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Christians in This World:
Pilgrims or Settlers?[1]

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In the last forty years or so a significant shift has been taking place in the Christian Reformed community's vision of how Christians should live. Specifically, this change centers on how Christians ought to consider and engage "the world."[2] In this article, I will first give evidence that a shift has taken place and try to identify the key features and values of the alternate visions. Then, I will evaluate this change and make a plea for recovering some features of the old vision.[3]

The Old Vision

Forty years ago Billy Graham brought his crusade to Chicago and I, 14 years old, joined the crusade choir. One of the songs we sang almost every night went like this:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face,
and the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.

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[1]This essay incorporates some of the language and ideas of my convocation address at Calvin Theological Seminary in 2003, an address that was subsequently published in various places.

[2]This term *world* (kosmos) is used in a number of senses in Scripture: some negatively as in 1 John 2:15, "If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him," and others positively as in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world." These seemingly inconsistent assertions make it clear that it is no simple matter to disentangle the attitude that a Christian should have toward the world. It may not even be possible to give a truthful answer at that level of generality. Perhaps the attitude a Christian should have to the world will vary depending on the state of the world in which he lives. I will, nevertheless, try to argue in this article for some features that belong in a proper Christian perspective or attitude toward the world.

[3]Of immediate interest here is the church as organism, that is, as individuals and groups of individuals. The proper relationship of the church as institute to her surrounding culture is a distinct question, although not unrelated to the present topic. For more on how the church as an institution should relate to the culture, see my article, "The Mission of the Local Church," *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, no. 2 (November 1997): 344–67 and my article, "The Church and Social Justice" *Calvin Theological Journal* 34, no. 1 (April 1999): 198–202.

At the time, I rather enjoyed singing this song, and wondered why this song was not in the blue *Psalter Hymnal.*[4] The music is marginal, to be sure, and the text is curious: As we look upon Jesus, are the things of earth supposed to grow strangely dim?

Another hymn that we sang regularly in my younger days was #395 in the red *Psalter Hymnal,*[5] "I Am a Stranger Here."

I am a stranger here, within a foreign land.
My home is far away upon a golden strand.
Ambassador to thee, from realms beyond the sea,
I'm here on business for my king.[6]

The song invites more questions: Are we really strangers here? Did not God design and create this world for us?

Some hymns were included in the 1987 gray edition of the *Psalter Hymnal,*[7] the gray one, but they were altered or reformed. One hymn in the gray Psalter Hymnal (#419) has a text written by the Anglican pastor George Croly. There the text is: "Spirit of God, who dwells within my heart, wean it from sin, through all its pulses move." That is not exactly what Rev. Croly wrote back in 1867. He wrote: "Spirit of God, who dwells within my heart, wean it from *earth.*" This is what is printed in the earlier editions of the *Psalter Hymnal.* Rev. Croly was not expressing in his text a concern for sin in general. Rev. Croly was praying in particular for grace that would help him be weaned from attachments to this world. In Reformed churches today, this is rarely sung or spoken. After all, because our world belongs to God, should not we feel at home here?

Today when someone makes his or her public profession of faith in the Christian Reformed Church, the more recent approved form offers up this question, among others:

"Do you promise to do all you can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to strengthen your love and commitment to Christ by sharing faithfully in the life of the church, honoring and submitting to it authority; and do you join with the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere?"[8] When I made profession of faith in 1967, I was asked different questions, including, "Do you declare that you love the Lord, and that you desire to serve him according to his Word, to forsake the world, to put to death your old

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[4]*Psalter Hymnal,* Grand Rapids: Publication Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1959.

[5]*Psalter Hymnal,* Grand Rapids: Publication Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1934.

[6]E. T Cassel, "The King's Business" (Carol Stream, Ill.: Hope Publishing, 1930).

[7]Psalter Hymnal, Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Publications, 1987.

[8]Ibid., 964.

nature, and to lead a godly life?[9] Along with other things, I promised "to forsake the world." The synodically approved form for the baptism of adults in the 1967 blue *Psalter Hymnal* had an even more pointed question: "Do you firmly resolve always to lead a Christian life, to forsake the world and its evil lusts, as is becoming to the members of Christ and of His Church, and to submit cheerfully to all Christian admonitions?"[10]

All these texts and changes in texts show that in Christian Reformed Christianity there used to be a repeated concern about our relationship with the world. The concern was that Christians would become too attached to it and begin to think of it as their true home. The name of this sin was *worldliness.* This concern was addressed in songs we sang in worship services and in Sunday School.[11] In the latter, we sang about our "mansion just over the hill top in that sweet land where we'll never grow old." We were to keep our hopes trained for what lies "beyond the sunset," for "Beulah land." Some remnants of such ideas still linger in the gray *Psalter Hymnal* in hymns such as "Jerusalem the Golden," but many of the song texts that refer to heaven as some distant, other place, have been eliminated or altered.[12] For example, the hymn "Dwell in Me, O Blessed Spirit" in the blue *Psalter Hymnal* has the refrain, "Dwell in me, O blessed Spirit, gracious Teacher, Friend Divine! *For the home of bliss that waits me,* O prepare this heart of mine." In the gray *Psalter Hymnal,* the italicized words are replaced with, "*For the kingdom work that calls me.*" The problem with the original text cannot be that the words did not express a truth. We must look forward to that place that Jesus is preparing for us. The reason for his telling us this was to give us peace about our ultimate future. The redaction of the song text must have been seen as an important improvement. If you think of heaven as a future home of bliss, perhaps it would be easier for you to be less concerned about this world.

This older vision, moreover, does not simply relativize the concerns of this world, it understands them as a real spiritual threat. This can be seen in a hymn in the red Psalter Hymnal that is not in the gray one: "Am I a Soldier of the Cross?"[13] The third stanza includes three simple questions: "Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood? Is this vile world a friend to grace, to help me on to God?" The questions express the worry that Christians may have become so comfortable in this world that they no

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[9]*Psalter Hymnal,* 1959, 88.

[10]Ibid. 91.

[11]While the song books used in Sunday school were neither standardized throughout the denomination nor synodically approved, local consistories did approve their purchase.

