Luke Timothy Johnson notes in his classic study, *Sharing Possessions*, the Bible's concrete practical prescriptions about what to do with wealth may be all over the map (and why not, given the diversity of social, historical, and personal circumstances involved?), but its basic message is surprisingly consistent: wealth is a God-given good for the sustenance and enrichment of human life, but is also a dangerous source of idolatry and oppression.

It bears emphasizing that to say this can hardly be a means of downplaying the dangers of wealth. Many are the sermons on the Rich Young Ruler in which the congregation exhales a sigh of relief on learning that the rich young ruler's problem wasn't that he was *rich*, it was that he was *idolatrous* about his money—"Phew," we all say, "I almost thought Jesus might be talking to me there for a minute!" Much fewer are our sermons on Isaiah or Amos, but when they do happen, we are relieved to hear that the prophet only declares "Woe to those who join house to house and add field to field" (Is. 5:8) because they got rich by "oppressing the poor" and "crushing the needy" (Amos 4:1); we, on the other hand, make an honest living as a mortgage loan officer at the bank, and get our household goods from Amazon, so no worries.

No, if Scripture tells us anything at all, it is that wealth and idolatry go together like salt and pepper; it is rare to find much of one without the other. Idolatry is not some rare vice that afflicts a few of the careless wealthy, but a temptation that follows almost inescapably upon any acquisition of wealth. Indeed, it is not a vice of the rich to which the poor are immune—the longing for wealth that one does not have, while it can arise out of legitimate need or grief at injustice, easily degenerates into an idolatrous envy and a burning obsession every bit as crippling as that of the miser. Nor is injustice and oppression some odd pathological, or culturally specific add-on to greed, as if back in primitive biblical times, they could only get rich by exploitation, but now we've discovered how to get rich by honest productivity. Rather, if idolatry and oppression seem to go hand-in-hand in almost every biblical discussion of wealth, it is because there is an intimate structural connection. If one worships Yahweh as God, then the human persons created in his image must necessarily be valued above all, and valued as *persons*, ends in themselves, rather than means to other ends. If Yahweh is displaced by inanimate creatures, human persons will become instrumentalized as dispensable means toward the service of the new god, Mammon. To the extent that wealth is viewed (rightly or wrongly) as a product of

one's own labors and cleverness, the idolization of wealth shades over into an idolization of self, in which all other persons, or at least less wealthy ones, are perceived as radically inferior. Thus Naboth comes to be seen as far less valuable than his vineyard, and our garments and gadgets far more valuable than the third-world workers who make them.

Some readers will have instinctively bristled at my comparison of Naboth's vineyard and Bangladeshi garment factory workers. There is a world of difference, they will say. In Ahab's pre-modern economy, the only real way to get wealthy was at the expense of others. Wealth was, as we noted already, above all a matter of land, and there was only so much land to go around. If you wanted more, you had to go to war and conquer someone, find ways to reduce your neighbor to debt servitude so you could acquire his land at a rock-bottom price, or use a rigged legal system to deprive him of it on the basis of trumped-up charges. Nowadays, in a market economy characterized by the free global flow of capital, you can get rich by making your neighbor (including the Bangladeshi garment worker) rich. Everyone wins. Someone might well retort that this rosy picture is frightfully naïve about the on-the-ground realities and imbalances of power in the global economic system; particularly in natural resource industries, which do still depend above all on that scarce resource of land, old-fashioned Ahab-and-Naboth style exploitation, plus more sophisticated World-Bank-aided forms of it, remain depressingly common. But this is not an essay in macro-economics, so let's sidestep that objection for now, and grant the main force of the argument: yes it is true that in our modern, non-agrarian economy, the accumulation of wealth does not depend nearly so directly on oppression and injustice as it once did. There is much more room today to get rich by one's own hard work and brains, and to build that wealth in the ethereal world of the financial markets rather than in hard assets like land, iron, and gold.

But precisely the factors that might seem to weaken the link between wealth and injustice are liable to strengthen the link between wealth and idolatry. Note the key features of the valuation of wealth that we discussed above—*self-sufficiency* and *self-determination*. We noted that even in an age when wealth was primarily measured by tangible assets, its greatest lure has always been the power it promised: beginning with the desire for the freedom from want, and freedom from control by others, increasing wealth eventually offers the satisfaction of the freedom to control others and transcend ordinary human limitations. But wealth measured largely in real estate, as it would have been in biblical times, could only offer so much transcendence; the land itself had to be constantly cared for, and was always at the mercy of the elements. Now that our wealth consists increasingly in abstract financial instruments—stocks and bonds and insurance products—that know no geographical limits and need no caretakers, the illusion of transcendence that it offers is far more powerful and persuasive. I say "the illusion," because of course, as the 2008 financial crisis showed us, even the most abstract instruments offer little buffer against the risk and chaos that is an inescapable part of human life: the financial speculator who added derivatives to derivatives was no better off than the real estate investor who added house to house and field to field.

Likewise, the explosion of options that our modern technology has given us— in goods, services, and transportation—and the unparalleled fungibility of modern money, mean that wealth offers almost limitless opportunities for self-determination. With a Visa or Mastercard in your pocket, there's nowhere you can't go, nothing you can't buy, and ultimately, we tell ourselves, nothing you can't be. In Biblical times, even the wealthiest landlord or merchant tended to be bound to a certain place or community, while modern forms of wealth hold out the promise of freeing us from any limitations beyond what we choose for ourselves. Old-fashioned greed thus shades over into the deadliest of the sins, pride, the idolatry of the self, and the narratives we tell ourselves, that wealth is a reward for ingenuity, hard work, and productivity, simply cement the idolatrous connection between my net worth and my self-worth.

A final point is worth noting in this connection. Too often Christians concerned to defend the essential goodness of wealth focus narrowly on wealth as an absolute measure of material well-being; wealth, on this account, is simply the possession of various goods that enable a comfortable and perhaps luxurious life, and the financial means to continue purchasing more. Accordingly, writers of this sort are quick to point out that even the poorest Americans today are generally better off than the rich of Biblical times. If the Bible had really meant to denounce material bounty as such, well then we'd all better strip down, empty our pantries, and move into small shacks, they sarcastically argue. But if the essential allure of wealth is in its promise of self-sufficiency, self-determination, and transcendence, then wealth is much more a social construct than a simple calculation of how many goods and services you can afford. The rich young ruler could glory in the fact that, being far wealthier than most of his fellows, he was freed from any sense of dependence on them, and indeed knew that they often depended on him. He could rejoice that he had far more freedom and power than his fellows, that he was master of his own life. The inner-city single mother living on welfare, even if she has access to luxuries he never dreamed of, and even a richer and healthier diet, has no such sense of transcendence. This is why conversations about wealth that start with the question, "how much is too much?" are bound to lead nowhere. The key question rather is, "how does this wealth make you feel about yourself, and about others?"

Thus, regardless of whether it is the case that you can only *get* rich at the expense of others, it is true that you can generally only *feel* rich at the expense of others. Thus concerns about inequality, such as we find throughout the Scriptures, can hardly be dismissed as outdated zero-sum thinking. In short, we ignore or marginalize the Bible's constant warnings against the perils of wealth at our peril. They are not the relics of a long-gone agrarian age, but speak directly to the idolatry that captures our hearts today.

[2] Using the Reformed numbering

THE VIRTUE OF LIBERALITY

When asked what virtues should govern our relation to wealth, many of us tend to think in terms of a two-track morality. First are the basic rules of justice in buying and selling and such, which are binding on everyone all of the time, rules like "don't steal," "don't defraud," "honor your contracts," etc. Then there are "cherry on top" expressions of charity, in which we are encouraged to freely give away money or sacrifice our own advantage for that of others. The first are required, the latter optional; the former a matter of sin or innocence, the latter a matter of extra merit; the former primarily a matter of *don'ts*, the latter primarily a matter of *dos*. Sometimes in politically conservative circles, this distinction gets mapped onto claims about the appropriate reach of civil laws, which can and should enforce duties of justice, like "Don't steal," but not those of charity, like "share with those in need." While there are relevant distinctions in this neighborhood, this bifurcated vision often reinforces a bourgeois morality in which our basic moral obligations in relation to money are pretty minimal—don't take other people's stuff—within which we are encouraged to maximize our profits so that one day, as the Spirit moves us, we might benevolently part with some of our hard-won gains.

We are thus liable to be a bit flummoxed when we encounter the way our Christian forebears talked about the eighth commandment, that good old bastion of private property.[2] In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther writes: "**You shall not steal.** *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor's money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, *but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income.*" Notice the negative and the positive held together as a unit.

The Heidelberg Catechism sings the same tune in Q. 111:

"Q. What does God require of you in this commandment?

A. That I do whatever I can for my neighbor's good, that I treat others as I would like them to treat me, and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need."

And the Westminster Larger Catechism amplifies this theme:

"The duties required in the eighth commandment are: truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to everyone his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the right owners thereof; *giving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others;* moderation of our judgments, wills, and affections concerning worldly goods; a provident care and study to get, keep, use, and dispose these things which are necessary and convenient for the sustentation of our nature, and suitable to our condition; a lawful calling, and diligence in it; frugality; avoiding unnecessary lawsuits, and suretiship, or other like engagements, and *an endeavor, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others*, as well as our own."

This emphasis is apt to catch us somewhat off-guard—here we thought we were doing great and keeping the commandment by maintaining

a careful distinction between our neighbor's private property and our own, and now we find that if we're not actively endeavoring to "further the wealth and outward estate of others," we're stealing! What this means, concretely, is that at no point in our economic lives can we bracket out as irrelevant our duty to love our neighbor and seek to maximize his good. If I'm in a position to price my product, or pay my workers, at a level that maximizes my profit and leaves others the slimmest of margins, I must recognize this as a temptation to violate the eighth commandment. Likewise, if I can afford to bless someone by buying a product and tipping generously, well there's an opportunity to obey the eighth commandment. This isn't how we Americans like to work—we're happy to give generously later, we tell ourselves, but when it's time to do business, we want to make sure we don't leave any money on the table. But of course, leaving some money on the table—or some grain at the corners of the fields—is exactly how God told Israel to practice their charity.

The reason why we can never bracket out our neighbor's profit while seeking our own becomes clear when we consider our economic relations from the standpoint of virtue. Virtue is neither about mere good intentions, nor merely law-abiding actions, but a pattern of action conducive toward the good that flows from a soul formed by the right desires and habits. Our outward actions with respect to money both reflect and shape our inward desires. A man who thinks that he can, in certain business contexts, ignore the neighbor's need in order to get the best deal, will soon find his heart deadening toward his neighbor's need in general, and being drawn instead toward money as a good in itself, not merely a tool toward other goods. However much he may tell himself that he is making money to give it away later, odds are that that "later" will never come. Of course, this does not mean he needs to ignore his own good as well—we are not called to irresponsibly fritter away our own wealth by being a doormat, always deferring to others and letting them take advantage of us. But this is a less common temptation—as Aquinas says, "To spend on oneself is an inclination of nature; hence to spend money on others belongs properly to a virtue."

It might not surprise that the catechisms lumped together so much of our economic morality under one heading—they were after all trying to describe all morality in terms of just ten commandments—but Aquinas similarly organizes his discussion of our approach to money under a single virtue (out of the dozens he surveys in the *Summa*): *liberality* (ST II-II Q. 117). A number of elements of his discussion might strike us as curious. First is the name, which has to do with giving stuff away; surely, we think, there are other virtues pertaining to our wealth, perhaps beginning first with *prudence*. Second is the fact that he classifies this virtue of giving stuff away with his discussion of *justice*, rather than, as we would assume, *charity*! Lest we might worry that it is a bit extreme to say that the only way to be virtuous with our wealth is to give it away, he clarifies—and this is the third thing that may baffle us—that "It belongs to liberality to make good use of money" and that "the use of money consists not only in giving it but also in spending it." How can we make sense of all this?

