SIGNPOST ONE

POST-CHRISTENDOM

INTO THE FAR COUNTRY: THE JOURNEY INTO POST-CHRISTENDOM

"WOW!" THE BARISTA EXCLAIMED, moving herself farther behind the counter. "A real pastor?" Her reaction was something between amazement and fear as if she'd just seen an extinct bird that she thought might contaminate her with some alien disease. But there I (Geoff) was, working in my small church office—a local coffee shop in the neighborhood—and I was experiencing what had now become commonplace: the disjunction between what people think about the church and my trying to live the gospel in everyday life. Sue, the barista, got over her shock, and we went on to have many good talks in the future, but she very much represented the new situation my church and I find ourselves in.

If you've been a Christian in North America and spent any time outside church buildings, you know what we're talking about. We sense our culture pressing in—in movies, in local schools, at the mall, or as we drive to the church gathering on Sundays. We see signs of it in the looks on people's faces as they travel on the train to work, scurry to get their children to a Little League game, or head to a restaurant with friends. People are living as if God doesn't exist or, at least, as if God doesn't matter. Society used to have a general place for God. Now, sightings are rare, and if they materialize, they are soon forgotten.

When we're at the doctor's office, in conversations around the water-cooler, or standing in the checkout line at the grocery store, we hear language that shows how the culture has changed. We hear words of praise for Oprah's "faith" or someone seeking "to be true to yourself." People

are still seeking a form of spirituality, but it is often an inward-focused spirituality centered on actualizing the true self, and not usually something learned "in church."

It's obvious that the world has changed from the days of previous generations. We are all busy, running after our own "gods," and seeking "what works." And when someone talks about Jesus, it is no longer clear whether that person is talking about the same person traditionally accepted as God. We are living in a post-Christian culture in North America.

"Are You One of Those Christians?"

Seven years ago, my wife and I (Dave) moved to a new neighborhood. Soon we found ourselves sitting around a fire pit, meeting our neighbors at a block party. When they discovered I was a pastor, they wanted to know about our church, and then the questions began. "Are you an evangelical like George Bush is an evangelical?" An arctic-like chill settled over the conversation, the disdain palpable. For them, Christians had become branded as narrow, exclusivist, and judgmental. It was apparent that if we were to talk about Jesus with people like this, we would have to start all over. The conversations would be as much about deconstructing what they did believe about me and my faith as it would be about giving witness to who Jesus was for our lives and the salvation he was bringing into the whole world.

These are the places we Christians are living in. These are the times of a new post-Christendom West. Imagine, then, seeking to plant a church—a fresh living expression of the gospel—in this post-Christian landscape.

Ten years ago, together with my wife, Rae Ann, I set out to plant Life on the Vine Christian Community in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. We had ten people join us in the effort. Shortly after, Geoff and his wife, Cyd, came along. We joined together to figure out how to be a church amid these challenges. We had no idea of the difficulties we faced.

In a few years, we had thirty people and decided we needed to reach out to the community. We tried everything. We tried doing a daily vacation Bible school in order to attract busy neighbors who, you would think, would be happy to send their children to a recreational venue in the neighborhood. As it turned out, only Christians came. We tried providing a date night, offering baby-sitting services for families in the neighborhood who couldn't afford it. Again, only Christians came. Someone proposed we do a fair on the grounds we had been given to start this church. The costs were prohibitive. The chances of competing with the

local school district or megachurch in offering these kinds of services were just about nil. Back then, these ideas were what was called outreach.

What we learned quickly was that non-Christian people in our neighborhoods would not come to an event or service held at or associated with a Christian church. Even non-Christians with friends who are Christians will resist. The question, then, was why would we even try these events. In a culture that distrusts Christianity, a society that no longer sees the church as positive, why do we seek to attract people to come to us? Why not instead use this time and energy to be in our neighborhoods, at our local park district gymnasiums and fairs, donating our time, getting involved, knowing the people, and bringing the gospel there? We were living in a culture that no longer wanted to do the things churches do, yet we were doing them anyway.