[12]A more thorough comparison of the changes to the text of hymns for the 1987 edition of the Psalter Hymnal would quickly make apparent the change in the vision of the Christian life.

[13]Isaac Watts, "Am I a Soldier of the Cross?" (1724).

longer experience life as a spiritual struggle. They assume that Christians should expect a struggle because this vile world challenges Christians with foes—with floods of opposition. This assumption is made explicit in stanza four: "Since I must fight if I would reign, increase my courage Lord; I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, supported by Thy word." Failing to fight in this vile world is evidence that one is not a soldier of the cross. It means that one has become like the world, that is, worldly.

Now it is only fair to consider this vision for what it was. This older Reformed vision was not a radical vision requiring separation from the world or culture. Specifically, it did not call on Christians to forsake this world by setting up parallel communities with a distinctive culture. The concern was to forsake the world's corrupt values and illicit pleasures, not physically abandon life in the broader community. Christian Reformed persons who held to the old vision were inextricably tied to the public economy. They held jobs, working for others who may or may not themselves be Christians or were self-employed with customers, patients, or clients whose lack of membership in the covenant of grace was not a disqualifier. They voted in elections, served on juries, and joined the military. They did not suggest that it was inappropriate for Christians to run for public office. They worked in and went to established hospitals. They also believed that mission work was very important and saw it as an obvious reason to risk entering a spiritually hostile environment. Going into pastoral ministry or becoming a missionary was understood to be a very high and important calling.

So what did forsaking the world really come to? To be sure, many covenant children were both protected and trained in Christian day schools,[14] but Christian adults lived and worked in the world. Clearly it did not result in a call to completely abandon contact or engagement with the surrounding culture. The idea was that this world is not the Christian's home but a time of spiritual struggle and, by God's power, some measure of sanctification until the day God calls one to his or her eternal home. What seemed most apparent was the transient nature of our earthly lives, and what made its many trials tolerable was the hope of a glorious future in a home that was far away. People with this vision saw this earthly life as the valley of the shadow of death, and they anticipated dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. This house is already being prepared by Jesus Christ for his beloved, and, by God's grace, they would eventually arrive there. They saw themselves as pilgrims in a world frequently hostile to holy living and on their way to a better place often referred to it as the Christian's home. The hope was a hope of glory, and sickness and the dissipations of aging did not diminish it. "This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through, if heaven's not

[14]Children and the elderly were both given some additional protection from the world, the former with Calvinist Cadets and Calvinettes (GEMS), and the latter with Holland Home and similar organizations.

my home, then Lord what would I do?" The idea of forsaking the world was really a call to live different lives—ones that avoided acquiring the values and attitudes promoted in a very secular culture. Reformed Christians used to think of the world as a dangerous place full of enticing temptations that can easily lead one away from God and the things of God. Christian believers even forty years ago were encouraged in sermons, hymns, and liturgies, to avoid entanglements in this world so as to live godly lives, always looking forward to the eternal city whose architect and builder is God.

This older vision of the Christian life, however, has the possibility of contributing to a problem. Most Christian Reformed communities forty years ago were relatively small, populated with first or second generation immigrants. For many of these folks, economic survival was a priority and political and social engagement with the surrounding culture was of little interest. Viewing the Christian life as a pilgrimage served to reinforce a Christian lack of interest in those social evils that perpetuate suffering and oppression. Strangers in a town distant from their home do not typically worry about that town's political issues, or schools, or any other structural problem. They might help an accident victim on the side of the road, like good Samaritans; they would be less likely to engage a corrupt official who does nothing to prevent street crime. Not only was working for social justice a low priority, engaging the world in unnecessary ways was understood to be spiritually dangerous. Christians with the old vision could excuse themselves for not worrying too much about social and political injustices. Their final home was far away "upon a golden strand."

As many Christian Reformed communities became more settled and prosperous, and with the social upheavals of the 1960s, the old vision social passivism became increasingly less acceptable. A new vision emerged that sought to correct this defect.

The New Vision

In the last forty years or so, Reformed Christians have gradually stopped seeing the world as so vile as to be dangerous to Christians. The new vision sees of the world as fallen, to be sure, but not exactly vile. The new vision does not ask whether the world is a friend to grace—a question that focuses on the well-being of the Christian. Rather, the new vision asks in what ways grace can and should be a friend to the world, that is, how can Christians bring to bear God's grace on the world to redeem or restore it? This is, after all, God's good earth, and we as stewards need to tend to it. Not only are all persons totally depraved but also the world, human institutions, and nature, are broken or corrupted and need to be fixed. This project of transforming the world is one assigned to Christians and calls for them to engage the world purposefully.

In contrast to the old vision that did not accept the world as our home but as a sin-filled and spiritually dangerous place, the new vision sees the

world as our home in need of our attention.[15] Thus, today it is rare to hear sermons on the topic of worldliness, and impossible to find any publications by Reformed writers today that worry about it. On occasion, a voice is heard about secularism, a term that carries some of the same connotation. More frequently, the emphasis is that we belong in this world; it is our home and we better get to work cleaning it up. The dominant concern expressed in the new vision is that Christians should engage and transform society and culture in order to bring all things under subjection to Jesus Christ.

Nicholas Wolterstorff and Richard Mouw, colleagues in the philosophy department at Calvin College in the late 1970s and early 1980s, are two of the clearest voices articulating the new vision. In 1980, Mouw published *Called to Holy Worldliness,* and soon after Wolterstorff wrote *Until Justice and Peace Embrace,* a book based on his 1981 Kuyper Lectures at the Free University of Amsterdam. While the two books are quite different in argument, style, and intended audience, they both convey a vision of Christians' purposefully engaging culture with an effort to bring it into greater conformity with the way things ought to be. Mouw writes, "Lay people . . . are called to be worldly. They are required to bring Christian sensitivities to bear on their participation in the structures of the good creation."[16] Similarly, Wolterstorff argues that Christianity should be "world-formative." He sets it off against "world-avertive" Christianity, a version of Christianity that he finds defective.[17]

On Wolterstorff's account, world-forming Christianity is not a new vision for the Reformed. It is the original Calvinist vision that was somehow displaced for a time. In the introduction he writes:

> As I was growing up in the Reformed tradition, I saw very little of that world-formative impulse so prominent in its origins. . . . Since then I have learned of the radical origins of the tradition in which I was reared. . . . It has produced in me a profound discontent over my tradition's loss of its radicalism. Why has it become so quiescently—sometimes even oppressively—conservative?[18]

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[15]The name and content of the CRC's Contemporary Testimony, *Our World Belongs to God,* makes this point rather clearly.

