

OFFER THEM LIFE!
INVESTIGATING THE IMPLICATIONS OF A
LIFE-BASED EVANGELISTIC VISION

ABSTRACT

by

Dan W. Dunn

The biblical theme of life may be viewed as one of the central organizing principles of the Bible, and therefore provides a strong and helpful foundation for the theory and practice of evangelism in the United States of America. In Chapter One support for this premise is offered and a range of related issues is discussed. An important result of this discussion is the proposal that an experience of full life was God's original intention for us in creation, and therefore is also God's current goal for our life in Jesus Christ. This God-intended experience of full life should be reflected in evangelism.

In the second chapter a brief exploration is made into the field of biblical studies, focusing on the theme of life in the Old Testament and Johannine theology. This exploration reveals an emphasis on God as the living God who invites us into an experience of full life through relationship with and obedience to God. Two tensions or continuums emerge. One is the tension between conceiving of life in terms of God's tangible blessings versus the blessing of knowing God. The other is a tension that involves the experience of God's full-life intentions for us now versus some future time. We also discover that the interrelated nature of the incarnation and the cross in John's gospel encourages a comprehensive understanding of life-based evangelism.

The third chapter describes an investigation of selected theologians concerning the life theme and related issues. From this investigation, several themes emerge as important: 1) our experience of life must remain tied to our relationship with and commitment to God; 2) life as God intends is relational; 3) God-intended life should impact all dimensions of living (such as personal, familial, communal, relational, social, economic, political, and cultural); 4) the life of holistic flourishing God intends will include a biblically appropriate understanding and experience of joy; and 5) life as God intends cannot be divorced from God's created material world.

In Chapter Four I engage in an analysis of the field research data that was collected from interviews with 153 persons in eight congregations. Five important areas for consideration in evangelistic theory and practice rise to the fore. First is the need for evangelism to include the possibility of experiencing positive benefits in this life in order to resonate well with non-believers. Second, Christians can have a profound influence on people in their relational networks. Third, emotional relevance should be included in ministries which will involve non-Christians. Fourth, the evangelistic community should struggle more fully with how to address the theme of financial health in a way that is theologically and biblically appropriate. Fifth, the dimension of joy should be considered in evangelistic vision and ministry.

In the final chapter I develop the beginning contours of a life-based evangelistic vision. One element of a life-based evangelistic vision is the following description of the gospel (the good news): *Through a full-bodied trust in and following of Jesus, we receive forgiveness and are initiated into a personal and public life of wholeness (redemption), reconciliation, and service. This life is best described as a holistic and relational*

flourishing of people, relational networks, communities, and God's creation, as together we partner with Jesus in his life-giving mission to the world, serving as agents of joy, peace, social justice, political justice, economic justice, love, purpose, and provision, in all personal and public dimensions of life. An additional element emerging from the research is that a life-based ministry of evangelism must be broadly conceived. The ministry of evangelism seeks to: 1) embody (portray and verbally communicate) the flourishing life that God intends for us as we follow Jesus; and to 2) invite, guide, lead, encourage, and/or direct non-believers toward choosing to follow Jesus and experiencing (and contributing to) that life for themselves and others. This life-based evangelistic ministry should be engaged in by individual Christians, relational groupings of Christians, organized congregations, and other Christian ministry groups.

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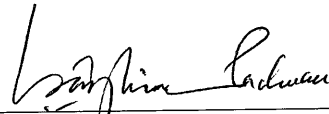
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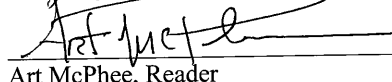
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CHAPTER ONE

INVESTIGATING THE EVANGELISTIC IMPLICATIONS OF

“LIFE” IN THE BIBLE

Premise

The biblical theme of life may be viewed as one of the primary themes of the Bible, and as such, provides a strong and helpful foundation for the theory and practice of evangelism in the U.S. American context.¹

Joe Dongell proposes that “full life” be viewed as the macro rubric of Scripture. As a root description of God, God is fundamentally the *living* God (as distinct from other descriptions, such as holy, powerful, loving). God is fully and vitally alive, and in Christ God wishes to share this full and vital experience of life with all of God’s creation, including human beings.² Hans Klein shares a similar perspective. He contends that the biblical material should be ordered and understood in relation to “life” (Old Testament) and “new life” (New Testament). He suggests a five-part outline for his biblical theology: a) God is the giver of life and new life; b) the Old Testament focuses on life and the New Testament on new life; c) threats to life (sin, death, and the devil); d) expectation of new life; and e) the relationship between the two testaments.³ The nature of the life that Christ

¹In a subsequent section of this chapter I describe some of the pertinent characteristics of the U.S. American context.