Let's look at how Aquinas characterizes liberality's relationship to justice. In his typical

"yes and no" manner, Aquinas acknowledges that it is not a "species of justice" *per se* but it is rightly "reckoned by some to be a part of justice, being annexed thereto." The key difference, he goes on to clarify, is this: "Justice establishes equality in external things, but has nothing to do, properly speaking, with the regulation of internal passions: wherefore money is in one way the matter of liberality, and in another way of justice." Justice is the virtue of rightly-ordered external actions regarding money, liberality of rightly-ordered affections. And liberality is not simply the same as charity, because charity is primarily a matter of one's love for the *recipient*, whereas liberality is primarily a matter of one's *non-love* for the gift: "But the giving of liberality arises from a person being affected in a certain way towards money, in that he desires it not nor loves it." In other words, the key consideration in liberality, which makes it a virtue foundational to all our financial dealings, is whether wealth has found its way into one's heart, displacing the love of God and the love of others. The virtue of liberality, then, is that of having a heart that holds money loosely, that is neither unduly bothered by the lack of it, nor unduly enamored with the possession of it, that receives it and also lets it go with equanimity, investing it with no value beyond the concrete goods it can achieve.

This, then, is why liberality includes spending. There are certainly problems with the careless or compulsive spender, but they are nothing compared to those of the hoarder, the one who has made money his god, confusing a means with an end. Money is meant to be used, and "the use of money consists in parting with it." To be sure, there is a virtue of prudence "to keep money, lest it be stolen or spent uselessly," but at some point it will need to be parted with. And when one parts with it, says Aquinas, it is most virtuous to part with it most fully, so that "parting with money by giving it to others proceeds from a greater virtue than when we spend it on ourselves." Although he here appears to create a simple dichotomy between spending for one's own good, which is OK, and giving to one's neighbor's good, which is especially good, his remarks elsewhere in the *Summa* allow us to pull these two together more clearly. In describing the purpose of private property, Aquinas notes that it is ordained to maximize the common *use* of this world's goods, and accordingly we should aim whenever possible to use things not merely for our own private good but for the good of others. Accordingly, even when we spend money on ourselves, it is not as if we bracket out the good of others. Of course, we all recognize this—we speak of "patronizing" a store or restaurant, and when we make a purchase, we exchange mutual thanks with the cashier or waitress. We have both served one another and been served by one another, at least if it is a fair exchange. But this is precisely why we cannot content ourselves with a minimalistic view of fairness but rather, as the catechisms above showed, rigorously apply the Golden Rule to our financial dealings: are we trying to do as much good to our neighbor as possible? Of course, one has to ask this question in the context of one's entire financial life, not each individual transaction: sure, I might best "further the wealth and outward estate" of the waitress by giving her a 150% tip, but this might not be sustainable in view of my other financial obligations. But I should strenuously seek, if I am a seller, to price my products as close as possible to their true value, rather than exploitatively convincing my customers (by tricks of marketing, concealed information, fictitious sale prices, etc.) to pay prices they

will later rue. And if I am a buyer, rather than obsessively trying to drive the best bargain I possibly can and ditching my favorite vendor as soon as I find someone with a lower price, I should try to bless my neighbor from whom I am purchasing by paying the fair price he asks.

Liberality is the mindset, disciplined by long practice, that refuses to value money as a good in itself, but holds it lightly, using it freely in whatever way maximizes its usefulness, whether that be giving it away to those who need it most, or spending it in a transaction that brings the maximum benefit to both parties. By pursuing this virtue in every area of our financial lives, we can overcome the schizophrenia, so characteristic of Americans, that parsimoniously connives to maximize profits today with the promise, so often reneged on, of giving back to the less fortunate tomorrow.

THE VICES OF GREED AND PRODIGALITY

Rightly understanding liberality helps break down a two-track morality of money, enabling us to see that even our spending should be seen as a service to our neighbor, a form of giving, even if still distinct from outright charity. But where virtue is naturally unified, vices are always plural, pulling us apart in different directions. So now we must examine two key vices that represent opposite forms of a disordered love and use of money (although many others could easily be added): Greed and Prodigality.

Greed is the most obvious vice in this list—indeed, it is so debilitating a spiritual disease that St. Paul would call it a source of all other vices: "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10). Paul also lists the greedy alongside idolaters, drunkards, and the sexually immoral as those with whom Christians should not even associate (1 Cor. 5:10-11) and says they will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10), frightening words for a culture so addicted to wealth as our own. Of course, we questioned earlier whether this is actually an apt diagnosis of American society—our addiction to debt and spending, to satisfy our cravings and impress our peers, actually trumps our regard for real wealth most of the time.

We will come back to our spending addiction in a moment, but let us not dismiss too quickly the idea that we might still be prone to suffer from old-fashioned Greed in the more specific sense. So what is that sense? Aquinas defines it as "the internal affection which a man has for riches when, for instance, a man loves them, desires them, or delights in them, immoderately." In this, he says, man sins against himself, by not loving what is most to his true good, and consequently, sins also against God by putting temporal things above eternal things. But what might make us love riches in this way? Clearly money is a means, not an end, and who could be irrational enough to love it as an end in itself? The Parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:16-21 gives us wonderful insight: "The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry."

The most striking thing about this little soliloquy is its solipsism: "within himself," "I," "I," "my," "I," I," "my," "I," "my," "my," "I, "my." Here is a man who is completely wrapped up in himself, so much so that he makes little speeches to himself, talking to his soul like an old friend. This gives us the first key to the heart of avarice.

Another key is found in James 4:13–14: "Go to now, ye that say, today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away."

Riches are valued chiefly as a source of false security, a way of helping us feel in control of our lives—absurdly so, since they are even more transient than life itself.

If we want to ask ourselves if we are tempted to greed, we should look for these two dangers—solipsism and false security—which are the heart of greed. Greed, in fact, is closer to Pride than to Envy among the Seven Deadly Sins, because in Greed, we turn inward and ignore others altogether; we retreat into ourselves and seek to be self-sufficient. When we do this, we deny what we were fundamentally created to be. The first thing the Scripture says about mankind is that we were formed from the dust of the ground, and made alive by the breath of God: we are wholly dependent, secure only as we rest upon God. The second thing the Scripture says about us is that "It is not good for man to be alone." We were created to share; nothing is more natural to us. Consider the instinctive reaction of the little child when she discovers some new marvel in the backyard—"Come and see." Consider your instinctive reaction when you hear a new piece of marvelous music or see a great new film: you tell everyone about it and try to get them to experience it as well. We are never more human than when we are sharing, and in nothing is the Fall clearer than in the barrier it introduces to such sharing (the first thing Adam and Eve did was hide their bodies from one another). Greed, then, is fallen man's descent into solipsism, the evidence that we have become *incurvatus in se* ("turned in upon ourselves"), in Augustine's memorable phrase. This of course brings us back to the theme of idolatry: since God only is truly self-sufficient, and the only one in whom we can genuinely rest secure, idolatry occurs whenever we treat some other object as a source of self-sufficiency, inviting us to rest secure in it, and isolating us from other creatures and from our creator.

Do we Americans ever do this with wealth, then? Certainly. We need look no further than our retirement savings (or our dreams and worries about such savings if we don't yet have them, as is the case for too many Americans!). I'm not about to recommend that people stop saving for retirement, and yet it is a sad and troubling commentary on our times that we have become so dependent on these individualized investment accounts instead of on one another for support in our old age. There are good practical and demographic reasons for this shift, and yet by shifting our focus from flesh and blood sources of support, to a mesmerizing series of digits—bound to multiply, we imagine, by the magic of compound interest—we readily lull ourselves into a false security. Of course, the enormous financial industry seeks by every means to encourage this false security, selling us the lie that with enough money, invested rightly, we can be secure against "the thousand

mortal shocks that flesh is heir to." And so we put our faith in technology stocks, or housing, or gold, or the next sure-thing investment, and get burned every time but still never learn, so powerful is our faith in this idol. Obviously, not all prudent saving becomes idolatrous greed, so I will return to say more about this specific issue in the next post.

Having spent so much time on Greed, let me be much quicker in surveying its opposite: Prodigality. If Greed is too much love of money, then Prodigality is too little. This seems like an odd sin to be guilty of—who do we know who makes this mistake? Well actually, as soon as we ask ourselves that question, a dozen examples are likely to spring to mind (at least half of them among our in-laws, no doubt!). We roll our eyes and groan at the endless trials of a friend or family member who complains that they never have enough money, and yet they always have plenty of income, and plenty of nice clothes and a new car, for that matter. Of course, our love of judging others in such matters can easily lead us astray here, but it remains true that we all know plenty of people afflicted by Prodigality, and one of them is likely to look us in the mirror every morning. This is the vice of failing to recognize that wealth is a very important tool that God has given us to effectively rule the world as his stewards, and thus failing to take appropriate steps to manage it prudently, instead throwing it around loosely and thoughtlessly, whether out of bad motives or good. We are apt to assume of others the worst motives, assuming that their spending is driven by a gluttonous inability to control their myriad cravings, or an envious desire to keep up with the Joneses, or a vainglorious need to be cool and important by having the newest things. And indeed often these are our motives for prodigality, but frequently this vice feeds on good motives as well. The great annual ritual of prodigality that takes place from November to December of every year is fueled by many motives, but still perhaps the chiefest among them is the laudable desire to give good gifts to loved ones—especially our children. But aside from the fact that the most important thing we can give others is *ourselves*, not some newfangled plastic creation or wad of cash, we are doing our children no favors if we are modeling for them each year the vice of prodigality—spending first and finding a way to pay for it later.

Indeed, when Aquinas discusses the vice of prodigality, it is entirely in the context of *giving* too much, or too carelessly, even to urgent needs and worthy causes. Why? Well, God has given us spheres of responsibility, and warns us that we must take care of the closest ones first—"if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8). Indeed, the Christian who fails to do so, because he gave away all his savings to World Vision, will soon find himself having to plead for the charity of others just to keep himself and his family fed and clothed, becoming as much a burden as a gift to others. Giving too much right away can also make us less able to give later. That said, in my experience it is a comparatively small number who err in the direction of such charitable prodigality—for every Christian who does, there are five others who, enamoured of wealth's promise of power and security, keep too tight a hold on their purse-strings.

"LOVE GOD, AND DO AS YOU WILL"?

In one of his most arresting formulations of the task of Christian discipleship, St. Augustine proposed the maxim, "Love God, and do what you will." At first glance, it is hard not to revolt against the seeming libertinism of this proposal, which we are apt to misread as a license for self-indulgence. Anyone who has spent much time with the great Church Father, however, will understand just how much is packed into those first two words: "Love God." All of human life, Augustine argued, is governed by love; it is love that drives the quest to pile up wealth for the sake of peace and security, love that compels some to spend recklessly in pursuit of pleasure or the attention of others, and love that motivates some to give freely to the neighbor in need. All of us love, but not all of us (indeed, this side of glory, none of us), love rightly, because our loves are not rightly ordered. As Augustine tirelessly taught, the great task of Christian life is to bring all of our loves into proper subordination to our overriding, passionate love for God himself. If once we ever achieve this right ordering, insists Augustine, the rest of our moral life will fall into place; we can "do what we will," because we will always will to do what we ought.

Applied to the all-important and often all-absorbing question of our financial discipleship, this maxim can come as a great relief and yet a profound challenge. On the one hand, it can free us from sterile legalistic prescriptions which would try to solve the moral problems of money simply by relocating it into someone else's hands, inviting us instead to a creative obedience that can adapt and faithfully respond to an ever-changing social and economic landscape. On the other hand, though, we would be missing Augustine's point–and Scripture's–if we thought this made things easy. Christ warns against serving both God and Mammon because there is perhaps nothing else under the sun that is so apt to displace God as the ordering principle of our loves. The ways in which wealth tempts us to idolatry are manifold, and constantly shifting and disorienting us with each fresh evolution or revolution of economic structures. That which can look like generosity in one setting can be revealed as a tool of oppression in another.

To our love of God then, we must add a determination to discern the contours of the world in which God has called us to work. Only with our hearts aligned to use money in the service of God, *and* our minds attuned to understand the meaning of money, can we be faithful disciples in an age of unprecedented wealth.

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The Cross in Our Calling:

A REFLECTION ON MARY'S MAGNIFICAT

ANDREW ARNDT

Mary is chosen for the sacred work of bearing the Incarnate Son of God, and the unforgettable words we know as *The Magnificat* come tumbling out:

And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."

(Luke 1:46-55, NIV)

As commentators have long noted, the words are not chosen at random. Reaching back into the deep wells of salvation history recorded in Israel's Scriptures (Hannah's song in 1 Samuel lies just beneath the surface of Mary's exultation) while also looking forward to the subversive ministry of her son (the blessings and woes of Luke 6 are quite obviously anticipated here), Mary's spiritual perception of the work given to her is from first to last a biblical vision, formed in the crucible of prayerful engagement with Scripture — the very thing, I think, that is missing from a great many of our current attempts to reclaim the sacred value of our work.