[16]Richard J. Mouw, *Called to Holy Worldliness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 37. What is worth noting in this short quote is the call to address structures, not merely persons. Mouw has in mind governments, corporations, and authorities, each of which is fallen in some degree and needs some correction. Note, too, the emphasis on the goodness of creation in contrast with the vileness mentioned in the hymn cited earlier.

[17]Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), ch. 1.

[18]Ibid. ix.

Wolterstorff describes world-avertive religion as that which does not focus on this world, or earthly life, but rather focuses on heaven. He says this otherworldly view characterizes medieval Christianity.[19] World-formative religion, on the other hand, is truer to the nature of Reformed Christianity, which endeavors to reform the world, to make it conform more closely to God's will. According to Wolterstorff, both of these recognize "something inferior in our ordinary existence," namely, the effects of original sin (making the world somewhat vile); however, an adherent of formative religion "rather than acquiescing in this inferiority and then turning away, . . . seeks its reformation."[20] Wolterstorff describes in subsequent chapters some of the various social ills that Christians can and should correct, primarily economic injustices (chapters 2–4) and nationalism (chapters 5–7). Thus, Wolterstorff distinguishes two visions and claims the old vision is not truly Reformed.

Other leaders in the Reformed community have made similar claims. Albert M. Wolters in "The Nature of Fundamentalism" (published in 1986) describes fundamentalism as follows:

> The whole point and burden of the Christian life is to save other people from this world, with no regard whatever for trying to influence this world in some cultural, political sense for Christ's kingdom. Under the influence of dispensationalism the kingdom of God had very little, in fact nothing, to do with the present age. The kingdom is something that comes with the millennium. This exclusive emphasis on evangelism with very little emphasis on the lordship of Christ over the broad terrain of culture, except for "moral" issues, of course, is one indication of grace against nature. Premillenialism by itself is another indication of that. In the premillenialist view, this whole world is going to be burned up, scrapped, and junked. Christ's kingdom, when it does come, will be a new kingdom which has no continuity with the world in which we live.[21]

Here, Wolters criticizes fundamentalism for some of the same things that Wolterstorff criticizes medieval Christianity. Fundamentalists in Wolters' sights hold that Christians should not attempt to influence the world in any cultural ways, that Christians' main emphasis should be on evangelism, and that this world is going to be burned up and discarded. His point is that

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[19]Whether this is an accurate characterization of medieval Christianity is debatable. What is important here, however, is that this otherworldly view is rather similar to the old vision described above.

[20]Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace,* 5.

[21]Al Wolters, "The Nature of Fundamentalism," *Pro Rege* 15, no. 1 (September 1986).

these mistaken ideas lead to a withdrawal from cultural engagement when such engagement is in fact an important task for Christians.[22]

More recently, in *Engaging God's World*, Cornelius Plantinga writes, "God's program of redemption is all-encompassing. Wherever life has been corrupted, it needs to be reformed. Accordingly, a prime citizen of the kingdom will typically be a reform minded citizen, looking for ways to address some of the deformities in human life and culture."[23] In earlier decades, this last sentence no doubt would have read "a prime citizen of the kingdom will typically seek to remain holy, looking for ways to *avoid* the deformities in human life and culture." Of course, Plantinga does not mean to encourage unholiness; he would agree with Richard Mouw in calling Christians to "a holy worldliness." This is a call to social and political engagement, a call to shape and influence culture so that it conforms more nearly to God's will for the social order; a call to transform society so that it is more just.

With all these thoughtful and articulate Reformed thinkers leading the way, it is little wonder that Calvin College and many Christian school associations have adopted the idea, often expressed in their mission statements, to the effect that they see themselves preparing students to transform the world. The institutional church has picked it up as well. The Christian Reformed Church's *Agenda for Synod 2008* puts the slogan "transforming lives and communities worldwide" on its cover.

The *Expanded Statement of Mission of Calvin College* prominently includes statements consistent with this new vision. An introductory paragraph says, "At Calvin, the Reformed tradition of Christian faith has been and continues to be our guide to hear God's voice and to respond obediently to God's call. It is a living tradition of Christian faith that draws upon historic confessional statements of the Church, both past and present, in a continuing effort to understand God's redeeming purposes toward creation." Here, the new vision takes on a dimension not yet acknowledged. It now includes "God's redeeming purposes toward creation." It is not only human institu-

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[22]What needs to be highlighted in Wolters' quote, however, is the little clause "except for 'moral' issues, of course. . . . " That is, Wolters concedes that even the fundamentalists think that Christian life requires obedience to God's moral law. They do not think that evangelism is the only duty of Christians; other duties include living morally. This is an important point because what I am calling the old vision did call on Christians to support evangelism and has always insisted that Christians strive for obedient and moral lives. The old vision stressed personal transformation, not social justice. It is within God's power to redeem this present cosmos for his final kingdom or create a new one, and I do not believe that the option he will choose has been revealed clearly in Scripture. One's view of the continuity or discontinuity of this creation with the new heavens and new earth is a question that does not need to be decided in order to evaluate which vision is the more biblical; both visions are co-possible with either view of the final kingdom.

[23]Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Engaging God's World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

tions and activities that await our engagement, we are to participate in the redeeming of creation itself. Plantinga makes the same point. "Everything corrupt needs to be redeemed, and that includes the whole natural world, which both sings and groans."[24] What can this mean? To be sure, Christian medical researchers can find new ways to treat old diseases and prolong lives. This is a wonderful way of dealing with creation. Christian seismologists can become better and better at predicting earthquakes, which could save thousands of lives. This also would be a wonderful sign of the kingdom. Yet, it is a mistake to call such activities "redeeming creation" because it introduces a sense of *redeeming* that is not accomplished through the cross but through our good works. Using soteriological language to refer to nonhuman entities makes it possible to speak of redeeming creation, culture, society, and government.[25] This rhetorical excess can lead to misunderstandings because what is intended is not like human redemption, requiring the atonement, forgiveness, and faith, but simply effectively working at things so they function more nearly to the way we believe God desires.