One Sunday I learned that some people from our church were protesting the local high school board's decision to make all the school's bathrooms unisex. Two weeks later, Geoff was asked to join his neighbors in the same protest. The only problem was that Geoff's neighbors were protesting against the very people in our church who were arguing for traditional gender-based bathrooms. We saw firsthand how the church had lost its former place of authority in the community and was instead viewed with suspicion. In this case, it was Geoff, speaking as a neighbor within the community, not as a pastor, who was listened to.

Meaning Anything

Today it seems anything can mean anything, or nothing. People now expect much less out of our ideas as Christians and much more out of us as people; much less from the truth of our ideas and much more from the truth of our lives; much less from what we claim to know and much more from the life we've experienced. People are now simultaneously more suspicious and critical of grand ideas but more open to individual lives; more cynical of overarching explanations but more receptive to honest questions. Most people are open to a plurality of sources and traditions and are noncommittal about the truth of any one source.

Just look around your neighborhood. There is a family down the street from me (Geoff) where the wife was raised Jewish but recently declared her atheism (and is now trying to convert me!) and the husband is an agnostic from an ex-Lutheran family. Raised without overt spiritual direction but openness to all, one of his daughters is now flirting with Buddhism as a way of life, and another daughter, living in Africa and serving the poor, has joined the local Catholic parish (although she tells

me they are much too conservative). And they all think of me as the nice guy who runs the equivalent of a nonprofit self-help center.

When trying to navigate this new cultural landscape, it often feels as if all the street signs have been pulled down, the lights aren't working, and the road has been blocked or torn up in some places. We can't get around with any ease and frequently get lost. Some of us, like Dave, remember growing up as children when navigating these cultural landscapes was relatively straightforward. Now it feels like wandering among the rubble. Others of us, like Geoff, never felt this certainty; the maps and paradigms handed to us seem outdated, destined to frustrate and discourage.

Aren't We All Christians Still?

What is to be done in the sign-stripped, mapless, and road-blocked world? There are two common responses from Christians regarding this (what some have called) postmodern mind-set (soft-relativist, strong pluralist, antiauthoritarian but pro-downtrodden). Some want to fight the cultural changes that are drifting away from universal truth, credible authorities, and a common story for understanding life. For them, engaging in mission requires showing that relativism is wrong, pluralism is mistaken, and objective truth is out there. Before any one can even share the truth of Christ, apologists must defend the idea of truth. Before anyone can even proclaim the gospel, evangelists must establish the validity of the scriptures. The assumption is that people must begin thinking a certain way before they can think about the gospel. These people often self-consciously stand against postmodernity and its negative effects on the truth of the gospel.

A similar approach is to ignore the cultural changes and stick with what works. If hellfire and brimstone was good enough for Jonathan Edwards and the First Great Awakening, then it is still good enough for us. All are still "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and to preach anything less is to compromise the gospel. It is assumed that people already live in fear and guilt, and the job of the church is to relieve people of this terrible burden.

In everyday life, this often means trying to persuade people of their guilt so that the gospel can then be offered as the means to relieve them of it. It's a nice maneuver when it works. But fewer and fewer people are susceptible to this kind of guilt. We no longer live in a culture where people already know about a Holy God, the Judge. People do not live with the idea that the whole world is careening headlong toward some final judgment. They are more concerned about their social security than they

are about eternal security. Arguing people back to the truth or back to guilt is merely a retreat to a lost modern mind-set and forgotten Christian culture where we can still assume that everyone is basically a Christian.

Aren't We All Postmoderns Now?

Another reaction to these cultural changes is to fully embrace the postmodern mind-set. This mind-set, made so popular by Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and the emerging church, refuses to argue people back to the truth. Instead of retreating into a bygone cultural bunker, they revise faith for a new generation. Instead of engaging in conflict against the contemporary situation, they push us to enter a conversation with these new thought patterns.