I am an unapologetic fan of Frederick Buechner. I find him uncanny for his ability to illuminate the sacred value of the ordinary with pith and poignancy. Consider the following reflection he offers on how to discern our life's calling:

By and large a good rule for finding out is this: the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. ... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

Now I think there is very much to be said for Buechner's "rule." In my own life it has certainly proved itself true. I am a born communicator with a lifelong love for the church and desire to help people. No surprise then, that I would discover a deep sense of vocation in the ministry, where writing and preaching and offering spiritual direction (my deep gladness) meets the human need for words that unfold new vistas of possibility for understanding the great mystery that is God and God's dealings with the creatures his hands have made (the world's deep hunger). I am blessed to live a life where those two things consistently intersect.

Likewise, I am friends with many people who live the truth of Buechner's rule. My friend David is an accomplished artist who has found great satisfaction working in urban planning and design, where day in and day out his artistic gifts intersect with the world's need for cities that are conducive to human flourishing. My friend Michelle daily brings her keen insights into child and family development along with her extraordinary gift of leadership to bear on the world by leading a vibrant family ministry at our church. Even on the more domestic side, my friend Kyle is an exceptional cook and host who regularly turns his table into a place where the risen Christ is encountered by friends new and old, serving up extravagant feasts he'll often spend days planning and preparing—his love for hospitality satisfying the world's need for connection.

So, yes, I think that Buechner is on to something. As a pastor who believes deeply in the role that human work plays in the plan of God and in the joy that comes from discovering the work that God has called us to, I have often counseled people directly along Buechner's lines. Do what you love, as the saying goes, and you'll never work a day in your life—the line between work and play being virtually erased in the endeavor. As Dorothy Sayers said many years ago, "[E]very

man should do the work for which he is fitted by nature," and that, if and when this is the case, we will "no longer think of work as something that we hastened to get through in order to enjoy our leisure;" instead, we would "look on our leisure as the period of changed rhythm that refreshed us for the delightful purpose of getting on with our work".

To both Buechner and Sayers I say, "Yes, may it be so."

And yet…

I have journeyed with the notion of what the late Eugene Peterson called "vocational holiness" long enough now to recognize that while Buechner and Sayers are right, they are perhaps not *right enough*. Or perhaps (to give a bit more credit) we ought to do a better job recognizing and exploring the very-much-overlooked *provisio* that Buechner himself offers—"*By and large*," he writes, "a good rule of thumb is…"

Whatever is left out by the "by and large" is what I am interested in here, because, as it happens, a great deal of God's call on each of our lives is left out by the rule of thumb Buechner offers. There are profound limits to the "deep gladness + deep hunger" formula, dimensions of vocational holiness that it simply cannot illuminate. (I beg the worried reader to trust me: I have not left my meditations on Mary and her song. I'll return to them and the light they shed presently).

I am thinking, for instance, of the way in which the formula represents something of a First World luxury. Grateful as I am for the opportunities my life has presented to me, through which I have been able to bring my gladness and the world's hunger into alignment, I also recognize that for *most* people over the course of world history and across the globe today, my situation is an opulence bordering on fantasy, which their lives did not, could not, and will not afford them — their "deep gladness" notwithstanding. Are they thereby barred forever from "the place God calls?"

Relatedly, I am thinking of the way in which the formula limits our sense of vocation *exclusively* to whatever it is we do to earn money. This is one of the reasons why over the years I have personally tried to carefully distinguish the words "vocation" and "occupation." *Vocation*, to my mind, is the more encompassing of the two concepts, including not only what we do with our so-called working hours to earn a wage, but more broadly 1) who we are as human beings in our totality (and how God intends that totality to be a blessing to others), and 2) the network of relationships we find ourselves in which represent arenas of sacred obligation. "To be sure," I have often said to people, "if you can, find an *occupation* that brings your gladness and the world's hunger into contact with one another; but do not think that in so doing you have exhausted what it means to be called by God in your particular life."

In that same vein, and finally, I am thinking of the way in which the most important vocations of our lives have a way of *finding us*, and how one of the surefire ways we can recognize those vocations is that there is a cross (and often many crosses) buried in them — crosses that not only summon and demand a life of prayer, but indeed come to us *precisely because* of our life of prayer.

This is where Mary and her Magnificat help us. What strikes me about Mary and the central "work" of her life as the bearer of the Incarnate Son was that she did not *choose* it; it chose her, or more accurately, God chose her for it, and that

not at random but because there was something God saw in her. We need not lapse into any kind of "Mariolatry" to recognize this. Twice the angel Gabriel remarks on her status of "favor" with God (Luke 1:28-30). Raymond E. Brown explains that "this has the connotation of being especially graced" and goes on to say, in a passage worth lingering over, that

> *[t]he one whom God has chosen for the conception of His Son is one who has already enjoyed His grace by the way she has lived. Her discipleship…comes into being when she says yes to God's will about Jesus; but such readiness is possible for her because by God's grace she has said yes to Him before. Thus Mary's discipleship does not exhibit conversion but consistency.*

She has said yes to him before. This, it seems to me, is the terrain of Scripture-soaked prayer, which teaches us to know the voice of God and readies us for the high holy labors of our lives.

I remarked at the beginning of this essay that "Mary's spiritual perception of the work given to her and the place it occupies in terms of the wide sweep of salvation history is from first to last a biblical vision, formed, so it seems, in the crucible of prayerful engagement with Scripture"— and now we see why this must be so. What fitted her for her role as *Theotokos* was that she had always, in her way, been anticipating and welcoming and yielding to the advent of the word and call of God. We can imagine her at the synagogue or at the Temple, mind and affection soaked in Israel's Scripture — *anticipating, welcoming, yielding*… Or at the prescribed times of daily prayer with her family, reciting the Sh'ma — anticipating, welcoming, yielding… Or as she (to borrow a phrase from the 17th century Carmelite monk Brother Lawrence) "practiced the Presence" in the ordinary rhythms of life, pondering the mysteries of the Law and the Prophets in her heart — *anticipating, welcoming, yielding*…
…so that when the Word and Call of God finally came to her, in a way she could never have anticipated — Incarnate of her own flesh — drawing her into her most important vocation, she not only recognized it for what it was and what it meant in terms of the wide sweep of salvation history, but was ready to go wherever the call took her. Her prayer of assent — "be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38, KJV) — rings down through the ages, and Simeon's word to her (Luke 2:34-35) pierces our hearts as well, for we discern in Mary's story the nature of true discipleship: that like the Messiah whose Mother she was (and is), her prayerful acceptance of her divine vocation will pierce her soul. His cross is hers also. Her cross, her many crosses, are occasioned by and gathered up into his. And through the cross, as the old acclamation from *The Book of Common Prayer* has it, "joy has come to the whole world" — the joy of the kingdom.

As it always does.

When I was in seminary, I noticed one day an elderly woman with a severe physical disability working in the library. Her limitations being what they were, she could not work quickly — or, truth be told, very effectively. For hours she sat stooped over the card catalog, organizing as she was able, often requiring assistance, at a snail's pace. Day after day she worked. And day after day I wondered about her.

And wondered more when one afternoon I saw one of my systematics professors sitting with her in the cafeteria, eating lunch. She ate as

she worked — slowly, stooped over, requiring assistance. He would reach across the table every now and again to help the food into her mouth, or to wipe her face. I was touched, quite deeply, by what I saw, knowing this professor to be a man not only of great intellect, but also great prayer and love for the Scriptures; and now, quite evidently, a man of great kindness too. My guess was that she was his sister, or another family member he had brought under his care. How sweet, I thought.

This went on for months until eventually I became curious enough to ask around. "That's not his sister," I was finally told. "That woman is his wife. Early on in their marriage she was diagnosed with a rare genetic condition that would eventually rob her of all her motor skills. She's been like this for years — slowly deteriorating. He is her primary caretaker."

I buckled inside. Newly married, I wondered how I would have responded to a similar diagnosis, how I would have handled the long loss of my bride. It was obvious to me then, as it is obvious to me now, that only the daily surrender of prayer — "be it unto me according to your word" — would have made it possible, and my professor's willing assent to the cross buried in the heart of his vocation to love the wife of his youth "till death do us part" said more to me about the nature of the kingdom and of the God he worshipped than any line from his thousand page systematics ever could.

It is the life of prayer — which Mary models — that makes a life of true vocational holiness possible. Yes, to be sure, there will be times when engaging the various callings of our lives will be as easy and as natural as simply doing what we love, living at the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger collide. But even those places, if they are genuine vocations, will carry crosses, for the call of God always does. "When Christ calls a man," said Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously, "he bids him come and die." How will we handle the divine bidding unto death?

In my own callings I have died many times over. As a husband, as a parent, as a son and brother, as a pastor, as a friend. Gethsemane just keeps coming — for each of us, in each calling. "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me," says Jesus, trembling in prayer as he approached the terrifying climactic hour of his divine vocation. And it is there, in prayer, that he finds his resolve: "Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39) — a prayer he surely learned at his mother's knee: "be it unto me according to your word."

So may we learn to pray. And so may the kingdom come.

Amen.

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THE MEGACHURCH REBORN

MATTHEW MILLINER

I arrived in the Thessaloniki airport and passed by the customs office, its door casually propped open, and saw everything I had come to Greece to avoid: a framed reproduction of Warner Sallman's blonde-haired, blue-eyed American Jesus, testimony to the global reach of that thing we call evangelicalism. I had come to escape all that, to experience the power of ancient icons, and the cheap reproduction in the airport portrait told me that if that was my objective, I had better move fast.

So I attacked the storied city of Thessaloniki with my feet. I was less an evangelical now than I was a jet-setting grad student with a modest research budget, and I was on a mission. Just outside the hotel where I stashed my bag was an ancient Roman agora. I was not interested in the Romans, however, but in those they killed. A block north I visited the spacious basilica of the early Christian martyr St. Demetrios, a son of senatorial privilege whose Christian faith, legend tells us, earned him a spear in the gut. I had been in many an American megachurch, and the basilica of St. Demetrios was the early Christian equivalent, accommodating the influx that came with an increasingly fashionable faith. The five-aisles of the church mirrored the five-aisled modern highways that accommodate traffic congestion today.

Early Christian basilicas like this were patterned after the civic buildings of the ancient world, where statues of the emperor, *basileus*, would reside. But Christianity replaced this 3D imperial propaganda with 2D mosaics of Christ, deliberately undermining earthly political promises and the subservience that

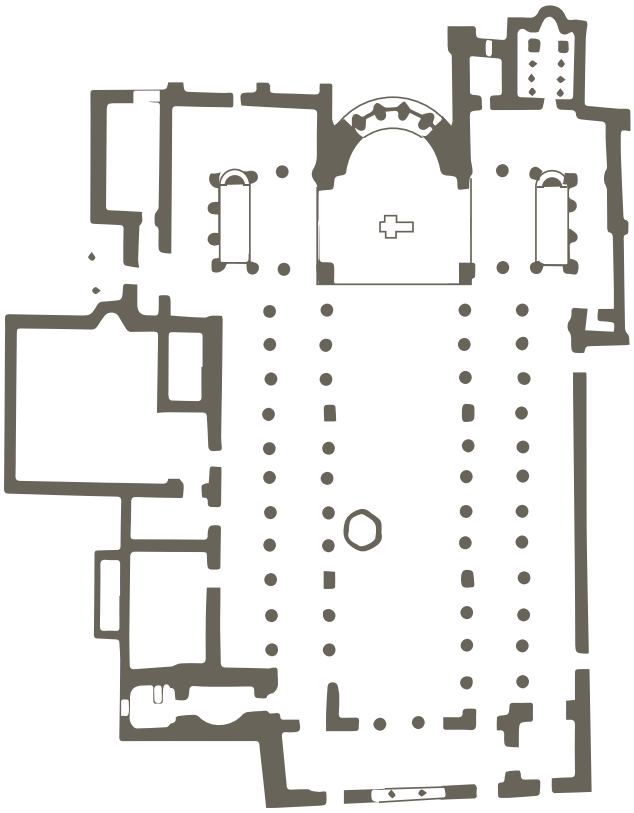
comes with them. The massive sunlit structure of St. Demetrios still breathed this new atmosphere of freedom. Not all of this basilica was ancient though — a 1917 fire had destroyed much of its earliest portions and the reconstructions were obvious. But selections of the church's original inheritance survived. My heart rate increased as I examined the building's carefully preserved early Christian mosaics — two bishops and a saint posing as if they were living portions of Thessaloniki's crenelated walls. One warrior saint was not accompanied by sword and shield but by two innocent children instead, evidence of a military ideology that Christianity had transformed.