Thus, the new vision begins with the call to Christians to engage the world, that is, to seek to influence politics, culture, and even nature itself, so as to promote God's reign. Christians must never wall themselves off from culture. Rather, they should purposefully engage it in order to bring it into conformity with the will of God. This is the Christian's vocation. The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker, the government worker, the corporate employee, the small business owner, the homemaker, the gardener, and the professional athlete all need to work to make the area of their endeavor comply with the will of God. The new vision involves a shift in the attention of the Christian church and Christian believers from the heavenly Jerusalem to the earthly polis.[26] The new vision focuses the attention of Christians to issues of cultural, social, and environmental justice.

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[24]Ibid., 96.

[25]Whether and how the atoning work of *Jesus Christ* extends to nonhuman creation, as Paul suggests in several places, is a complicated issue that is beyond the scope of this article. I would argue that the effects of Christ's atonement extend to creation only via the renewal of humanity and not directly.

[26]D. A. Carson summarizes that something similar is going on in evangelicalism more generally. "In a fair bit of Western evangelicalism, there is a worrying tendency to focus on the periphery. . . . [Dr. Paul Hiebert] analyzes his heritage in a fashion that he himself would acknowledge is something of a simplistic caricature, but a useful one nevertheless. One generation of Mennonites believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments. The next generation assumed the gospel, but identified with the entailments. The following generation denied the gospel: the 'entailments' became everything. Assuming this sort of scheme for evangelicalism, one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, with some drifting toward the third." D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

This new vision of the Christian duty to transform the world comes in varying degrees. In a minimal version, it is little more than a reminder to Christians that they must not separate themselves into isolated communities disengaged from the problems of society. This is a helpful corrective to a lacuna in the old vision. That lacuna is evident, for instance, in the fact that the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was not something that had very much CRC participation. The new vision calls Christians to extend their efforts at serving God to include a concern for social justice. The new vision amends the old vision by redirecting the attention of Christians to social justice in addition to personal holiness. The new vision, however, is not without its own perils. In its strongest version, it is a version of the social gospel: society and culture are fallen but redeemable, and we can and *must* fix them—and doing that is the most important thing Christians or the church can be doing.

Some may call the new vision "creation affirming." If the old vision affirms anything, one may say it is "fall affirming," for it is keen to the effects of the fall. It is alert to personal weakness and sin, and not optimistic about our ability to undo the effects of the fall and make the world better. Our primary task in this world is to grow in righteousness in a world that is a dangerous place with numerous spiritual temptations to be navigated. According to the old vision, the goal of the Christian in this life is to seek to live a holy life untainted by the world, and this involves taking a rather defensive posture toward the world.

The new vision is more optimistic, stating that a main goal of the Christian in this life is to seek to address the systemic social and cultural evils and so help display the kingdom of God in greater fullness. This requires positive engagement with the world. The new vision exudes much more confidence that Christians not only can safely engage culture but also successfully transform it. If Wolters is right in saying that the old vision is a kind of premillennialism, then it may be equally true that the new vision is a kind of postmillennialism. The old vision's concern about becoming worldly has under the new vision morphed into a duty.

The old vision calls on Christians not to separate from the world but to be a salt and light in it. Even in 1928, the CRC synod stated explicitly that spiritual separation from the world "does not imply that Christians should form separate communities or should shun all association with ungodly men."[27] The new vision, in its better versions, still calls for holy living, but one with an outward thrust, an active, intentional, purposeful, and transforming engagement with the world. The strong versions of both visions are mistaken. To pursue the goal of personal holiness alone leads to a quietist piety that is no earthly good—the danger of the old vision is worthlessness. To pursue the goal of transforming the world alone leads to a social gos-

[27] *Acts of Synod, 1928*, Article 96.

pel that neglects or diminishes significantly both evangelism and personal holiness. The proper vision will be one that avoids the dangers of each. How can a Christian navigate between the Scylla of worthlessness and the Charybdis of worldliness?

Problems for the New Vision

As the old vision enhanced the possibility of social worthlessness, it is worth considering problems to which the new vision contributes. As I see it, the new vision has contributed to two serious problems among Reformed Christians: worldliness and a diminished interest in personal evangelism. The new vision is not the sole cause of these problems, nor are they intended effects by those who advance it. In addition to contributing to these two problems, the new vision suffers from one important internal problem. In what follows, I will first consider the two serious developments to which the new vision contributes and then turn my attention to its internal problem.

Under the new vision, we have come to think that the world is not quite so vile, and as a result have made ourselves comfortable here, adapting to the culture's contours with remarkable facility. A generation ago most Christian Reformed people avoided living ostentatiously. Today, among those with wealth it is commonplace. Philip Yancey writes that his former pastor, Rev. Bill Leslie, told him that as churches grow wealthier and wealthier, their preferences in hymns changes from "this world is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through" to "This is my Father's world."[28]

Worldliness was a major concern in 1928. Yet, consider that the CRC synod that year did not warn the church about cultural engagements in general; it warned specifically about worldly amusements. It saw them as a dangerous form of cultural participation, even while it expressly denied that such activities are intrinsically sinful. Why did synod in 1928 single out worldly amusements rather than other ways in which Christians engage the culture around them? The obvious answer is that the less hazardous forms of cultural engagement, such as working in a factory or running for Congress, are not things so pleasant as to make us forget God. They have much less power to lure us away from our interest in heaven. Worldly amusements, on the other hand, are enjoyable; they are sweet. Satan knows that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Therefore, he allows some sweetness in order to make us stick to this world and seek happiness on earth.