²Joe Dongell, “Biblical Theology as a Whole” (lecture, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY, May 7, 2009).

³This reference is based on a 1991 article by Charles Scobie, in which he investigates various attempts at developing biblical theologies, categorizing them according to three approaches: systematic, historical, and thematic. In his discussion of different thematic approaches he refers to a 1983 article by Klein. Klein’s original article is in German, so I must depend on Scobie’s assessment thereof. The original article is titled “Leben – neues Leben: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer gesamtbiblischen Theologies des Alten und

offers those who follow Him has vital implications for evangelism, especially in relation to the gospel message. What is the good news that Christians share with non-Christians⁴, and what kind of new life do they invite them to embrace? George Hunter tells the story of a young man who once admitted that he believed in Jesus but had never invited Him to be the leader of his life or fill him with His Spirit. Hunter asked why this was so, and the young man answered that he had learned in his hometown that opening up to Jesus would result in his becoming some kind of fanatic or kook, someone that he would not want to be. Hunter replied, “Look, it just isn’t so, and somebody back home once sold you a tragic bill of goods. If you could look into the future and see the man that Christ has in mind for you to be ten years from now, you would stand up and cheer and you would deeply want to be that man. The gospel is not bad news; it is *good* news. The *gospel* is *congruent with our deepest aspirations for ourselves*.”⁵ I propose that God created the earth, its animal and plant life, and human beings, to experience full, vibrant, vital life in relationship with God and one another, and this experience of life is what God both

Neuen Testaments,” and was published in *Evangelische Theologie* 43 (1983): 91-107. Charles H. H. Scobie, “The Structure of Biblical Theology,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (1991): 177-178.

⁴“Non-Christian” or “non-believer” will be used throughout this work to refer to those persons who are not actively and intentionally following Christ. “Pre-Christian” is a term which some scholars prefer because it honors the fact that the majority of persons in the West are outside the influence of Christianity and the Christian Church (see George G. Hunter III, *How to Reach Secular People*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992, 13-39). I acknowledge that the use of “pre-Christian” is helpful in reminding us of our apostolic task to reach persons who have little or no knowledge of Christianity. However, in this project I envision the “realm” of evangelism to include not only persons who have little or no knowledge of Christianity (or Christians), but also those who do have knowledge of Christianity (or Christians), and have not yet chosen to become Christ-followers. In this context, “non-Christian” includes those persons whom other scholars would designate as “pre-Christian,” but is not limited thereto. “Non-believers” will also be used on occasion, to honor the Johannine emphasis on believing in Jesus so that we may have life. John is, of course, not the only biblical author to emphasize the role of believing in Jesus, but his emphasis is very strong, as will be demonstrated later in the project.

⁵George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 53; emphasis added.

makes possible and invites us to embrace, in following Jesus Christ. This full life⁶ which God offers in Christ is the cornerstone of the good news, and offers a valuable foundation for the theory and practice of evangelism.

Current Situation Viewed from Two Perspectives

First Perspective on Current Situation--Understanding of Eternal Life

An important issue in this discussion is our understanding of *eternal* life.