The church was filled not with tourists but with townspeople. And there were the icons I had come for, most of them not ancient but freshly painted, tucked in the church's every corner like flowers waiting to be pollinated. The smell of beeswax votive candles, flickering before the icons, saturated the nave, inviting veneration. I chose to join such venerators, descending into the crypt, crossing myself and bowing at the tomb of St. Demetrios, who remains Thessaloniki's patron saint. It claimed to be in the very gymnasium, that is, the ancient Roman equivalent to a locker-room, in which Demetrios was killed.

Still, if I am honest with myself, the thoughts I had in this underbelly of the basilica were troubling. The acid of academic investigation had already begun to erode my romanticized vision of the early church. The seminar room and the sanctuary do not easily mix. I had learned that toward the end of the same century in which Demetrios was murdered by the Romans, the Christian Emperor Theodosius had ordered the slaughter of thousands of the city's inhabitants in punishment for a rebellion. Even if a Christian bishop had disciplined Theodosius for this act by refusing him the Eucharist, there was no memorial equal to the shrine of St. Demetrios for these victims in Thessaloniki. Instead of relying on Christianity's power to persuade, moreover, Theodosius had effectively canceled paganism — visits to temples were forbidden and the sacred fires were snuffed. This is usually enough to turn people away from Byzantium in disgust, stuffing it back into the "Dark Ages" where many still think it belongs.

The liberation offered by Christianity, in other words, quickly morphed into hegemony. The spiritual freedom of Evagrius of Pontus was overshadowed by the persecutory zeal of Ephiphanius of Salamis, who cataloged divergent opinions with militantly uncharitable zest. Though the scale is different, of course, it is difficult not to compare this to whatever seems to have happened to evangelicalism in recent years. I thought of megachurches I attended in their prime. As a young youth pastor I had once attended a conference at one of the more famous ones, and I could not tell the difference between the man leading the church growth breakout session and a generic business guru. And that is not even to mention the abuse that would later be revealed. Christianity promised liberation from worldly power; but it soon permitted that same power to manifest itself again, poorly disguised by a thin Christian veneer.

Even so, maybe I did somehow encounter St. Demetrios himself in that damp undercroft, because the basilica, to my surprise, was equipped with an answer to these seminar room objections. Climbing the steps from the tomb back to the main church, I entered the building's unexpected annex. It was a quaint protruding chapel that had been attached to the main church around



the year 1300, many centuries after the basilica's original construction, visible in the upper right of the plan (see above). Compared to the basilica itself, it is rather modest, even paltry — but the scuffed and weather-beaten late Byzantine paintings in the annex chapel of St. Euthymios are some of the best in the city. They offered a corrective to the imperial faith of Theodosius. St. Euthymius had been trained by a bishop appointed by Theodosius, and had every reason to expect a comfortable administrative career. Instead, he smelled corruption and sought silence instead, fleeing to the Palestinian desert's humiliating sands. His hermetic hideouts included the cave where David had once fled from King Saul.

Only from this place of self-imposed exile could Euthymios have a healing effect on the Christian empire. The effect is well-conveyed in the miracles of healing displayed in the chapel's faded paintings, created almost a full millennium after Euthymios' life. The eyes of these figures were freighted, as if they knew the walls of Thessaloniki would eventually be breached. That said, the saint's name, Euthymios, means happiness, as if the only happiness worth having comes with power's surrender, not its grasp. St. Euthymios, and the annex chapel that foregrounded his memory, represented the underground river of contemplation that had long sustained Byzantium, moistening the ground especially when the empire was weak. It was this underground river that had resurfaced in Byzantium's waning years. How many American megachurches, I thought to myself, could stand to grow annex chapels like this?

And then I found one, or at least I found a St. Euthymios. It was a good fifteen years after my trips to Thessaloniki, at a considerably less glamorous weekend seminar I had reluctantly agreed to attend. Scattered among the participants were leaders that emerged from the fallout of a recent church implosion. It turns out that in the wake of the scandals that rocked that congregation, people either left, or they found depth. This group was composed of the latter. I attended a session led by a woman in her sixties who took us through one psychologist's outline of the stages of faith. As faith matures, she told us, it hits something called "the Wall," when the satisfactions of the ego are deliberately starved. No amount of pious intention, let alone intellectual ability can surmount it. Then she read this passage aloud:

> *[At the Wall] something is always given up. That differs for each person. It usually is something central to one's identity. Giving up does not mean losing. It does mean release and detachment in whatever form that takes. There*

may be a prior sense of being unable to cope, of not knowing what to do or where to turn. Finally, in desperation we give up and let God do whatever is right for us.

This woman had a front row seat to the scandals of big evangelicalism, to the collapse of McChristianity, and here she was showing us what prayer in the midst of suffering could look like. Embarrassing headlines connected to her congregation were still fresh at that point, and I was so struck by her demeanor that I asked her directly what was to come of all of it, the victims, the perpetrators. "Many have left," she told me with a gentle gravity in her eyes, "but many are on the deeper journey."

I had wandered into the annex chapel of St. Euthymios, healing desert mystic, all over again. Her countenance communicated the same pathos as the late Byzantine paintings in the chapel. Just as the chapel was constructed beyond the original wall of the ancient church, her soul, and the souls of these quiet saints, had been constructed on the far side of "the Wall" discussed in the seminar I attended. The signs of these subtle new supplements to whatever we call evangelicalism are everywhere, moreover, if one knows where to look, though there may not be a Gallup poll, top-rated podcast or a Religious News Service article broadcasting the news. And that is as it should be, for the more attention that is called to these rivulets of renewal, the more easily they become polluted. These renewals should be written about instead in the future, when it is more certain if they really mattered, just as the paintings of Euthymios were made so long after his death.

It is enough today to call attention to ancient patterns: the rediscovery of contemplation in the face of public failure, the deeper journey that follows the recension of public rewards, comparatively squat appendages springing from five-aisled basilicas, pleasing the saint that sleeps below. I'm not sure it has ever been any other way.

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Against the Economic Mediation of Community

MYLES WERNTZ

In a recent guest column at Anne Helen Peterson's *Culture Study*, Wendy Robinson wrote about her forays into the world of Peloton, on a growing phenomenon: the lack of community which people find within the ecosystems created by consumer products.[1] She writes movingly about her struggles with finding an exercise community, having gone from the YMCA to a local studio to the digital community of Peloton riders. Her search is, truly, a search for not just health, but for a community to belong to, for a space in which she does feels both at ease in her own body and joined to a community of fellow seekers and searchers. "I'm not overstating it to say that I love Peloton", Robinson writes. "However, as a fat rider, I'm never fully sure if they really love me back."

This sentiment—that Peloton should love the riders back—is a jarring statement, in two ways. Placing an expectation on a commercial entity that it would not only provide a service, but return feelings of affection, borders on the dystopian. Love, as Robinson uses it, becomes unmoored from a personal recipient and transposed to a corporation, and invites us to ask not only whether Peloton as a company can love, but what it would in fact look like for Peloton to *love*. Would it alter its programming for the lost sheep, leaving the ninety-nine riders behind? Would it endlessly differentiate its programming

[1] Wendy Robinson. "On Loving a Company That Doesn't Know How to Love Me Back." *Culture Study*, April 24, 2022. https://annehelen.substack.com/p/on-loving-a-company-that-doesnt-know

into more and more nuanced versions, that it might pay attention well to the individual riders?

This is the first jarring element which surfaces in this statement, but quickly followed is the second: this is not that unusual of a sentiment. There is much to be said—and which has been said—about the ways that economic pressures create pressures of image and style, that advertising shoves and cajoles the myriad ranges of human bodies into the Platonic form. But Robinson's comment—that she desired a mutual love, mediated through this consumer platform—was the most interesting part of her story. That she was seeking out her people, in search of love was less significant than the unspoken default of her piece: that the natural place for finding human communion are spaces mediated by commerce.

The examples of this phenomenon of our social lives being mediated and made possible by commercial entities are almost multiplied out to the point of being prosaic: commercial matchmaking platforms, Metaverse churches, CrossFit gyms advertising themselves as "communities" rather than exercise facilities. And in some ways, this relationship between commerce and community is an old one. Long before Twitter and Facebook took their place as the economically mediated gathering points for billions of people, the Ottoman coffeehouses of the 17th century became these kinds of spaces. In the coffeehouse, Islamic thinkers would gather to exchange ideas, having purchased entry into the intellectual community by a cup of ground-up beans. And before the coffeehouse, the medieval university—even in its more austere origins—originated as a fee-based environment for learning and intellectual community.

But what differentiates past examples from the more recent iterations is that, in the past, community trust was that which *preceded and enabled* commercial interactions. As we see in Scripture, using fair weights and giving fair prices for goods was expected because the people involved were both part of the same covenant community. A seller could not cheat the buyer first because it was commanded of them by God, but secondly, because they lived in the same area as their client. Social trust and common life preceded and made possible the exchange of goods, but was not coextensive with exchange practices.

The genealogy of how social life became enmeshed with and mediated by commercial ventures is a contested history, but can be named according to two broad contours. First, the expectation that community life would be coextensive with commercial relationships is a new development. The shift of the university model toward for-profit activities and the designation of former hobbies as potential side hustles are but two examples of how previously distinct spheres have become merged, not out of avarice necessarily but out of some necessity. As costs of living increased, alongside the expectations of what kinds of technologies were entailed with belonging to certain social spheres, more income was needed to maintain the same social dynamics.

The second change is one precipitated by the rise of this new form of commerce, which no longer requires local trust to precede commerce, because there is simply no more local person or entity to

trust. Franchises of restaurants are "local" in the sense that they are located within a particular place, but their policies, procedures, and inventory are governed by somewhere else: the authority of the relationship between local owner and local consumer is mediated by a far off party which neither has ever seen. Apple exists everywhere and affects life everywhere, but yet exists in no particular space and the consumer's relationship with Apple does not consist of a relationship with any particular person. Chris Arnade has written lovingly about the ways in which we depend on these kinds of economic institutions, and in some towns, it is the only game there is.[2] But it does not change the fact that our relationships become mediated by institutions managed elsewhere, who owe their allegiance to somewhere else.

These two factors create a situation in which social life is enmeshed with and mediated by economic life, and in which these economic forces are frequently faceless and absent. The human desire for community, for meaningful relationship and connection, has not abated, but must now occur increasingly within the spaces made possible by economic relationships. This is not an issue relegated to one class, for the McDonalds' gatherings which Arnade describes and the Peloton class are an economic world apart. But they are ultimately two rooms in the same house built by distant economic decisions.

In Robinson's essay, then, we find a startling statement which is, in the end, quite normalized. Logically, Peloton does not exist to make community, to help people find connection, or to be inclusive: it exists to be a profitable home cycling company. That it helps people find connection or to further their personal aspirations, beyond personal fitness, is entirely beside the point, except that such things contribute to Peloton's reason for being: to be a profitable company. And yet, because of the overlap between social and economic, with Apple FaceTime, Zoom, Twitter, and Starbucks patios mediating our social existence, we continue to expect that commercial entities are in the business of helping us be connected.

But the joke is on us: these commercial interests have never had community building in view as a primary good, except that enabling people to make connections leads them to also foster a connection with the business. Starbucks is largely agnostic toward the reasons I gather with friends, provided that I continue to gather there and purchase coffee, and Disney (despite the protestations of conservatives and progressives alike) could care less what your politics are so long as you continue to associate them with magical family vacations. The criticisms of digital platforms—that they deform our desires, that they cripple our attention, or that they malform our habits—are symptoms of this deeper problem: these spaces are all built for profit, not community. That people find friends or like

[2] Chris Arnade. "McDonald's: you can sneer, but it's the glue that holds communities together." *The Guardian*, June 8, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/jun/08/mcdonalds-community-centers-us-physical-social-networks

minds within these spaces is ultimately beside the point, whether that space is Facebook or Peloton. A digital space remains profitable to the degree that it keeps the consumer coming back, and if part of what keeps us coming back is the presence of other people, so be it.