Is worldliness a problem Christians need to worry about in our day? Back in 1928 there were no televisions, but synod was still concerned. In 1928, synod was concerned about Christians going out to a theater to watch movies that by today's standards are incredibly benign. Now, virtually every Christian Reformed family has invited into its home the far racier and much

[28]Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 111.

more scandalous programming of television. Many Christian Reformed churches have rows and rows of empty pews during the scheduled worship services. Are the missing congregants at movies, dancing, or playing cards? Probably not. More likely they are watching television, at a cottage, traveling, or watching their kids in an AAU soccer match. These are enjoyable activities, and there is nothing wrong with doing them on occasion. Even so, the situation forces the question: Has the world and its pleasures so captured Christian hearts that taking part in scheduled public worship seems, at best, a second or third choice? If so, is not this evidence of worldliness? How about evidence from the change in lifestyles, such as the dramatic increase in divorces among Christians? Perhaps synod in 1928 was right to be concerned about worldly amusements and only wrong about which amusements would turn out to be the problem.

Why did synod in 1928 use strong words to warn Christians about activities that are, by its own admission, morally permissible? If normal human actions such as eating or drinking should be done to the glory of God, cannot any activity that does not go against the will of God be done in such a way as to glorify him? Then, presumably, because theater going is not evil, one can perform in or watch a drama to the glory of God. Acting or watching actors can be a spiritual undertaking, in the same way farming or teaching or nursing can be. Perhaps, in some circumstance, even playing poker can be done to the glory of God. The world belongs to God, not one square inch is outside of his kingly rule. Not surprisingly, synod in 1928 does not follow this train of thought. Rather, it warns Christians to avoid theaters, card playing, and dancing. Synod argues that movie watching is a pursuit that particularly lends itself to increasing worldliness. Synod in 1928 was more concerned about the harm worldly amusements can do to Christians than with any good Christians gain from worldly amusements.

The new vision is often unrealistic about what good we can do. We cannot reform ourselves significantly, as those who have struggled in their Christian walk know from long experience. Do we think that we have arrived at a level of faith and spiritual maturity where we can now take on the worst evils our adversary has devised? Have we forgotten how much of the old flesh remains at work in us? Have we forgotten a Calvinist reading of Romans 7? We should know that we are neither good enough nor wise enough to undue sin and its effects over the long haul. This is not to say that we should not engage in doing good or that we should separate ourselves from the human community. It is to say that our engagement with the secular world needs to be undertaken with more serious circumspection. We need to be less naïve about spiritual risk. We need to be less confident that we can immerse ourselves in secular activities without spiritual damage. We need to be more realistic about our own frailty. Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "Test everything; hold fast to the good; avoid every kind of evil."

In his book, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith*, Alan Wolfe points out: "Far from living in a world elsewhere, the faithful in the United States are remarkably like everyone else." In the struggle between faith and culture, he says, "culture has triumphed."[29] One way this is evidenced is in the church's adopting a therapeutic approach to people's problems. "Talk of hell, damnation and even sin has been replaced by a nonjudgmental language of understanding and empathy."[30] In commenting on Wolfe's book, Cal Thomas writes, "If Christians really want to see culture transformed, Wolfe's book, especially, shows they need to begin with their own transformation. Only then do they have a prayer of seeing cultural change. To expect it to happen the other way around is futile."

The new vision is optimistic about the prospects for transforming culture. Laws and policies do generate many serious problems, and changing them is an important activity. Yet, Scripture does not give us much reason for optimism in general about the reformation of society or culture before the Lord returns. Matthew reports the Lord's saying that it will be as in the days of Noah when the Lord returns. In many places in the New Testament (especially in Revelation), the theme is that the time just before the parousia will be difficult. There are even passages that speak of the tribulation. This is not to say that we should not attempt to correct injustices—indeed we must. Thankfully, shalom is not contingent on our successes.

The problem of placing the emphasis in the Christian life on social concerns as the new vision does is that it seems to give first priority to something that is not the most important. Luke 10 includes the parable of the Good Samaritan, the conclusion of which is "Go and do likewise." This is a clear call for helping others. The very next verses are the narrative of Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary. Martha is busy making preparations to feed the Lord and his disciples. Mary is not helping, she is sitting and listening to Jesus. When Martha complains to the Lord about Mary, he replies, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." Martha was helping, yet Mary chose what was better. Mary was not so distracted by her service for the Lord that she neglected to listen to him. C. S. Lewis said: "Put first things first and we get second things thrown in: put second things first and we lose both first and second things."[31]

All this needs to be said because today among Christians there is noticeably less interest in the life to come. When life was brutish, nasty, and short, it was an easier matter to focus on the life hereafter. That is why so many

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[29]Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York: Free Press 2003), 3.

[30]Ibid.

[31]C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (23 April 1951), para. 2., 228.

spirituals speak of heaven. The slaves who wrote them wanted songs that would draw their minds away from the present circumstances and to a vision of glory. Thus, they hopefully sang, "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home" or "the angels beckon me, from heaven's open door, and I can't feel at home in this world anymore." In contrast to brutish and nasty times, we live insular lives. We are rich, free, and secure; we are at home here. If life is a pilgrimage, at our current stage many of us are not in tents—we are ensconced in a four-star resort. As we indulge ourselves in the good things of this life, we begin to lose interest in that other country—the heavenly one spoken of in Hebrews 11. Thus, many are now uncomfortable with the idea that we have a mansion just over the hilltop, or that we should be looking beyond the sunset. One effect of not seeing this world, this life, as vile is that by not considering that which is dangerous we have become comfortable here. We are losing both the idea that this life is temporary and that it contains spiritual dangers.

This problem of worldliness is not the result of the new vision alone; changing historical circumstances also have contributed to the loss of the ideas that life is short and spiritually dangerous. We are more prosperous and live longer than even a generation ago, so we do not have the same thirst for heaven that characterized earlier saints. The new vision gives those who have other reasons for being worldly a way to justify their error.

Evangelism

Attending to social and cultural issues places one's attention on the problems of this present life and away from attending to the life hereafter, which is a central concern of evangelism. Therefore, the adoption of the new vision has altered ideas of what Christians should be doing—or what is most important. Many Christians are not enthusiastic about calling people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ with the idea that they will go to heaven when they die. As this present life becomes the chief focus of the Christian life, the idea is fading that we need to endure to the end in the simple hope of some trans-historical salvation. Today, some Christians actually speak disparagingly of "saving souls." For them the idea of personal evangelism has become off-putting and is associated with Christian fundamentalism. What has replaced it is an increased concern about correcting social injustices and showing mercy to those who are suffering.