Not retreating but revising: Isn't this what Christians have always done? The apostle Paul became all things to all people so that all might be saved (1 Corinthians 9:22). And like the men of Issachar, we are called to understand the times so that we might know what to do (1 Chronicles 12:32). We know the gospel is not one-size-fits-all. Otherwise we wouldn't need four gospels with four different perspectives written to four diverse audiences. Revising instead of retreating makes Christianity relevant to the new postmodern generations.

But being relevant is not the only motivation behind the emerging church. It is not just that Christianity has lost touch with the contemporary mindset. Nor is the problem just that Christianity has believed the wrong things, losing touch with the modern world by becoming too narrow, rational, and dogmatic. Rather, Christianity has believed in the wrong *way*.[1] Those of the emerging church feel that embracing Greek philosophy caused us to focus too much on ideas and right beliefs. As a result, Christianity lost its Hebraic inheritance of relational truth and the right way of belief.[2] This recovery of a relational mind-set moves from a gospel of guilt to a gospel of compassion and mercy. Rather than a vengeful God seeking justice on all sinners, now the gospel calls all to seek justice for the poor and the oppressed. Instead of mounting arguments for absolute truth, caring for all is the absolute commandment.

We applaud both standing up for the truth and broadening the scope of the gospel. These are both essential aspects of the journey into the missional far country. But the moves to retrench and defend or revise and relate require something more. The categories of modern versus postmodern are helpful, but we require something more earthy, on the ground, and in the middle of the struggle. We need a way to engage the cultural dynamics of day-to-day life while compromising nothing of

what God has done in Christ for the world or his very presence in the world. We need to journey deep into people's everyday lives, trials, hurts, and desires. To do this, we need a signpost that can direct us to where people outside the church are living, that is, the new cultural worlds of post-Christendom.

The First Signpost: Post-Christendom

Recently one of our church's missional communities invited its neighborhood over for an Octoberfest celebration. One of the members of this community had been learning how to home-brew beer, and he used the occasion to share several of his best recipes with the gathering. Sixty people came and spent the evening getting to know one another in his backyard. One neighbor named Pete came after being invited by a member of the missional community. He knew no one else except his neighbor. He started to ask a lot of questions like, "How do you all know each other?" "Why did you all choose to live so close to one another?" "Why do you all drink in moderation?" One of the missional community members answered him awkwardly by saying, "We're here to plant a church." Pete could hardly get his mind around that answer. He said "A church? [long pause] Well, I'll drink your beer, but I won't drink your Kool-Aid!"

This incident illustrates the new situation many of us find ourselves in as Christians in North America. The place of the church is fading and, even worse, is under suspicion. The reality of God is fading in the social consciousness. Yet many Christians, pastors and churches, ignore this reality. Oddly, we go on living and organizing ourselves as if nothing has changed since the 1950s. Talk of modernity and postmodernity, although helpful, misses the core issues we're facing. We need another diagnosis. For us, the issue lies squarely in the fact that the contemporary world is moving toward post-Christendom.[3] But what is post-Christendom?

Speaking in terms of Western history, *Christendom* refers to the Middle Ages of Western Europe when all of society (church, state, schools, work, art) was united under the umbrella of Christianity. All of life—work, commerce, education, politics, family, and money—was ordered toward the church and around the core beliefs in Christianity. The Reformation did little to change this. It only put more options on the religious menu. We could now be Lutheran, Reformed, even radical Anabaptist, as well as Catholic. When the New World was discovered, Catholic Europe established Catholicism in Latin America, and Protestant Europe established Protestantism in the United States and Canada. This was all Christendom in one way or another, and it lasted for a long time in North America.

Fifty years ago, it was not uncommon for our parents (or grandparents) to watch *Andy of Mayberry* and see Andy in the pew on Sunday and Barney singing in the choir. In those days, stores were closed on Sunday. Popular evangelist Billy Graham could go to a city and hold what was basically an evangelical Sunday morning service in the local municipal stadium, and thousands would come. A majority of people would go to church on Sunday, and those who didn't go would feel slightly guilty. Many Protestant churches held a Sunday evening service to do evangelism, expecting their regular members to bring non-Christians to hear a targeted gospel message. Regular church people would attend a midweek service, as well as serve with the Boys and Girls Clubs. Life revolved around church. Even public television had to watch its p's and q's regarding religion and sexuality. Government gave its nod, and the public schools basically cooperated with the Christian agenda. These were the days of Christendom in North America.