BEYOND ECONOMICALLY-MEDIATED COMMUNITIES

The difficulty with addressing this is one of both ubiquity and scale. The capitalist class benefits from how widespread this relationship between sociality and economics is because there is nowhere for consumers to retreat from it. Every form of common life can be a lifestyle to be sold to consumers. Unwinding this relationship, however, is not impossible, given that it has a beginning point, and conceivably, an ending point as well.

The elision of the social and the economic is partly a takeover, but partly, the expectations which we place upon these economic institutions now that they will provide commonplaces for a fragmented world. To resist this, the first step is simply refusing to expect this much of these institutions. Institutions do not exist, first of all, to love, but to perpetuate a value in a sustainable fashion over time: Peloton or McDonalds exists, above all, to sell you a product, and without that, they fail to exist. And so, if you do not find community in their ecosystem, it's not personal. If they benefit you, it is because the design of the institution and your own particular values and aims align with that of the institution, at that particular moment in time. But when we trust these institutions to have our best interest at heart, or to be operating in a morally positive direction, we are thinking naively: institutions do not care about you—they "care" about (or rather, are concerned with) enabling the longitudinal existence of their prime value. The institutions cannot give you the good that you seek, though they may very well give you a good workout.

With the economic institutions unburdened from this expectation, we are then confronted with the imperative to reclaim spaces for free association, unlinked to the pre-programmed avenues for association that the Pelotons of the world provide. It is, in some ways, the difference between a park and an amusement park: the former is a free and open space in which multiple games can be played, and the latter, a constrained space in which people enter to consume pre-programmed possibilities of enjoyment. But escaping this orbit is difficult: as David Graeber has put it, bureaucracy is the hidden temptation to any anarchy,[3] or as the Christian might put it, the tower of Babel hiding behind every command to spread out over the earth. Ivan Illich, in his manifesto on education, rightly saw that long before Peloton, educational bureaucracies were suffering expectations of productivity, credentialization and monetization, schools becoming less communities of learning

[3] For this expanded point, see David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Melville House: 2015).

and exploration and more like factories of knowledge. The consequences were not simply for educational outcomes, but for societies in general, with people taught that play and free association were inefficiencies to be feared rather than opportunities to be embraced.

But what lies ahead if we look to have our communal life drawn together in non-monetized ways? What happens when we turn away from the spaces which money mediates? It will mean building again our common life, without assuming that one needs to have money to have community. To assume that economics mediates our community life is to assume, further, a higher level of expendable income, which necessitates more income and work, which leads to work creeping into all of our lives, closing the loop even more tightly between economy and sociality. There is no deescalating from this vicious cycle; there is only breaking it, by dropping out of its presumptions and building new ones: engaging with church members face to face in slow ways, offering homecooked dinners, asking which of our social expectations presume the income which is built into accessing the Peloton world.

In the end, the love which we seek is one which cannot be bought or sold, and it is that which must be disentangled from the world of goods and services. What appears within the economic as a process of exchange is better understood as the desire for a gift, an exchange between persons which will always be unequal and always be ongoing. For relational giving and receiving is not one which can be equalized like a commodity: it will be one of encouragement and challenge, of affirmation and burden-bearing, and always in disproportionate and intimate ways. You will be strong when I am weak, and vice versa, meaning that our giving of gifts to one another will require that we return to one another again and again, offering uneven exchanges in ways which an economic frame cannot account for. And so, we remain bound together in gifts, passing through economies, but not determined by or confused with them.

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The Discipleship of Work

RORY GROVES

When we moved to our farm several years ago with a toddler and newborn in tow, we mainly had it in mind to experience a bit of the country life: to plant a large garden and perhaps raise a few chickens. We didn't expect much else to change. But the land has had its own effect on us.

The chickens and gardens are here, to be sure. But so are sheep, goats, pigs and honeybees. We also find ourselves baling hay, pitching manure, splitting wood, and repairing fences. Always repairing fences. At some point our hobby farm became a working farm, and nearly every aspect of our lives now revolves around this labor we undertake together, as a family.

The work is real. It's dirty, smelly, sweaty, and tremendously physical. Cutting, splitting, stacking firewood. Weeding, mulching, harvesting from the garden. Hauling water and cleaning stalls. There are easier ways to acquire food. Cleaner ways. Cheaper ways. But that's not why we do it.

A friend once quipped that growing tomatoes is "the best way to devote three months of your life to saving $2.17." In a way, he's right: food has never been cheaper or more abundant than it is today. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. expenditures on food have dropped from 44 percent of the annual household budget in 1901 to a mere 13 percent in 2017. Over the last century, the industrial agricultural system with its factory farms has brought us a previously unimaginable abundance of cheap food. But it has come at a very steep price.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, industrialists and bureaucrats alike were patting themselves on the back for the unprecedented economic growth of the previous century. Nearly every aspect of the American economy had been upended by the Industrial Revolution. Official government documents hailed the arrival of "the factory system." Statisticians wrote with uncharacteristic praise for this newfound way of work (and unmerited derision of the former):

> *[Prior to the Industrial Revolution] the factory system had not yet displaced the domestic or individual system of labor. Nothing was known of the development of special skill by the subdivision of labor and the confinement of each workman to one particular step in a series of progressive operations, an expedient by which the productive capacity of the modern operative has been brought to the maximum and the time required to complete the product reduced to the minimum.*[1]

[1] Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor. *Comparative Wages, Prices and Cost of Living*. Boston: Wright & Potter printing co, 1889, 10. https://lccn.loc.gov/07028681.

The expedients gained came at the price of relationships lost: factory production meant the end of the apprenticeship model, the method by which generational skill had been passed on for thousands of years. Families that divided into factories no longer educated, mentored, and discipled their children at home. Dependency on the family and community was replaced with dependency on the employer. Work became an end unto itself rather than an opportunity for mentorship.

But it is at work that true discipleship takes place, more so than at church or in the classroom. Work is where the real person resides. The true nature of a man is revealed when he is swinging a hammer, felling a tree, or negotiating a contract. For good or ill, we speak loudest to those around us when we are at work. Integrity, perseverance, and faith in divine providence cannot be transmitted in a lecture hall. They must be modeled.

Jesus taught in the synagogues. But he discipled his followers along the way—in boats, along seashores, in towns and villages, while at *work*. The apostle Paul mentored Aquila and Priscilla while working: "because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them."[2] He also admonished the Thessalonian church to "acknowledge those who work hard among you . . . and hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work."[3]

Scripture makes it clear that work is not solely about making stuff. God intended something else to occur in the process. We may be growing tomatoes or crafting fine furniture. But we are also shaping souls.

That is why we don't mind the sweat and dirt or the inefficient methods of production we employ here on our farm. For us it's not about doing it faster or cheaper. Relationships are what matter. I want to be there beside my son as he struggles to lift bales into the barn, or kneel beside my toddlers as they pick blueberries and manage to save a few for the bucket. In the garden I can tell my children about spiritual truths and our responsibility to care for God's creation. They get to see how their dad reacts to uncooperative weather, broken-down tractors, and raccoons in the henhouse. In these trying moments, will I give in to anger and despair, or will I demonstrate my faith by trusting in God's provision?

It is at work where our faith is most on display. It is here that disciples are made.

Excerpt from Durable Trades, *used with permission.*

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[2]Acts 18:3

[3]1 Thes 5:12–13

Good Work

CHARLIE CLARK

We hunted for steel along flat-bottom train rails—glass
blanketing the gravel track bed like chicken feed,
jimson weed between creosote-steeped timbers—
picked over buckled trailers and garbage stacks:
cracked pump heads, mower blades, band saws rusted mid-cut.
The clang of spikes and bolt heads lobbed into a bucket
was a lesson he taught me in milking the wasted land.

—Mark Jay Brewin Jr., "Scrap Iron"

A man pushes a shopping cart full to overflowing with cracked hubcaps and rolls of chain link and empty tins just starting to rust. A pickup already loaded down with eyeless stoves and disgorged radiator coils patrols the slums in search of more castoff appliances. The basement of a new-built suburban house gleams with the stumps of copper pipes shorn off by hacksaw blades, the plumbing stripped out the week after it went in. This is the work of the scrap peddler. Peddlers are gleaners in the industrial economy, reaping on the unprofitable margins. I grew up around them, because my family bought their harvest.

Clark Iron & Metal is, as a family-owned scrapyard, something of an anachronism even in such an out-of-the-way industry as metal recycling. Most yards started out like ours but have since been bought up by corporate chains, many of them vertically integrated with the steel mills. Clark's principal asset is five acres of concrete with a spur line off the CSX railroad. On this plot of wasted land, we operate a variety of heavy machinery for moving scrap around, cutting it up into pieces small enough to melt, and sorting it into grades that approximate the underlying chemistry of the metal. Then, we ship it off by truck or rail to some earthly hell, one of the huge furnaces dotting the Rust Belt that are kept burning night and day to make steel.

At the scrapyard, we did business with about a hundred peddlers a day. They get paid by the pound, different rates for different kinds of metal: short iron, long iron, torching iron, auto cast, shredder feed, stainless steel, painted aluminum siding, irony aluminum, electric motors, sealed units, no. 1 copper, no. 2 copper, yellow brass, red brass, hard brass. The scalemaster's job is to grade the scrap, weigh it, then argue with the peddler about the grade and the weight. It's customary for the peddler to accuse the scalemaster of miserliness, crookedness, or general moral turpitude. That was my job for an hour each day while the regular scalemaster was at lunch. It was the worst hour of my day.

The peddlers supply about half the scrap for our yard. The rest comes from factories: obsolete equipment, as well as the byproducts of the manufacturing process itself (a gleaming heap of a million defective seat belt buckles). Handling a factory's scrap puts you in touch with the whole business in a surprising way. It gets you out on the production floor, where you can see at a glance how hot the engine is running: how close is production to capacity, how well-trained are the workers, what condition is the equipment in? One thing that's striking about the production floor of a modern factory: how dark it is. Robots don't need light to do their work. The floors are barely peopled. A modern assembly line can be tended by one or two human beings, a whole plant operated by a couple dozen.

But just because a modern factory can be operated by a couple dozen workers, doesn't mean that it is. The production floor is practically uninhabited, but the offices are packed. Handling the scrap gets you in here too: talk to Accounting, talk to Environmental, talk to Safety. These are not nice offices, not the Class A space that I occupied during my mercifully brief stint in corporate law. These offices are white-walled, gray-carpeted, drop-ceilinged, and fluorescent-lit. The image of today's white-collar work environment might be the Googleplex, but in large swathes of the information economy, the aesthetic of *Office Space* is alive and well and seedier than ever.

These office workers mostly create reports — spreadsheets, slide decks, compliance checklists — for executives who work in nicer offices in better neighborhoods. In terms of actual job responsibilities, many seem to be dramatically underemployed and to spend most of their working hours on social media. If you ask me, of all the denizens of the modern economy, these avatars of Quiet Desperation are the most to be pitied. At least the scrap peddler — unless his approach to the trade involves theft and must therefore be conducted under cover of night — works in the sunshine and open air.

Except for my hour as scalemaster, I was the equivalent of all those managers and report-generators and salespeople haunting the offices of the plants we serviced. Me and my hyper-competent secretary: we were the central nervous system of the whole operation. We were Accounting, Environmental, and Safety. We were Purchasing and Sales. We were HR, QC, and IT. My office was still white-walled, fluorescent-lit, and drop-ceilinged — gray tile not carpet — but befitting my executive status I had a large window overlooking the scrap piles. I made compliance reports and sent them to the state. I made spreadsheets and sent them to myself. I didn't make slide decks. I still spent a lot of time scrolling social media.

So here I was, on the one hand, a sort of peddler writ large (there's a scalemaster at the mill, too, and they graded my scrap and weighed it, and then I argued with them about the grade and

the weight), and on the other hand, one of these office creatures, pushing paper to little apparent effect, though at least not impeding the steady accumulation of profit that comes from buying cheap and selling dear. My only real job was to make decisions that no one else wanted to make, and I made the big bucks because my name was on the building. I was the middle man between the peddlers and the mills, between my employees and my equipment, and every time goods or services changed hands, a little bit of money stuck to mine.