“Eternal” refers to chronological time (forever), so that those who believe in Jesus will live with Him throughout eternity after physical death. However, the biblical understanding of eternal life is more than chronological eternity: it includes a fullness and vitality of life here on this earth. Commenting on John’s use of the Greek word for life (*zōē*), one author says that “in most cases it states expressly that the follower of Jesus possesses life even in this world.”⁷ Rudolf Bultmann agrees with this assessment. Commenting on a Greek verb cognate of life (*zāō*) in relation to its use in John’s gospel, he writes that “he who believes has *already* passed from death to life.”⁸ C. H. Dodd shares this perspective, claiming that John offered an addition to the normal Jewish eschatological understanding, so that our post-resurrection life begins not after our

⁶I prefer Dongell’s use of “full life” to Klein’s use of “new life.” Full life includes new life, but I conceive of it as moving beyond the newness of our life in Christ at the beginning of our relationship with Him (which includes relationship with God, other persons, and creation (more will be said on the relational nature of full life in Christ throughout this project), so that it includes a growing awareness and embrace of all that God intends for us in Him, throughout our lifetime and into chronological eternity.

⁷Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 430.

⁸Rudolf Bultmann, “ζωω,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume VI*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 870.

resurrection, but rather as a result of our believing in Jesus. Commenting on the Lazarus story, he writes that “the ‘resurrection’ of which Jesus has spoken is something which may take place *before* bodily death, and has for its result the possession of eternal life *here and now*.”⁹ We see, therefore, that the concept of eternal life includes a “life-now” dimension as well as a “life-then” dimension.

If life in Christ is understood primarily in terms of where (or if) we will live during chronological eternity, the focus of evangelism leans toward preparation for life after death. One example of this emphasis is found in the ministry of Evangelism Explosion. In the Evangelism Explosion training material, the two diagnostic questions recommended for Christians to use in their witnessing with non-Christians focus on whether or not the non-Christian will go to heaven. The first question is: “Have you come to a place in your spiritual life where you know for certain that if you were to die today you would *go to heaven*, or is that something you would say you’re still working on?”¹⁰ The second question asks: “Suppose you were to die today and stand before God and He were to say to you, ‘Why should I let you into My *heaven*?’ What would you say?”¹¹ This focus continues in the section describing the essential gospel to be shared, which is summarized as follows: heaven is a free gift; it is not earned or deserved; people are sinners and cannot save themselves; God is both merciful and just, so God came down into human flesh, died on the cross and rose from the dead to pay the penalty for our sins

⁹C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 148; emphasis added.

¹⁰D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion: Equipping Churches for Friendship, Evangelism, Discipleship, and Healthy Growth*, 4th ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996), 32; emphasis added.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 33; emphasis added.

and to *purchase a place in heaven* for us.¹² Of particular note is the statement that “the whole Bible is about *one great transaction*...By His grace He freely offers to give to us this gift of *heaven*.”¹³ This strong emphasis upon the everlasting nature of the life which Christ makes possible for us in heaven is an appropriate focus for the theory and practice of evangelism. Christians should be motivated by a strong interest in helping persons live forever with Christ, and ministries which are effective in sharing this dimension of the gospel are to be encouraged. This is especially true of ministries which have a strong follow-up process to help new believers move from the getting-to-heaven focus toward a focus on a thriving life of discipleship. In this regard, one may agree with George Sweazey, who notes that as long as a congregation is effective in helping Christians grow in their experience of the many dimensions of life in God’s grace, they “can safely make their first appeal through just one aspect of the gospel.”¹⁴ Some congregations or ministries, however, may find it extremely difficult to make their discipleship and follow-up ministries broader and more in-depth than their evangelism ministries. The dimension(s) of the gospel which they focus upon in their evangelism may tend(s) to be the dimension(s) which take(s) precedence in the rest of their ministries.¹⁵

¹²D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion*, 33-36; emphasis added.

¹³*Ibid.*, 34-35; emphasis added.

¹⁴George E. Sweazey, *Effective Evangelism: The Greatest Work in the World* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1953), 60.

¹⁵As one example, *Evangelism Explosion* engages in a follow-up process in which a life of discipleship is encouraged, but this new life of discipleship is predicated upon the evangelistic emphasis upon heaven. Thus, discipleship is fueled by our gratitude for the gift of heaven (“The reason for living a godly life is gratitude...I’m saying ‘thank you’ for the gift of eternal life Christ has given me.” D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion*, 49). This is an appropriate focus, but it is also a limiting focus that makes it difficult for persons to capture and experience the full-life dimensions of Christian living.