But in many places (but not all!) today, these times are gone. The culture has shifted, and Christendom has all but disappeared in large parts of North America. We are now changing from one set of cultural patterns to another. We suggest this shift into post-Christendom can best understood by three "posts-": postattractional, postpositional, and postuniversal. These three describe the cultural conditions that have come after post-Christendom. They describe what has changed and help us see how old ways of being church may simply not relate to the new cultures after Christendom in North America.

Postattractional

There used to be a time when people gravitated toward the church building on Sunday and, especially, in times of personal or social spiritual need. It was easy to attract people to the "church." But today the poles have reversed: the church is more likely to repel people. We now live in a postattractional time.

People in this post-Christendom world no longer think about going to church when they wake up on Sunday mornings. When they find themselves in a crisis, they don't turn to the church. In fact, the church often finds itself under suspicion as an institution. "The church only wants my money!" is a common sentiment. Today we find that churches have to justify our existence. It is not true everywhere, but if you find these dynamics in your neighborhood, you know you're living in a postattractional, post-Christendom place.

Postpositional

The second post- describes how the church no longer carries respect or influence in post-Christendom. The church used to have an inherent position of authority in the community. The pastor (educated, trained, and ordained) would be consulted on educational and civic matters. People would trust him (and almost all of them were men) as the source of help and direction with regard to spiritual matters. When I (Dave) was a grade school child in the 1960s, my teacher would ask if my father, a local pastor, would like to see a copy of the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* because we were studying it in school. Today, asking clergy to comment on class curriculum would be virtually unheard of, even resisted. In many places, the authority of the church and the pastor are viewed with apathy, distrust, and even hostility. In fact, not just the church but all other previously authoritative institutions have fallen under suspicion.

Now, churches, pastors, and ordinary Christians must earn authority, and it has to be earned relationally. The character of our Christian communities must be exposed to the light of relationships and developed slowly over time before a picture of the kingdom can emerge in our neighborhoods. People are more drawn in by the life of a local gathering than by a set of moral dictates coming from an established power. If you find yourself in a neighborhood where the church is suspect and clergypersons who wear collars are seen as strange, you're living in a post-Christendom neighborhood.

Postuniversal

Language and worldview are no longer universal to everybody we meet (of course, these things were never really universal to all people). Post-Christendom culture is postuniversal in these regards.

As a result, outside of our church, we can no longer assume we are speaking the same language when we talk about Jesus, God, and sin in our neighborhoods. Indeed, it is difficult to even speak of a singular, universal culture to which all belong. Instead of saying we are in a postuniversal culture, we should say we are in cultures (plural) that are postuniversal. North America now, more than ever before, represents peoples from diverse religious, ethnic, and economic heritages. There is no single common culture or conceptual language from which to discuss God, faith, and redemption. If you find yourself in a neighborhood where people don't know what you are talking about when you say, "Jesus is Lord," or they say, "Who are you? Tim Tebow or something?" then you know you are living in a post-Christendom neighborhood.

Post-Christendom and Intellectual Shifts

These three "posts-" describe the dynamics we're all dealing with in post-Christendom. These dynamics are interwoven with various intellectual shifts (broadly understood as postmodernism) that are becoming commonplace among people who graduated from college since the 1990s.[4] They are noticeable when we sit down in coffee houses or hang out in a health club or attend a local town meeting. It's the world that is happening all around us.

For instance, sitting in a café in Santa Fe, New Mexico, one morning about six years ago, I (Dave) noticed a poster on the wall. Titled "How to Build Global Community," it was a call to a new understanding, a plea for justice, a way toward peace. Around the global images of culture on the poster were listed over thirty catchphrases that communicated its message. A look at these revealed the depths of the new cultural situation we find ourselves in.