It was during this time, sitting at my desk at the scrapyard, that I read this passage in Wendell Berry's *The Hidden Wound*:

> *What would be a just wage for a life of carrying off other people's cans and bottles? A million dollars a year would not be enough, because such a job can be performed only by the forfeiture of the effective life of the spirit in this world.*

I put down the book and walked down the hall from my office to the window that overlooked the warehouse. I looked out over forty thousand pounds of crushed and baled aluminum cans, the mortal remains of some quarter million six packs. I reflected that my family was, for the year, roughly one million dollars in the black. Had I made a bad deal?

Our trade in UBC — "used beverage containers" — was the part of the business I was on the most intimate terms with. When I was in high school, my job was to work the can machine. A conveyor belt leads up to a basket on a scale. You and the peddler dump the cans in a hopper at the bottom, ripping and shaking out the trash bags, trying not to get too much of the hot soup of sour beer and sticky soda on your clothes, then you tare the scale, and run the cans up the belt. You pick out any trash off the moving conveyor. There's an air gap at the top to drop any "heavy" cans, the ones that people fill with dirt or steel to try and sell at the aluminum price. You write the weight on a ticket and give it to the peddler for the scalemaster. You use a different color ink every day so they can't change your 1s to 9s. When the basket is full, the cans go to the baler to be crushed and wrapped in wire.

The soda cans were, of course, a reminder of our national love affair with high fructose corn syrup. As an industry, Big Soda owes its existence to an agricultural policy that took millions of small farmers off the land, converted their farms into mechanized monocultures, and created an overproduction of corn so vast that we cannot afford not to waste this bounty by creating products with no nutritional value, lest the whole economic house of cards come tumbling down. Endless acres of super high-density, Roundup Ready, chemically fertilized corn, destined for canning as Coca Cola: wasted land comes in many colors.

The beer cans reflected just how much of our drinking we Americans do at home in front of the television. Of course, we put televisions in our bars too, but this packaging decision is still as good a signifier of our social atomization as any. As a homebrewer, I confess that I think canning (or bottling) is a minor crime against beer. Draft beer tastes better — cask ale better still — and kegging is faster, cheaper, and less wasteful. The only real advantage of canned or bottled beer is that it's easier to stock in supermarkets and drink in private. The world would be better off without it: put pints back in the pub, fill a growler for the picnic.

In this moment of clarity, looking out over

my "life of carrying off other people's cans and bottles," I saw my work as one link in a vast chain of unmitigated failure. At the bottom of the chain, the "permanently unemployable" peddler hauling junk for a few pennies a pound. At the top of the chain, a SoftBank analyst putting in a hundred Juul and DoorDash-fueled hours to make that WeWork deck. In between the two of them, me and the robot minders and the office drones and all the data wranglers conspiring to show the rest of us ads while we trade minion memes. In their own pockets of the spider's web, the Uber drivers and doc reviewers and factory farmers and management consultants. I went looking for a way out.

What I found was centuries of reflection on the question of "good work" — almost all of it forgotten today — stretching from the ancients' division of human life into business and leisure, the active life and the contemplative life, *poiesis* and praxis, to the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church in the modern era. This tradition made sense of all the dysfunction I saw before me and behind me, below me and above me, at my right and at my left. It was a tradition that ran through medieval theories of just price, the social economists of the nineteenth century, the agrarians and distributists of the twentieth, Ruskin and Morris, Chesterton and Belloc, Dorothy Sayers and Dorothy Day, Illich and Arendt, and of course, Mr. Berry of Port Royal, Kentucky. Taking them all together, I arrived at an understanding of why the system was failing all of us — me, the peddlers, the office drones, even the finance brahmins — so completely.

As a starting point, we do not work for the sake of work. Work deserving of the name is always work toward some end. We recognize that work that is done to no purpose is a waste of time and energy. We also know that we are done working when our purpose has been accomplished. In other words, work is a goal-oriented process that terminates when its goal is achieved. Work for work's sake is a contradiction in terms.

Second, we do not work for the sole purpose of consumption — that is, in order to satisfy the needs of bodily life. Only part of our work is for the sake of meeting those needs. For all work to be done for the sake of consumption would render all work ultimately futile, because the needs of bodily life are never finally met and so there would be no end to the process. The pattern of working to eat and eating to work would be completely cyclical, and to reduce all work to this cycle would in turn reduce human life to its bare, animal basis.

Why then, do we work? We work (*ascholia*) in order to gain leisure (*schole*), by which we mean not recreation but the opportunity to exercise our human nature in ways that are not compelled by biological necessity. The two principal uses of leisure are contemplation (*theoria*) and action (*praxis*). Contemplation is the turning of the mind (*nous*) towards the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, which for the Christian is most fully realized in the act of attention to God that is the essence of prayer. Action encompasses all those interpersonal, relational acts — of which speech (*logos*) is the paradigm — by which we know other people as free individuals and make ourselves known in turn.

Unlike work, the activities that belong to leisure — speculative thinking, prayer, participation in public affairs, friendship, and so on — are undertaken for their own sake. In fact, to treat these activities as means rather than as ends is to abuse them: speculative thinking in the service of intellectual vanity ceases to be speculative, friendship turned to personal gain ceases to

be friendship, and so on. These activities are undertaken freely, not subject to economic compulsion; they are the ones we choose when money is no object. They are good not for some other purpose but good in themselves.

It is true that in order to enjoy leisure, we must work — and this for two reasons. First, while we do not work solely in order to consume, we do have to eat. Fortunately (or providentially), nature is so arranged that most people produce more by their work than they need to survive. This surplus provides support for dependents and leisure for the worker. The second reason we must work — and the tradition is united on this point — is that the exercise of both body and mind is essential preparation for the enjoyment of leisure. As Arendt says, "There is no lasting happiness and contentment for human beings outside the prescribed cycle of painful exhaustion and pleasurable regeneration."

The activities of work and leisure are arranged in a natural order. The end, the destination, of the order is noble leisure: the enjoyment of activities that are good in themselves, that require no further justification, that employ what is highest and best in the human person, that are characterized by freedom rather than necessity. Good work provides the worker with sustenance, a surplus to support dependents, and maximum opportunity for noble leisure while preparing the worker to enjoy that leisure properly.

The diseases of work are departures from this natural order, and they are myriad. You can break the pattern at any point, resulting in a different kind of dysfunction each time. The remarkable thing about the modern economy is how it manages to manifest so many of them, all at once, and to such a profound degree. Allow me to illustrate just one such perversity as it played out at the scrapyard.

We previously observed that, under ordinary circumstances, a worker produces more than the worker needs to survive. That's how subsistence farmers manage to have families and make homes and still have time to sing songs and say prayers — in other words, to enjoy a complete life. However, there is a perpetual temptation accompanying this surplus, which is to expropriate someone else's surplus in order to free yourself from the burden of labor. To enslave another is to deprive them of the fruits of their labor beyond what they need to survive, to deny them the leisure that is the natural end of work. Throughout history, slavery has often been effected through violence. Debt, however, has proved just as effective, and wage slavery is achieved by restricting access to the natural abundance of the earth and confiscating the worker's surplus as an entrance fee.

In the scrap business, my whole position hinged on giving back less to people than what they produced for me. Yes, I solved some coordination problems. Someone had to call the mill, call the railroad, make the packing list. But why was my compensation so hugely disproportionate to the amount and difficulty of that work? Because the true basis of my position was not my own work but my ownership of the land and equipment that made others' work possible. In order to convert their own work into money — whether selling scrap or selling labor — they needed what I had, and supposedly, that entitled me to a portion of their surplus. I gained leisure at their expense.

Why go along with this? Why participate in a system where I am daily enriched by your work? For the peddlers, there simply wasn't much choice. If your work is scrapping, you need someone like me to buy your haul. For a lot of them and for a variety of reasons, "get a job" wasn't on the table.

But my employees weren't really better off. They had jobs, but I still paid them less than what they produced and pocketed the difference. That's a basic fact of employment.

One of my biggest enablers was, for lack of a better word, overconsumption. Most of my employees could have lived much more independent lives if they had been willing to make less money and buy less stuff. In this sense, there were two parasites draining them of leisure. I was the big one, but the other one was their own habit of choosing to work more and spend their surplus consuming more rather than enjoying leisure. Of course, my relationship to the peddlers or my employees wasn't uniquely exploitative. Everywhere I looked, I saw more of the same, and dozens more failure modes, spreading out in every direction.

Even as I realized the evils of my own position, I found it difficult to imagine an escape. In a letter to a pacifist, Niebuhr wrote, "Your problem is that you want to live in the world without sinning." That captured my feelings about the modern world of work. Where was I going to go that would be any better, any purer than where I was? Everywhere I turned, I saw the same or worse. On the one hand, I remain sympathetic to Chesterton who vowed to "set fire to all modern civilization." But I admit that I'm not hopeful for a dramatic revolution in our state of affairs.

A couple years ago, I found myself removed from the scrap business not entirely by choice. I believe the work I do now is good, though the money that pays for it is implicated in the same broken system as the business I've left behind. I try in small ways to conform my life to the natural order of work and leisure, alongside the other natural orders that lead to human flourishing. There's no heroism in this, no asceticism; I'm no one's moral exemplar.

Still, I do a lot more labor than I used to. I tend a garden. I cook. I brew beer. I mow my own grass and rake my own leaves and shovel my own snow. I chop my own firewood. My wife and I live in an old house, and we're slowly uncovering its good bones, doing the work ourselves. Except for the cooking, I'm not very good at it. It's inefficient. But in part because I do more labor myself, I don't need to work longer hours. I don't have to take whatever job pays best. As a consumer, I'm participating less in the employment-based economy. That means that some workers somewhere have some infinitesimal amount more surplus and more potential leisure than they otherwise would. It might be practically nothing, but that's still something. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*.

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Flawed Myths.

Lyz Lenz. *Belabored: A Vindication of the Rights of Pregnant Women.* New York: Bold Type Books, 2020. 240 pp, $26.00.

KATELYN WALLS SHELTON

At church, I was taught that if a woman denied sex to her husband, he would find sex elsewhere. At church, I was taught that a man's sexual desire was so great, it was a need – not a want. At church, I was taught that men were biologically different from women; they craved sex, while women simply endured it. As I did with most sermons, I internalized this message.

I began to think that if my one-day husband cheated on me, it would be my fault – for not being available enough, for not being skinny enough, for not being pretty enough. I was terrified of pregnancy and childbirth, not for the normal reasons, but because these are times that couples often need to practice abstinence for medical or physiological reasons. When I thought about the prospect of marriage, I was plagued with images of my husband leaving me just as I was preparing to give birth to his child. And for the longest time, I thought marriage was something that I would never be able to do—thank God (literally) for counseling and better teaching.

Critics of conservative evangelicalism highlight questionable trends in its teachings on biological sex and sexuality, which tend to be rooted in extra-biblical, overwrought gender roles and books

on "kissing dating goodbye" rather than a robust theology of our bodies. While the desire for a biblical account of sexuality is right, purity culture and untethered forms of complementarianism went a bridge too far. They sold a false bill of goods to their adherents: "follow these rules, and you'll have a long and successful marriage and family." "Follow these rules, and you'll be happy."

Like me, Lyz Lenz was one of many Christian women (and men) who were led to believe this lie. And her book, *Belabored: A Vindication of the Rights of Pregnant Women*, is an attempt to rewrite the narrative of what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a mother, what it means to be embodied. Part social-anthropological history, part memoir, *Belabored* is an irreverent, hilarious, devastating and pithy window into Lenz's lack of fulfillment in the roles of wife and mother, and her subsequent search for meaning in the wake of a failed marriage.

Throughout, her prose is punctuated with colorful (read: foul) language. She dedicates the book to her children, who "ripped up my vulva on their way into this world," and explains childbirth as her lower half feeling like "a Vegas hotel room after it had been trashed by a B-list rock band." But for all the gusto with which *Belabored* dispells the lies we tell about sex, marriage, and ourselves, Lenz's new myths are just as incomplete as the old ones.

Lenz's subtitle reveals something of her inspiration. *Belabored* is an homage to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a trailblazing work of feminism published in 1792. Where Wollstonecraft was responding to a certain French politician's claim that woman's chief end was to be the companion of man and romance the primary goal of her life, Lenz's response is to her own context of Christian purity culture, which says woman's chief end is to be a virgin until married; a submissive wife, sexually available to her husband at all times and in all manner; and a sacrificial mother that forgoes all other work or ambition to raise her children.