Evangelism in the U.S. American context, therefore, should not limit itself to the heavenly dimension of the good news of Jesus Christ. This is especially true when one considers that Christian evangelizing must attend to questions and issues which people are actually addressing, rather than those which Christians *think* they are (or *should* be) addressing.¹⁶ It is here that a stronger emphasis on the biblical theme of life can inform evangelistic efforts, for people today have far more interest in whether they can experience life *now* than in whether (or where) they will live for chronological eternity.¹⁷ This is a crucial area for study, and one to consistently attend to during the research

¹⁶Leslie Newbigin argues against this perspective in *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989). He suggests that the “logic” of mission encourages us to understand that the foundation of mission is God’s action in Christ, which has brought about “the presence of a new reality.” To address ourselves to questions which the world is asking does not serve well because “the world’s questions are not the questions which lead to life” (119). As the Church is faithful to its Lord, the Kingdom’s presence will be felt and people will begin to ask the questions which only the gospel can answer. I agree with Newbigin’s claim that the world’s questions are not those that lead to life. However, I also concur with other writers who claim that some of the best *starting points* for relationships with non-Christians are related to questions which those non-Christians are asking. I do not suggest that we should be bound by their questions, but we should at least be aware of them and know that they can sometimes provide points of identification and entry into conversation and/or relationship. In a related vein, Donald McGavran advocates field research to help Christians discover what *actually* helps persons choose to become Christ-followers, rather than falling back on practices that we *think will* work or *ought* to work because they worked for us or because we like them. He refers to *effective* evangelism. Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 54-66; 192. Additionally, given the strong individualistic focus in U.S. American culture, it is likely that most non-believers will first be motivated to consider the Christ-following journey based on appeal to their own self-interest. As Steward and Bennett contend, one result of the U.S. American focus on individualism is “an intense self-centeredness” (Edward Steward and Milton Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, revised edition [Boston MA: Intercultural Press, 1991], 63). In this context, to expect non-Christians to be *initially* motivated by questions that they do not see as being relevant to them in some way is simply unrealistic.

¹⁷Donald Soper has observed that as a result of the process of secularity, five shifts took place in the Western world. One of these shifts was from a death orientation to a life orientation, and this has enormous impact on evangelistic thinking and practice. With much longer life expectancies, and with the ongoing crusade of modern medicine against disease, people no longer think about death on such a large scale as they once did. There is a far greater emphasis upon life. Soper maintains that we must bear this in mind as we advocate the good news of Jesus Christ. “If we talk about eternal life, as under God we are compelled to do when we preach, we must talk about the *present* possibility which our blessed Lord advocated and himself spoke of” (Donald Soper, *The Advocacy of the Gospel* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1961], 17-18; emphasis added). Soper’s insights are almost fifty years old, but they remain true even today, as confirmed in Charles Taylor’s much more recent work. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor notes that “modern humanism tends to develop a notion of human flourishing which has no place for death” and that death “must be combated, and held off till the very last moment” (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007], 320).

phase. In what ways are people seeking life today? How much does their battle against death take away from their experience of full life? If we assume that they are seeking life, do we make a corollary assumption that their daily experience is more akin to death? If so, who or what are the “thieves” that are trying to steal and kill and destroy their lives (based on the language of John 10:10)? Christians, therefore, must continually discern ways of thinking about and practicing evangelism that honors the strong biblical theme that God wants God’s created humanity to experience life fully (“abundantly,” according to John 10:10), on this earth, prior to physical death.

When evangelism deals with sin, for example, mutual emphasis could be given to the life-forever benefits of being forgiven through Christ (e.g. access to heaven) *and* to the life-now benefits of Christ’s forgiveness (e.g. freedom from bondage).¹⁸ Likewise, evangelism could endeavor to discover appropriate means for expressing how deeply God is *for* humanity while at the same time honoring that God is *against* sin. Similarly, repentance could be accentuated as an important dimension of “getting right with God” in order to prepare oneself for life in the hereafter, but it could also be stressed as a contributing factor to reconciliation and full enjoyment of relationships with people here on earth. The same point could be illustrated in relation to other theological and evangelistic concepts, such as atonement, redemption, salvation, and justification, among others. In evangelism, each of these concepts could be conceived and expressed in ways

¹⁸John Wesley addresses this in an indirect way with the distinction he makes between justification and the new birth. He writes that “God in justifying us does something *for* us; in begetting us again, he does the work *in* us. The former changes our outward relation to God, so that of enemies we become children; by the latter our inmost souls are changed, so that of sinners we become saints. The one restores us to the favour, the other to the image, of God. The one is the taking away the guilt, the other the taking away the power, of sin...” John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. V*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 224.

that would honor both the life-after-death *and* the life-before-death benefits of following Christ.