For instance, the poster declared, "Visit people, places, and cultures—not tourist attractions." Here's a slogan that cuts to the core of our new cultural suspicions: the people of the new post-Christendom cultures distrust what seem to be programmed experiences manufactured for consumption. They see through the staging of political events. We swear allegiance to a group only when it is personal and real. Or, as the poster says, "Listen to the people tell their stories." There is a hunger for real life and a cynicism toward corporate determination. This poster in a little café tells us we're living in a postattractional milieu.

A second look at this poster reveals the slogan, "Question consumption!" It shouts out, "Notice the workings of power and privilege in your culture," and, "Know where your bank banks!" All of these slogans reveal suspicion toward external and imposed authority. Those born in the cultures of post-Christendom believe that all systems of knowledge have power interests. Michel Foucault, one of the more famous postmodern philosophers, provides the tagline for this. He asserts that "all power is knowledge." In so doing, he is reversing the popular mantra of industrial America: "Get a good education!" or, in the words of Francis Bacon, "knowledge is power!" Foucault warns us to be aware of power agendas in all forms of societal education.

We are often taught that knowledge creates the power to change the world. Each Saturday morning, the *G.I. Joe* cartoon taught me (Geoff) that "knowing is half the battle." To know things was the power to change things. In this way *G.I. Joe* was more than a cartoon; it was teaching valuable life lessons. What I didn't know at that time was that the *G.I. Joe* morning cartoon was Hasbro's way of producing consumer

demand by expanding its market through television. Hasbro was exerting a subtle power on my way of knowing and my desires through its cartoon even while it claimed to give children the helpful knowledge and confidence to take control of their lives.

Similarly, think of ads for medications. They offer themselves as merely informational—"If you struggle with … ask your doctor about …" Just the facts. But so much more is going on. They are forming in us anxiety about cholesterol, blood pressure, or depression and then offering a solution in the form of a particular drug. These ads offer knowledge, but they also exercise power in forming our desires (partly in the form of what they don't tell us—that there might be other ways of dealing with these problems than just popping a couple pills).

This happens everywhere. Opening a checking account or getting your first credit card introduces one to the power of debt and interest and opens one to a new way of thinking about money. Listening to certain news outlets shapes our thinking about politics. Buying produce from chain stores forms our understanding of agriculture. Under the guise of giving us helpful knowledge, just as Hasbro did (and still does), each activity exerts a subtle form of power. We become enslaved to or at least formed by the power interests at work in these systems. The poster in Santa Fe shows how postpositional this context has become.

That poster offers yet another lesson in its compelling phrases: "Think of no one as *them*," and, "Imagine other cultures through their poetry and their novels." These catchphrases express a plea not to impose one's own cultural prejudices on other peoples. Instead it urges us get to know their language and understand what makes them tick. The postmodernist philosopher Jacques Derrida is famous for claiming, "There is nothing outside the text."[5] By this, he means we are all captured within a culture and a language. We all live in and from a (con)text. By "language," we don't just mean languages like English, Spanish, Swahili, and Chinese. Rather, it includes the cultural patterns of meaning that shape and organize our lives. These might be the language and thought patterns of Latino immigrants working in California, the experience of racism in the South (for blacks and whites), or northeastern political passion. None of these is neutral. All of them form, shape, and even control us. We enter these experiences formed by language before we can truly understand them. There is power at work here. There are stories. There are no more metanarratives that explain everything for everybody as postmodern philosopher Jean Lyotard tells us.[6] We are living in a postuniversal world where we can no longer assume we are speaking the same (conceptual or cultural) language. It's not that easy!

I (Geoff) remember preaching early on at Life on the Vine. Being from California, I used what I considered a harmless slang phrase that refers to getting angry. I later found out that people thought I was swearing (oh, and to make it worse, I was referring to God with these questionable words). So while we were all speaking English, my West Coast language was inadvertently offensive to the language of midwestern ears.