According to the old vision, the primary emphasis for purposefully engaging the world is for the purpose of evangelism. The great commission is: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." This task of making disciples has to do with presenting the gospel to individuals and then training the converts to live as Christians should, in obedience to Christ's commands.

The increasing worldliness among Reformed Christians undercuts evangelism in two ways. First, by immersing ourselves in the culture because we no longer consider it dangerous, we have become prey to the assumptions of evolutionary naturalism. The wordview of evolutionary naturalism is ubiquitous in Western culture and has made deep inroads into our consciousness. The reality of eternity and heaven seem distant, even incredible. Christians find it harder and harder to believe in an afterlife, the resurrection of the body, the Second Coming, and the final judgment. We find it harder and harder to believe that people are sinners, deserving of eternal punishment. With our own faith so compromised, we are too weak to witness to the gospel.

Second, the enjoyments of this life attract almost all of our attention. We who are wealthy are finding new ways of securing our enjoyable lifestyles, and these are often incompatible with evangelism. Christians find it harder and harder to experience deprivation or sacrifice. An increasing number of young people today have the goal to find some occupation or profession that will afford them the comfortable lifestyle they relish—and it is not only the young. How do you think most Christian Reformed people today would respond if their only child decided to drop out of law school in order to become a missionary to Sri Lanka or to plant a church in Las Vegas?

Helping someone out who is oppressed because of some injustice, no matter how grievous the oppression, will pale into insignificance when he is called before the judgment seat of God and does not know the name of Jesus. Putting a new roof on a house damaged by hurricane Katrina is a wonderful thing to do, and it helps a homeowner at least until the next hurricane, maybe for decades. Dying without Jesus in a house with a new roof is far worse than living for Jesus in a house with a roof that leaks. A Kenyan who is a Christian, living in the squalor of the Nairobi ghetto with the danger of civil war ever at hand, is infinitely better off than a millionaire U.S. citizen who is not a Christian. The priority of evangelism is that the good it does for people—the grace of God it presents to people—is an eternal good; it is not just for this relatively brief current life. The right priorities are clear in Scripture. Paul, sounding like a fundamentalist, says that compared to knowing Jesus everything else is garbage.[32]

This brings us to a word about the work of the institutional church. This new vision is having a significant impact on the life of the CRC. Certainly the concern for evangelism still exists in the Christian Reformed Church, as both Home Missions and World Missions continue their evangelistic efforts. Yet, the role of Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC), a diaconal ministry, has grown to the point where its expected budget expenditures for 2008–2009 is $6 million more than that of Christian Reformed

[32]Philippians 3:7–9.

Home and World Missions combined. This is evidence that there is a growing interest within the Reformed community in doing humanitarian relief work and less of a commitment to direct mission and evangelistic activity. The purpose of the CRWRC is not to spread the gospel in word but to live it out in helping victims around the world. In the report of CRWRC in the *Agenda for Synod 2007,* they describe their work as a "peace-building ministry." It says "we catch a glimpse of peace when a survivor of Hurricane Katrina sees the last nail pounded in on her newly rebuilt home, or a Sudanese refugee receives food despite great danger. Peace is there when a man in Laos harvests rice on his newly irrigated field." Clearly, these are good things, but they are not the same as telling the old, old, story of Jesus and his love. They are good things, but they are not the best things, nor are they things that the church is uniquely gifted to perform. Habitat for Humanity, the Salvation Army, and the United Nations do comparable work on a far greater scale, as do dozens of other organizations. What the church has that these other organizations lack is the gospel, and, while we share an interest in social betterment with numerous humanist organizations, our primary engagement with the world should be to share the gospel with others.

Some may want to broaden the idea of the gospel to include feeding the hungry, but that is not what the early church said. In Acts 6, when the church was growing and some widows in the church were being overlooked in the food distribution, the twelve disciples gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables." We join many other people of the world who pound nails, distribute food, and help irrigate fields. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." The peace of God that Jesus promised is based on the salvation of persons. He is living water, not irrigated fields; he is the bread from heaven. My point is not that the CRWRC is doing anything wrong; rather it is that the good work it does should be secondary to the work of spreading the gospel; yet, it has attained a primary role in the church. Doing work to help those in need so they can live better lives is a good thing and is an occasion for joy; however, an infinitely greater thing—one that causes the angels in heaven to rejoice—is when a sinner repents. Thus, it is a mistake if the church (as institute especially) turns its primary attention to improving people's present lives through community transformation and not through engaging directly in evangelism and missions. It is not that CRWRC should become less but that our mission efforts should become greater.

In 1980, Mouw wrote: "It is unfortunate that in some Christian circles evangelism is treated as something very different from 'social action.' It is even more unfortunate that some Christians insist on choosing *for* evange-

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[33]Richard Mouw, *Called to Holy Worldliness.* 8.

lism and against engagement in social action."[33] Mouw does not mean to deny that evangelism is different from social action, only that it is not very different. Nor is he claiming that social action can be a kind of strategy for doing evangelism, although that is true. Jesus himself attracted crowds because of his miracles and then spoke to them about salvation. Mouw wisely wants to keep both evangelism and social action and not play them off against each other. He is right, of course, but we are not so good at balancing. Resources and energies directed in one way are not available for other uses. The sad fact is that over time the engagement with culture and the increase in worldliness have contributed to a significant de-emphasis on evangelism.

The Internal Problem with the New Vision

From the very beginning, a major problem with the new vision was to identify the cultural norms that are required in order to determine the social and cultural changes that Christians should attempt to accomplish. The Bible is clear that Christians ought to do good as a response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, but what good should we be doing? Christians are instructed repeatedly to do good, that is, to love God and love others. Loving God requires piety, devotion, and a desire to live a holy life as free from corruptions of mind and heart as possible. Loving God and others involves the great commission—telling others about God's love in Jesus and calling them to faith and obedience. Loving others involves all sorts of duties, including feeding the hungry, teaching the unlearned, and caring for the sick. For instance, a generation ago, CRC missionaries preached the gospel and also opened schools and hospitals.[34] Our obligations under the new vision are expanded but less clear. We are told that we are agents of the renewal of creation and that we are now to transform culture, but with what compass do we know what path a culture ought to take?