Lenz's book is, in her own words, "an attempt to midrash the experience of motherhood". As her description implies, the book is surprisingly religious, and Lenz employs biblical language throughout: "Back at his mother's house, in the quiet of the basement room, where we were stashed away, chaos and darkness met water. Sex, I mean sex. And we created a daughter". She describes the "moment of generative and formless existence" at conception, claiming that we need to project a new cultural narrative on what it means to be a woman no matter how she decides to "use her uterus".

The structure of her story is born in four parts: "first trimester," "second trimester," "third trimester," "fourth trimester." Each part is subdivided into topics fitting to the trimester; virginity and conception in the first, ice diapers and mom bod in the last. And in each, Lenz attempts to shock the reader with her own story before critiquing the society – and often the church – that, according to Lenz, landed us in this forsaken situation in the first place.

While some of Lenz's arguments are painted in broad strokes, making it difficult to infer exactly who or what she's arguing against, her primary concern is the way society conceives of and treats

women, particularly mothers. Most concretely, Lenz critiques the deficiency of medical research into pregnancy and maternal care, rising rates of maternal mortality, and lack of paid family leave and other social supports, such as childcare. More abstractly, Lenz criticizes society's obsession with female virginity, a woman's lack of autonomy due to the "stranglehold of patriarchal power on our bodies", the "destructive narrative of purity", restrictions on eating during pregnancy, and unattainable beauty standards pre- and post-pregnancy.

Lenz attributes many of these problems to evangelical teaching on purity and sexuality. "Purity culture" is a common whipping boy for evangelicals and exvangelicals alike, but contrary to popular belief, many of the views endorsed by purity culture don't align well with traditional Christian ideas about sexuality. "Don't have sex before marriage, but then everything is fair game" was not the historic church's teaching on sex, but it was what I (and apparently Lenz) grew up hearing in the pews. This, despite the fact that the church historically taught that sex was to be approached with chastity, that hardest-of-all virtues to cultivate, the one Saint Augustine prayed for – "but not yet."

Part of the problem with purity culture was its intemperance, its emphasis on abstinence until total freedom, rather than the cultivation of chastity. Chastity is mistakenly understood to mean abstinence from sex only, and thus a virtue to be dispensed with once one is married. Don't get me wrong: abstinence before marriage and sex only within the bounds of marriage are clearly biblical goods – but a sexual free-for-all after saying "I do" is not. Chastity requires more.

One of the best descriptions of chastity I've heard is refraining from "selfish sex" – sex that is disconnected from sex's dual purpose (unity between the spouses and the procreation of children), or disconnected from the needs or desires of one's spouse. Chastity historically understood is much more in this vein – it's the temperance of the body before, during, and after marriage – as a virgin, a married person, and a widow or widower. It is, according to John Calvin, "purity of mind, combined with purity of body." Thomas Aquinas remarks that "conjugal chastity" – that is, chastity within marriage – "abstains from unlawful pleasures," which assumes there are pleasures that are off-limits to the marriage bed. It is for this reason that the church has historically condemned the use of contraception: sexual pleasures that split the unitive and procreative purposes of sex within marriage hinder the cultivation of temperance or chastity.

This idea that sex requires more than just consent (or a marriage license, for that matter) crops up in another recent critique of sex proffered by Christine Emba in her new book, *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation*. Emba suspects that more sex rarely means enjoyable sex, and asks what it would mean for sex to be good – not just pleasurable, but objectively good. Her working answer relies upon Thomas Aquinas's idea of "willing the good of the other" as a potential alternative for ethical sex, an alternative which sounds much like the virtue of chastity.

Lenz asks different questions than Emba; she's not just ill-contented with sex, but with marriage and motherhood and being a woman. One reads the frustration in the author's voice as a

frustration with her own life – as a child raised in toxic elements of Christian purity culture, a woman married to an unforgiving Christian man, and a mother expected to give up every other aspect of her selfhood. Readers learn in the acknowledgements that Lenz's marriage finally collapsed before the book's completion – and with the death of her marriage, the death of a Christian way of thinking about her life: "This is not the story I want to tell of my life. It's not the truth of who I am. I want a different myth."

The problem is that Lenz's new myth is just as flawed as the first. Where the first myth idolized marriage and motherhood, the new myth idolizes autonomy and self-actualization. But both of these myths focus chiefly on power and who holds it (there's an entire chapter to prove it). As a result, Lenz's self-professed desire is to be "fully free of everything," "every cultural pull, every patriarchal impulse." That desire, though, is exactly that: a myth. Autonomy is not freedom. Ridding ourselves of all entanglements and responsibilities does not make us free. Stripping ourselves of all our titles – wife, mother, sister, daughter – does not enable us to divine our "true selves." Autonomy only makes us more isolated, alone. Emba knows this, and though they ask different questions I think Emba has the better answer: when seeking for freedom at all costs, "the outcome is a world in which… people are both liberated *and* miserable." I suspect Lenz knows this, too.

In one of the most poignant stories of the book, Lenz recounts a trip she took alone. She missed her husband. She missed her kids. She didn't know how to live "when someone wasn't demanding something of my flesh." But it's precisely these demands, these relationships to other human beings, that make us who we are. One title does not strip us of another. Motherhood makes us no less a friend, a lover, or a fine writer, as Lenz is. True selfhood is not an enlightenment one reaches once free of all entanglements (and thus, reality). True selfhood *is* our relationships, our covenants with other human beings, our context on this earth, our language, our customs, and yes, our religion. As Lenz herself speaks of pregnancy – we are symbiotic beings, both in utero and out. Christianity tells a better myth than the one Lenz was taught. Lenz asks unironically for a "story in which food is not the danger but the salvation," and the Christian myth, the true myth, tells of one: the Eucharistic body and blood of Christ. Christianity tells of a day when our imperfect bodies will be resurrected, alongside creation, to new and perfect life. It tells that sex and marriage are good, but not ultimate goods. It tells men and women that abstinence and chastity and self-restraint are not only possible, even in marriage, but required of those who love their spouses and love God. Above all, it tells of grace – overwhelming, indescribable, undeserved, overflowing grace. Evangelicalism could stand to rediscover this myth. I hope Lyz Lenz does too.

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The Great Unmooring

RICHARD SENNETT. *THE CORROSION OF CHARACTER: THE PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES OF WORK IN THE NEW CAPITALISM*. NEW YORK: WW NORTON, 2000. 176PP, $15.99.

ANNE HELEN PETERSEN AND CHARLIE WARZEL. *OUT OF OFFICE: THE BIG PROBLEM AND BIGGER PROMISE OF WORKING FROM HOME*. NEW YORK: KNOPF PUBLISHING GROUP, 2021. 272PP, $27.

CHRIS KRYCHO

Over the past two years, COVID-19 necessitated a mass adoption of remote work for many — and surfaced deep disagreements between employers and employees about what they owe each other. For all their recent heat, though, these debates are hardly new to American life. Nearly 25 years ago, Richard Sennett published *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, a screed against "flexible work." Sennett's story goes like this:

For a few decades in the mid-20th century, American businesses modeled a very specific ideal. Companies provided lifelong stability in exchange for lifelong loyalty; that loyalty was in turn the foundation of good character. Sustained hard work over time brought predictable rewards. In the late 20th century, though, American companies abandoned this model. Spurred on by competition from Asian and European companies who were eating their lunches, they embraced "flexibility" as their ideal. The result was the steady dismantling of a decades-old set of norms which had structured many Americans' lives. Benefits, pensions, and the promise of stable careers evaporated, and in their place companies offered new goods: *flexibility, specialization, autonomy*, and even *teamwork*. All of these Sennett damned without remainder: they were corporate-speak for giving workers the short end of the stick and they fundamentally undermined the formation of character, healthy families, and healthy communities.

Sennett put his finger on some real problems — highlighted over and over again in the years since by many other commentators — but *The Corrosion of Character* is intellectually vacuous. First, he never bothers to make an actual argument for why *this* virtue trumps *that one*, and he contradicts himself often: why are autonomy, responsibility, and teamwork bad for office workers, but a terrible loss when taken from bakers? Second, he freely admits that the narratives he shares were cobbled together from a variety of sources, leaving him able to tell whatever story was most convenient to him. Even so, the barest poking at his narratives raises difficult questions. Summing up his (cobbled together?) story of a bartender-turned-adwoman-returned-bartender, Sennett simply takes a woman's word that the young women she had worked with were "patronizing." On the evidence of Sennett's own telling, though, they sound earnestly supportive and kind.

The Corrosion of Character is also morally bankrupt. Sennett excuses the stifling bureaucracy, totalizing ideology, and racism and sexism of the mid-20th-century company — because at least they offered steady jobs, union memberships, and pensions. People could build virtuous lives and model virtue for their children… by remaining in near or actual poverty: after all, it was a *stable* kind of poverty. Worse, in the climax of the book, Sennett suggests that workers were better off as anti-black racists who "had clear pictures, whether true or false, of their friends and enemies" (146) than their successors in a bakery run by a black man and with time allocated to community service. Why? Because the bakery now failed to provide stability or identity — even through wicked lies.

We must not equivocate on this. We may mourn the loss of skill and ownership that came with the introduction of automated technologies while recognizing that those technologies were safer, were less ruinous of people's bodies, and sometimes produced better results. We should be moved to forge a path which provides safety and reliability *and* ownership, autonomy, and solidarity. But we must never excuse past wickedness because it came bundled with other things we value.

Sennett does make one important point in the midst of all that nonsense, though. Picking up on themes from Paul Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another*, Sennett asserts that "'Who needs me?' is a question of character which suffers a radical challenge in modern capitalism" (146) — and that it "has no immediate answer" (147). This question — "Who needs me?" — is at the core of what has made not only work but *all* of society feel so empty to so many for so long.

In March 2020, as COVID hit in earnest across the United States and Europe, everyone who *could* work remotely suddenly *had* to work remotely. Leaders in many companies, including the tech companies you might have expected to be leading the way, responded poorly. Some spoke of being out of the office as if it were a worse stressor than living in a once-a-century pandemic. Many companies initially planned to demand all employees return to the office after the end of the pandemic, even when their employees had flourished in a remote environment.

Some of these leaders were clearly uncomfortable with a shift away from the environment they had come up in, and which they worked best in.

The rapid adoption of surveillance technologies suggests that many were also unwilling or unable to manage results instead of by tracking "butts in seats." More charitably, though, many leaders were responding to a sad reality. The office is the last place many people experience a sense of shared purpose, and therefore find their communities and identities. Of course people isolated at home during the pandemic missed the only community they had. Of course getting rid of the office felt like a threat.

Charlie Warzel and Anne Helen Petersen's *Out of Office: The Big Problem and Bigger Promise of Working from Home* was written during the pandemic, in response to the mass shift to remote work. Warzel and Petersen echo Sennett on the ways that "flexibility" has often been code for asking people to do more work with less support and without more pay. (Thankfully, they do not echo his tendency to excuse the inexcusable.) But they also argue that a mass adoption of remote work offers an opportunity to rethink the relationship between workers and employers, and indeed between workers and work. No such redefinition will happen automatically, though; it will require concerted effort. So far so good. Unfortunately, both their idea of what work ought to be and how we ought to achieve that ideal are woefully insufficient.

First, for Petersen and Warzel, work itself is — always — something to be liberated from. Sennett thought even drudgery could at least build character. Warzel and Petersen have no such hopes. Theirs is not a deeply considered view of work, though. On the one hand, they clearly love their own jobs, and they recognize that many other people do, too. They even go so far as to point out the good things about office jobs lost when going remote. On the other hand, they consistently write of both policy changes and technological interventions as means of working less, indeed of being saved from work.

In an extended discussion of email and related productivity tools, for example, they write: "We created productivity tools to manage a productivity tool and found ourselves deeper and deeper in a hole, desperate for the solution that promises to finally allow us to dig ourselves out" (148) — a pithy description of what Jacques Ellul termed "technique." A few pages later, though, they enthuse about programs with guardrails built in to prevent tech overload and gush about the possibilities of virtual reality platforms, apparently unaware of the contradiction.