Similarly, we all live in overlapping networks of languages, cultures, and histories generating different hopes, passions, fears, and expectations. And just like moving from the West Coast to the Midwest, we must learn to inhabit these languages before we can proclaim Jesus within them. This is all a testimony to the postuniversal nature of our North American society in which this poster serves as a centerpiece.

More than just some catchphrases, then, this poster is a signpost pointing us away from our secure places. It directs us far into another country. It leads our church lives, everyday lives, and individual lives (we assume these are all part of one life) into the postattractional, postpositional, postuniversal cultures that lie at our doorstep. Our neighbors are too distracted to notice another well-produced program on a screen or a piece of entertainment in a theater. They quickly move from one "truth" to another. They live too fast and are too cynical. Only an encounter with something real, humble, and embodied, where they encounter a set of eyes, a conversation, and an authentic life, will cause them to take notice. These are the souls of the new post-Christendom cultures of the West. This is where they live. This is where we must go.

Not Prodigal Enough

In Santa Cruz, California, on my college campus, I (Geoff) was talking with an ecofeminist student about her desire to save endangered species. I admit I was trying to evangelize her! But we kept turning toward issues of the environment instead. No matter. I was well trained in the art of debunking evolution as a philosophy, exposing how this worldview actually gives no basis to care for the environment because it didn't have a place for a Creator who gives intrinsic worth to creation (and so on and so forth). I was a Bible-believing, philosophy-reading student ready to destroy all intellectual strongholds standing against the gospel. The only problem was that she wasn't interested in questions of origins (Where did the earth come from?), or ethics (How do we know what is good?), or my very compelling answers. She wasn't asking those questions. Rather than entering into her world, I was just repeating the questions and answers I

had learned from my established church culture. I was proclaiming the mainstays of traditional faith in an apologetic mode.

Mark Driscoll's book, *Vintage Jesus: Timeless Answers to Timely Questions*, does some of these same things. It answers questions such as, "Is Jesus the only God?" "How did people know Jesus was coming?" or "Where is Jesus today?"[7] There is nothing wrong with asking or answering these questions, of course. The problem is that these are proposed as timely questions meant to minister the gospel to a seeking world. Yet these questions assume people have a background from which to ask about Jesus. They are therefore Christendom questions. They reflect a Christendom confidence that everybody already knows who Jesus is and that he is important. It does not teach us how to engage those who know nothing about Jesus and suspect people who do. This approach isn't nearly prodigal enough.

Of course, knowing the dangers of the fundamentalism of my youth, I could have taken a different approach when talking with this student environmentalist. I could have wrapped the faith with an evolutionary cover, making it accessible and relevant to the passions of this young woman. I could have embraced, affirmed, and accepted this alternative worldview, inventing a new Christianity compatible with her hopes and aspirations. Isn't this what it means to be reckless in faith, entering the missional far country? Isn't this the best example of an excessive faith, ready to change and adapt for every situation, not holding anything back?

But this too leaves something to be desired. In our welcoming and affirming of all cultural nuances and alternate worldviews, we also want to be able to discern God: the God we know in and through Jesus Christ. Christ has said, "Behold I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5 ESV). Again and again we are told in the Bible that he is at work "reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19 ESV). We must not lose attentiveness to God's activity in the midst of our conversations. When we are in our neighborhoods, talking and helping, we must not find ourselves surrendering what we believe is good and right, losing the ability to discern the dark underbelly of things. If we do, then we will eventually find ourselves unable to enter into our surrounding neighborhoods prodigally, as God comes in Christ. God comes in Christ as one of us, affirming and accepting and loving. But God also comes overcoming evil and injustice by healing and restoring the broken. He comes as God bringing his saving reign into the world. In the same way, both of these aspects together are the sign of a prodigal Christianity following a prodigal God.