A society and a culture can develop in many different ways, and Scripture does not lay out a single path that is "Christian." On most social and cultural matters, God allows for a variety of strategies and institutions. The limits are that societies should not be unjust (protecting what Calvin calls "equity" [*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*]) and practice social evils. For examples slavery, racism, abortion, and wars of aggression are contrary to God's revealed will, and societies with such practices need to be transformed to eliminate these violations of God's will. In the case of societal developments that are adiaphora, God leaves it to people to make arrangements in a way that suits their own history, tradition, environment, and the like.

However, if there are numerous cultural options, who is to say which ones ought to be changed and which ones are acceptable? Thus, there is nothing that could be called a Christian culture or a Christian society. Any cultural

[34]In the late 1940s, my parents were missionaries to China. My father was a doctor and my mother was a teacher.

activity, any social order, that is consistent with what is morally good (externally) will also be consistent with Christianity. Non-Christians, as well as Christians, can and do contribute to a common moral culture and society.

Sometimes those who work within the new vision make assumptions about the kind of culture that God wills. Take the big question about the preferred form of government. Does God will that a society be governed by a single person, or a small group of persons, or a democracy? John Calvin favors the small group notion but allows that any of the three may be fitting in some contexts. Democracy advocates favor democracy, but is that God's will for every society? What God reveals as his will for the social order and the natural order are a few general ideas, not many specific ones.

The new vision is the product of a much more confident view that claims that we can know in some detail what God's will for society and culture is. An example of this confidence is Wolterstorff's diagnosis of global economics and his critique of capitalism that identifies it as clearly outside God's will for economic systems.[35] Yet, Ronald J. Sider admits that the introduction of capitalism into many parts of the world over the last twenty years has resulted in a significant decrease in poverty.[36] In Canada, the Committee for Contact with the Government lobbies for social policies that seem good to it. Others call for Christian influence to be made in the arts, science, and education. Yet, it is not at all clear that God's will in these areas is revealed. Should we transform the music industry and put an end to heavy metal and gangster rap? Should Christians in the moviemaking business reshape that industry to Christian standards? What would those be? Should we enact zoning laws that will make it illegal to have deer-shaped lawn ornaments? Often, those holding the new vision couple confidence in what we can know of God's will with the obligation that Christians should intentionally take it on themselves to be agents of change, helping society and culture conform to a more detailed knowledge of God's will than he has revealed. Plantinga recognizes this issue. He writes, "But in thinking about applying Scripture to life, the reformers faced a problem—namely, that it's hard to guide a program of reform by reference to the whole Bible, which is very large, or by reference to a single verse from it, which is very small."[37] He goes on to speak of catechisms as useful summaries, including the teaching of the commandments: "such interpretations of the commandments do not end moral discussion among Christians. They don't tell us exactly what to do about the spread of

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[35]Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace.* "In the preceding chapter I suggested that capitalism was a blend of certain legal arrangements and practices. Goudzwaard's discussion leads us now to see these practices in a new light. All together they amount to a "faith," a "social idolatry," 65.

[36]Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Waco: Word, 1997) "Many Asian countries have adopted market economies. The result has been a dramatic drop in poverty in the world's most populous continent," xiii.

[37]Plantinga, *Engaging God's World,* 98.

casinos, for example. They don't tell us whether tattoos are a good idea, or which styles of music best carry the message of the gospel."[38] Some Christians who are experts in a given field may see clearly how they think something should be changed in that field, and in obedience to God they should work for such changes. In fact, all Christians ought to do this in any situation before them. This is doing everything to the glory of God. They should stop short of claiming that the changes they are pushing for are God's will in the matter unless it is clearly a moral matter of the sort that is taught in Scripture or easily derived from it.

In the *Calvin Theological Journal* in November 2005, David Van Drunen argues that John Calvin carefully distinguishes the civil and spiritual kingdoms, a distinction that, if properly recognized, would lead to caution in the efforts of Christians to transform culture.[39] Timothy Palmer critiques Van Drunen's thesis in an article published in *Pro-Rege*. In the course of his argument, Palmer makes a revealing comment: "It goes without saying that Calvin was a transformationalist. The city of Geneva in his day is sufficient evidence. Through his influence the city was deeply changed. *Whether the transformation was for the better or worse is still a matter of debate*; that it happened is obvious"[40] (emphasis added). Inadvertently, Palmer puts his finger on a problem for Reformed transformationalists: If we cannot tell whether Calvin's transforming effects on Geneva were improvements, how can we know that the cultural transforming efforts we undertake (which go beyond the demands of revealed morality) are good and beneficial?

In commenting on the third commandment, C. S. Lewis speaks about the possibility and wisdom of a Christian political party. He is very much against it. He says: "It will be exposed, in an aggravated degree, to that temptation which the Devil spares none of us at any time—the temptation of claiming for our favorite opinions that kind and degree of certainty and authority which really belongs only to our Faith. The danger of mistaking our merely natural, though perhaps legitimate, enthusiasms for holy zeal, is always great."[41] The danger that Lewis speaks of is one that threatens any cultural transformationalist who calls for changes that go beyond what revealed morality requires.

Christians over the centuries have had a significant impact on cultures, especially Western culture, but much of this impact was the result of the spread of Christianity to ever increasing numbers of people. Large com-

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[38]Ibid.

[39]David Van Drunen, "The Two Kingdoms: A Reassessment of the Transformationalist Calvin." *Calvin Theological Journal*, 40, no. 2 (November 2005): 248–66.

[40]Timothy P. Palmer, "Calvin the Transformationalist and the Kingship of Christ." *Pro-Rege* (March 2007): 36.