Most muddled of all is their handling of the surveillance tech many companies have forced on their newly remote workers: screen tracking, calendar monitoring, scheduled bathroom break stops, and more. Warzel and Petersen spend a half dozen pages on the dangers of these surveillance technologies. Unfortunately, this comes mere pages after their glowing description of tools built for managers to help their employees… by monitoring their work habits. Warzel and Petersen even admit these could be weaponized by malicious managers, and point out that employees, not managers, disproportionately bear the costs of surveillance. Like the tech companies behind these tools, though, they fail to reckon with how the normalization of surveillance technology will empower abusive companies and even abusive individuals within otherwise-healthy companies far more than it will ever help employees.

Sennett recognized how good work can form peoples' characters, but would not grant work as also satisfying and provides people opportunities for real growth. For Warzel and Petersen, work is a (sometimes enjoyable) necessary evil which at best merely gets in the way of the rest of life. Neither book admits the classically Christian alternative: that work is both a creational good and the site of many of our greatest frustrations. For Protestants especially, work is a creative good, a calling for all of us, which should escape the "bounds" of the office, should be integrated with the rest of our lives, and can indeed be part of producing character. And yet it *is* toilsome, apt to be a site of abuse and control, a jealous god which consumes all other goods when given free reign.

Nor does either book ever question the division of work from the rest of life. Sennett takes issue with the old 9-to-5 only insofar as it was not fully socialized and unionized. Much of the familial destabilization he decries is just the long-term fruit of mass industrialization, though. Perhaps enduring the drudgery of a 9-to-5 *does* build the virtue of patient endurance; but it does so at the cost of the ordinary life together as a family which characterized pre-industrial economies of all varieties.

Warzel and Petersen do a little better. They recognize that the flexibility afforded by remote work might let us shape our days for the pursuit of better things than merely more "productivity." But if work is always just an impediment to the rest of life, the best we can do is enforce strong boundaries on work. Tellingly, children rarely appear in the book. (Hiking and skiing come up more often!) Their one extended discussion of families focuses on government-provided childcare. The goal is to enable parents to be unencumbered by children in the industrial economy rather than to reconfigure the economy to put families first.

Pre-industrial economies were a mixed bag. They inculcated virtues and afforded goods missing in the 9-to-5 world. They also had their own, very significant, problems: not least that they often ran on various forms of slavery and were subject — to the point of starvation — to the vagaries of weather and clime. Is there a path forward which gives us some of those goods back while keeping the genuine gains we have made through industrialization? Warzel and Petersen are right to suggest that the shift to remote might give us a chance to answer that with a *yes*, even if their own proposals are insufficient to the task of reforming, still less of renewing, our work culture more broadly.

One way to understand both of these books is to take them both as reactions to the profound sense of being *unmoored* — of isolation and instability — that seems endemic to late modernity.

Sennett and Warzel and Petersen alike lament that unions fell out of favor in the 1980s. Sennett thinks flexibility, teamwork, and autonomy undercut character *because* they undercut clear social structures. Warzel and Petersen are enamored of terrible technologies because they claim to replicate some of what people miss about the office: presence, community, and respect for boundaries enforced by physicality. Sennett observes people struggling without an answer to the question "Who needs me?" Warzel and Petersen describe communal activities they hope will fill the time opened by remote work

specifically and flexible work generally. Implicit in both books is a gnawing hunger for some source — any source — of community and personal meaning.

The opportunities for the church here may be obvious, but worth stating all the same. First, the church should also encourage more home- and family- and community-friendly work. Churches should support people trying to create home economies. Deacons should know the companies in their towns and cities well so they can help people find jobs that will be good — and they should know wise lawyers who can defend people when their jobs go bad. Churches can foster garden co-ops and skyscraper ecologies. Above all, they can provide a shared mission and identity.

Second, churches can help people to think rightly about work: that it is part of what we are made for, not something to be liberated from, but also a terrible master; that surveillance cultures are wicked and that defrauding one's employer is also wicked; that the technocratic habit of applying technology to every perceived problem undermines human dignity and only creates more problems to be "solved" (inevitably, of course, by yet more technology). Thoughtful Christians should take the lead in envisioning post-industrial economies which see the home as the foundation on which all of society rests. We can dream of everyone having the opportunity to do good work *and* the flexibility to team up on parenting and housework and errand-running and all the ordinaries of daily life. Our inability to realize those dreams in full does not absolve us of the responsibility to work for them, for all our neighbors' good.

For decades, work has been the one place in America where people have found purpose and community. It has always been an empty promise, though. Work can be the good it is meant to be only if the church is what it ought to be: a family formed around a shared new identity, with an all-consuming purpose in the worship of God.

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Unions Are Dead, Long Live Unions

HOW UNIONS CAN SAVE US FROM ATOMIZATION

COLIN REDEMER

Oren Cass's book *The Once and Future Worker* is among the most important in living memory on the subject of labor from the conservative perspective. He instinctively gets that there is a pre-economic political relationship in which all economic activity takes place. Principally this means that whenever we meet in the marketplace, before any exchange takes place, the question of "justice" precedes the exchange.This is because we are rational and political animals and thus don't meet one another in exchange the way we might a farm animal or an inert bit of metal.

But the political context in which we meet changes. For one thing it always exists in a relationship to the political activity of those who came before us. Our context is not a prehistoric "state of nature." Neither the Hobbsian war of all against all nor the Rousseauian primitive idyll. Our nature is as rational political animals, but it is also bound in a particular time and place. As Americans, living and writing in 2022, we must address the problems we currently face.

Cass claims something is off in America. And the root of it is a political determination which perhaps fit American's needs a hundred years ago but doesn't fit them now. In Cass' telling, on the one hand, the problems encompass various federal regulations governing employment from Social Security and Medicare to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. But on the other hand, it is also the National Labor Relations Act, the 1935 law which governs nearly all labor unions in the United States.

In place of these sweeping laws he longs for a subsidiarity-oriented polity where problems are faced by negotiations on the shop floor between employer and employee rather than by distant, or antiquated, federal diktat. A noble dream. Since "unions" are both a legally frozen term (governed by the NLRA) and a politically fraught one (many voters have complicated feelings about them) his proposed solution is "co-ops." Switching to "co-op" language is a useful rhetorical move given conservative opposition to "unions" but we should speak plainly to one another: his envisioned co-op is a union. Cass wants unions, just not *these* unions.

And that's understandable. The current crop of unions, as he notes and as is well known, are a wholly owned political unit of the Democratic Party. They are a mirror image of the pro-life movement; they vote and donate only one way. And in just the same way that the pro-life movement is betrayed by the politicians whom they get into office so too the with the unions and the Democrats. It is telling that Joe Biden, ostensibly the most pro-union president in modern memory, has barely even attempted to champion the "Protecting the Right to Organize" Act, which would be the most significant piece of legislation for American labor since 1935. For better or worse, the PRO act would in fact change the political background in which our economic relations take place – but don't hold your breath on the Democrats passing it. So Cass is right again – American unions are too politicized, too focused on things unrelated to the material conditions of their workers, and habitually betrayed by their political "allies." But he also claims they are too antagonistic, and here I take issue.

Cass's theory is that if federal labor law is burdensome, current unions are bad (and so far so conservative) then the solution moving forward is for unions to lay down their arms and agree to negotiate in a non-adversarial way. He cites northern European models for this. He does not, however, note that in many of those

countries unionized workers get mandatory seats at the board of directors. Such rules indeed remove some of the antagonism from the lower level negotiations but it does so by moving much of that antagonism up to the board level or directly into the political sphere. Further, it is not clear that American corporations are lining up to offer their workers such a role in corporate governance – Cass doesn't advocate for it either.

Cass offers a dream of asking labor to come to a non-adversarial negotiating table without any leverage… but my father taught me never to bring a knife to a gunfight. Part of politics is the recognition that it can indeed be adversarial, and supporting a worker who has been unjustly, and in some cases illegally, fired *should* stir up a sense of righteous indignation. Man is sinful and it is often the case that managers harbor petty grievances against workers. Normal managerial sadism is a thing, as is laziness and incompetence in employees. So too unions can steward their power poorly and make mountains out of molehills. But in this context the organization of a workforce into a unit which can elect champions to advocate for itself became law for a reason. Simply repealing the Wagner Act and gutting labor laws in the US, will do nothing for labor. Indeed, it could very well return us to the much more antagonistic blood-drenched struggle between working and ownership classes which got us into the situation we are in to start with.

I admire Cass' work but want to suggest that our problem is not fundamentally over-regulation (though that is a problem) nor is it capital's clever system of international arbitrage in the labor, materials, and tax-services markets (though this too is quite bad). Our problem is atomization. Can anything stand in the face of the ever fragmenting force of modern economic and technological changes? If California is any example the answer is a depressing but resounding: no. When gig workers at Uber and Doordash tried to appeal to standing labor law (that vaunted political context bequeathed to us by our ancestors) in order to get their work recognized as that of an "employee" the tech giants (and most Sacramento technocrats) banded together to utterly crush working citizens and pass Prop 22, developing a carve out which guarantees that the workers stay atomized. "Take what your betters decide to give you and get back to work."

Without strong organizations, communication channels, trust networks, etc, we are heading into a future far darker than our present. I do not think "co-ops" will work. Management won't generally accept it – why should they? – and employees, squeezed for productivity and fragmented and transitory as they are, aren't being trained in the virtues needed to make them work. Perhaps a rejuvenated American Church could help generate those virtues in another generation. Such a generation, however, would not need co-ops as they would find the tools needed already exist – they would simply

re-found the union movement. Legal tweeks may be needed (indeed they are, at the least unions should be required to set up separate PACs to engage in political campaigns) but many fundamental principles are already there, including recognition that employers have a certain power, but so do employees.

Unions deal in politics on the ground floor and politics is the process of deliberation. Deliberation does not happen via Vulcan mind meld. We deliberate under deadlines with credible consequences should we deliberate poorly, in an untimely fashion, or with reckless disregard for our interlocutors. In the face of profound atomization unions offer opportunities for tangible, and toothsome, solidarity.

Christians and unionists have more in common than either side likely realizes. For example the incredible pessimism of the current moment relative to our respective concerns. In "Fortress Unionism," an essay cited by Cass, Rich Yeselson outlines the many woes of the modern union movement in prose reminiscent of an evangelical *Christianity Today* reporter discussing the rise of the 'nones' and the emptying of pews. Both fear the techno-dystopian future and what it might mean for their constituents. Yeselson's "Fortress Unionism" strategy as applied to the church is shockingly similar to Rod Dreher's *Benedict Option*. Focus on strengthening what remains so that it can remain, and wait (or pray) for revival. Strengthening what remains will be needed in the face of what is coming. I am grateful for Cass's work and hope for a day when unionism is looked at fondly by both American conservatives and the American Church.

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About Mere Orthodoxy

We are a small group of Christians who since 2005 have been defending word count and nuance on the internet while working out what our faith looks like in public.

Whether it is arts, movies, literature, politics, sexuality, or any other crevice of the human experience, we believe that the Gospel has something to say about it and that "something" really can be good news.

We take our cues from C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton, two of the most thoughtful, perceptive Christians of the twentieth century. One of them wrote Mere Christianity and the other wrote Orthodoxy, and we like those books so much we stapled their names together and took it as our own.

Their thoughtfulness wasn't abstract: it was rooted in the challenges and struggles that England was facing in their time, and their mission was to demonstrate how a classically minded, creedally centered orthodox Christianity was an attractive and persuasive alternative to the ideologies of their day.

And they did their work with words, with essays, poems, and stories.

Here's what we hope you will discover in our writing:

We are scripturally rooted and creedally informed. We know that it's not enough to simply say the Apostle's Creed and that the further we get from it, the more we'll disagree on the particulars of how Christianity should play out in public. But we also think that getting to the Apostle's Creed is a pretty good start for most Christians in our era, so that's where we'll put our baseline.

We're cheerfully contrarian when we have to be. We disagree with each other, and probably with you too (at least on something, right?). We think that's part of what makes life and writing interesting. So we'll make arguments, but hopefully in a way that is generous and kind.

We're eclectic. We could write about anything. Chasing our interests is the only thing that keeps us interesting, and being interesting is the one rule we have. Other publications may have a "niche," and Google loves them for it. Our niche is the world and where our reflections take us in it. And we kind of like it that way (and hope you will too).

We're publicly engaged. We're after the meaning and significance of things, the substance. Which means that we are after matters of public concern. And our hope is that you'll think more carefully, more deeply, and hopefully more Christianly about our world and your place in it after reading us.

THE APOSTLE'S CREED

We believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

We believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Amen.

MERE
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