The Opportunities of Post-Christendom

Accepting the postattractional, postpositional, and postuniversal realities of mission in North America gives us an opportunity to learn again the prodigal nature of God, for the Triune God crosses all boundaries into our world of poverty and affliction in the Son rather than merely attracting us by magnificent displays of power and glory. He climbs down from a position of prestige and authority and becomes like us in our weary and despised state. He gives up a universal perspective and inhabits the flesh of a Jew in the Roman Empire. A prodigal Christianity understands each "post-" as opportunities for faithfulness rather than problems to be solved. Neither retreat nor revision will do. Instead we are sent into the depths of our neighborhoods to discover the prodigal God at work—the God revealed among the meek, in ordinary neighborhoods, within the languages and struggles of everyday life.

Each of the three "posts-" is seen in the Son, the one sent by God into the far country. We notice first that the Son becoming human didn't run an attractional campaign to gather large groups of people to himself. Jesus didn't have a single location or a simple message that drew crowds, and he was actively tearing people away from the stability offered by physical structures and social ties. To those desiring to follow him in some sort of easy and stable manner, Jesus responds, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Mark 8:20 NIV). When the disciples and the crowds wanted to consolidate early ministry successes at Capernaum, when they wanted to dig in and expand their ministry platform, Jesus had nothing to do with it. He simply responded, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also." Why? "Because that is why I was *sent*" (Luke 4:42–43 NIV). Living into the postattractional reality of post-Christendom is to follow in the prodigal way of the Sent One.

Likewise, God sent the Son into the middle of the largest empire in human history. Caesar, as its ruler, claimed to be a god and expected to be worshipped as such. In contrast to this, God sent his Son, "who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." He did not consider it necessary to flaunt his divine nature before the crowds, "but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." Not only this, but the Sent One was "found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:6–8 NIV).[8] The one who was already equal with God (the position Caesar aspired to) not only puts aside this status but took the place of the lowliest of low and

died the death of a slave, for only slaves and other non-Romans could be crucified. This humility, this obedience even unto death, is the prodigal place through which the presence of the Sent One is made known.

Jesus had no assumptions about power and prestige. He did not seek after places of influence and significance and did not rest on the seat of authority. In utter recklessness, the Sent One abandons the security of position, the pretense of power, the concern for control. In the eyes of Roman authority, this move from godhood to slavery was nonsense. For Roman authority, only a completely wasteful god would squander the opportunity to rule and dominate. Yet it should not surprise us that this is the postpositional posture of the prodigal God. And this posture of humility is the mark of those following God into the missional far country.

Finally, we should notice that the Sent One shows us what being post-universal looks like. The Sent One is not an abstraction living above the daily grind, a lofty thought beyond everyday concerns, a universal perspective outside our common blind spots. Rather, "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14 Message). The world-creating Word, the life-giving Word, the Word before the beginning and after the end, this Word took on flesh and blood, a common human body (a Jewish body to be precise), and moved in down the street (if you lived in Nazareth). The Word became local, not universal; concrete, not abstract. The Word left the virtual world, became analogue, and dwelled among us. The Word does not come to us as data to a hand-held device, but as a hand holding a hand.

Don't we mostly think of God as abstract, universal, outside space and time, beyond our experience, and above our comprehension? That God would become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth was a great scandal to the Greek philosophical mind. They thought God must be without a body, outside time, beyond emotion—like the Roman Caesar, scandalized by a God who would give up a position of authority; a God who would give up universality and take up particularity scandalized the Greek philosopher. This is the "scandal of particularity." It is only a prodigal God who would come in this way.

In the same manner, we must follow the prodigal way of the Son. We must enter each local context, each neighborhood, each place of work, and each social space. This is the journey of the Sent One who came and dwelled among us, who did not make us come to him, who came vulnerably and humbly, not out of a position of power, who came walking among us in flesh and blood in a way of life. He came communicating a message in his very life, using parables from local (agri)culture and

speaking the language of his day (Aramaic). To live into the postuniversal landscape of our post-Christendom situation, we must do no less.

These days, when our compasses are spinning and all the street lights are out, when our familiar routes are blocked and our maps are torn, this first signpost of post-Christendom directs us toward a prodigal Christianity that does not stand still in order to attract, does not sit in the seat of authority, and does not walk in the ways of the universal, but instead delights in the paths of the prodigal God.