[41]C. S. Lewis, "Meditations on the Third Commandment," in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 198.

munities of Christians generally trying to follow the prescriptions for conduct found in Scripture unavoidably had a significant impact on the culture where they were. Thus, over hundreds of years, the early church grew in number until it not only reached the seats of power, but it also began to reform and reshape the values and institutions of the Roman Empire. In this we see the wisdom of "he who converts his neighbor has performed the most practical Christian-political act of all."[42]

Thus, the call to transform societies in the name of Christ requires norms to guide the transformation. Where clear moral norms are known, like those condemning racism and abortion, Christian action is fitting. However, many social and cultural alternatives are all morally permissible, and to work for cultural change from one such alternative to another reflects the personal views of the change agent—not God's will. Sadly, the new vision tempts some to use the name of Christ to advance their own social or political agenda.

Biblical Basis for the Old Vision

Now, let me explain why it is important to recapture the most important parts of the older vision. The key features of this vision are that this life is both transient and spiritually dangerous. These features are both repeatedly evidenced in Scripture.

The biblical model of the life of faith is Abraham. His life involved a pilgrimage from Haran to the land God would show him. He came to Canaan, but when he got there he did not build a house, he set up his tents. He was a nomad, a traveler. Abraham considered himself to be on the way to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Abraham was guilty of looking for pie in the sky by and by, of setting his hopes on an eternal outcome that he could not manage or predict.

It was not only Abraham. When the author of Hebrews speaks of Abraham, Noah, Enoch, and Abel, he says of them:

> All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had an opportunity to return. Instead they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. There God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb. 11: 13–16)

This description is held up for Christians, not simply as a history lesson but as part of that great cloud of witnesses who demonstrated the kind of faith that should be emulated.

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[42]Ibid. 199.

This basic understanding was not altered by the coming of the Lord or by New Testament teaching. The author of Hebrews writes,

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2)

Here, Christians are encouraged to throw off not only sin but everything that hinders. The author encourages Christians not to participate *even in morally permitted activities* that have the potential to hinder Christians on their pilgrimage. Paul writes the Corinthian church, "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor. 4:16–18). Paul reinforces the transitory nature of this present life and directs the Christian's attention to what is eternal. "Our citizenship is in heaven." (Phil. 3:20) John writes: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. . . . The world and its desires pass away, but the one who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John. 2:15, 17). In 1 Peter 2:11, Peter identifies Christians as aliens and strangers in the world. All these texts, and many others, present the clear idea that Christians should consider the present life as transitory and focus their hopes on the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. The emphasis is that this life is a passing experience, which people of faith will understand as transient. Thus, Christians are pilgrims who need to be alert to those features or aspects of the present journey that may distract them from the eventual goal.

I have argued that Scripture teaches that the life to come is the important reality toward which we should be directed. Yet, as we have become more and more comfortable in this world, we focus less and less on what is truly important. Our increasing worldliness blocks us from grasping the truth that a lifetime of even ninety years is a mere grain of sand on the shores of eternity. It reinforces the illusion that this life is what is most important, with the result that we will never understand the martyrs; we will never understand the Christian life as one of self-denial, not self-indulgence; we will not have anything to say to aged Christians or at funerals. The joy and pleasures of this life, however wonderful and abundant, are not worthy to be compared to what God has in store for those who endure to the end. We need to want heaven more, not less.

Some may fear that a return to these parts of the old vision will result in a reduction in kingdom activity by Christians. This is not true. Even under the defective old vision, it was men and women who started the Christian Reformed Church and who established Calvin College and Calvin Theo-

logical Seminary. They built dozens of Christian schools and sacrificed to send their children to them. They started World Missions, The Back to God Hour Ministries, The Bible League, Rest Haven, Pine Rest, Bethany, Holland Home, Dordt College, Trinity College, Kuyper College, and many other Christian organizations. One reason why the old vision energizes such enormous contributions is that it reinforces the fact that our lives here are transitory. We are headed on to a better place, so we do not need to hoard the stuff we have now. Think how much more may be accomplished with the old vision expanded to include a concern for justice.

Most of all, we need to recapture the importance of evangelism. To do so, we need to reaffirm that salvation in Jesus Christ is pointed toward a heavenly home of joy and peace without measure. I know a missionary who with his family lives in one of the most remote places on the face of the earth with no air conditioning, no plumbing, no running water, and no Western doctors. This is a place no one would choose to live unless he had a vision of an eternal city so wonderful that all earthly riches and conveniences paled in the light of that hope. His primary concern is not that the people he lives among will enjoy more Western conveniences but that they will share in the glorious future that God has in store for his children. His message is not a message of earthly success but a message of eternal joy in Christ Jesus. He is pointing them to a city whose architect and builder is God.

The young man Saul had a marvelous career ahead of him in the Jewish synagogue and Sanhedrin—a life of power and privilege with opportunities to reform Jewish culture, but he passed on it. In the light of the hope of eternal glory, he counted such a career as garbage, and this makes the point: Without a vision of glory, of streets paved with gold and a mansion over the hilltop, we lack the motivation to make the kind of sacrificial choices that bespeak a faith that is alive.

The new vision does help us understand that our obligations extend beyond evangelism and private charity. We need to consider the broader social issues that generate systemic evils. The new vision also can generate a real problem: It focuses all our attention on this world and the good we can do. In so doing, the hope of heaven can be diminished, with the result that some come to love the world and the things in it. In a word, it helps us become worldly. When we come to love this world, there is no reason to press on. There is little motivation to invite others to an eternal home that we consider illusory. The pilgrimage ends. We cease looking for that eternal city whose architect and builder is God.

The truth is that (even if one day it is this very earth that is the locus of the new heavens and earth) in the world's present condition we *are* pilgrims here, and we look forward to the day when Christ will return and all things will be made new. In the meantime we should rededicate ourselves to trusting him and following him faithfully in our efforts at personal sanctification, as witnesses of his grace, and as agents for social justice. We must

not relegate to a subordinate role our duty to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Through the preaching of the gospel, human lives can be turned from a future with no hope to one of unbounded joy. "The main battlefield for the good is not the open ground of the public arena, but the small clearing of each heart."[43] If we completely lose the old vision, we are in danger of forgetting what is really most important. We are in danger of forgetting that we are pilgrims on the way home.

[43] Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (Orlando: Harcourt Books), 71.