Current evangelism in the USA does not completely ignore the impact of Christ-following during this lifetime. However, some of the common ways that evangelism portrays the benefits of Christ-following during this lifetime fall far short of the fully-orbed life which God intends God's followers to experience. Two U.S. American portraits of Christian living in particular come to mind: the prosperity gospel¹⁹ and the "you'll never have another problem" gospel. The prosperity gospel speaks to abundant living on this side of death; however, some of its proponents seem to do so in biblically and theologically inappropriate ways. There is too much emphasis on financial well-being and too little emphasis on other dimensions of God-intended human fullness, such as servanthood, mutuality in helping other people thrive, and relational community. As Ken Sarles has noted, "Jesus' own life adds eloquent testimony that the will of God does not always include material success."²⁰ I will deal more fully with the prosperity gospel in a subsequent chapter. The "you'll never have another problem" gospel obviously communicates that following Christ brings blessings in this life, but it just as obviously promises something which cannot be delivered, and which God neither promises nor

¹⁹In defining "prosperity gospel," I prefer Gordon Fee's description that the primary affirmation of the prosperity gospel is that "God wills the (financial) prosperity of every one of his children, and therefore for a Christian to be in poverty is to be outside God's intended will." A related secondary affirmation that is often implied or stated outright is that "the King's kids...should always go first-class." Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health & Wealth Gospels* (Costa Mesa, CA: The Word for Today, 1979), 2-3.

²⁰Ken L. Sarles, "A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 43, no. 572, O-D (1986): 341. For additional reading from different perspectives, see John R. Schneider's *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), and Justo Gonzalez' *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1990).

intends.²¹ One need only consider the “hall of faith” in Hebrews 11 to discern that faithfulness in following God’s way does not guarantee problem-free living. A principal issue (the problem) to be addressed in this research, therefore, is that some evangelistic theory and practice does not sufficiently appreciate and incorporate the biblical theme of full life in Christ, particularly in relation to God’s intention for us to experience fullness of life here on earth, prior to physical death.

Second Perspective on Current Situation – Basing Evangelism on “Kingdom”

The foundational premise of this project is that evangelistic theory and practice should be grounded in the biblical theme of life. How, therefore, does the strong Synoptic emphasis upon the kingdom of God fit into this picture? This issue will be dealt with further in the Theoretical Framework, but it would also be helpful to briefly address it now. One may consider, for example, the proposal from William Abraham that evangelism is best understood as “that set of intentional activities governed by the goal of initiating persons into the kingdom of God for the first time.”²² With his emphasis on initiation into the kingdom of God, Abraham seeks to honor the strong prevalence of kingdom language and imagery in the Bible, and particularly in regard to the teachings of Jesus. Furthermore, he wants to distinguish between initiating persons into the kingdom and initiating them into the church. This helps us move from an anthropocentric focus on “what we do or on what is done to us” in the church’s initiation process to a theocentric

²¹It is difficult to locate examples in print for citation purposes of no-more-problems evangelism. George Hunter observes that this kind of message usually gets communicated when preachers get carried away in their evangelistic communication, but they seldom include it in written works (personal email communication, February 19, 2010).

²²William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 95.

focus “on the majestic and awesome activity of a Trinitarian God whose actions on our behalf stagger our imagination and dissolve into impenetrable mystery.”²³ Based on this foundational claim concerning the kingdom, Abraham proceeds to delineate six dimensions involved in kingdom initiation: corporate, cognitive, moral, experiential, operational, and disciplinary.²⁴ Grounded in this comprehensive kingdom-based understanding, he extracts three principles that are vital for the ministry of evangelism. First, evangelism is inextricably linked with worship in the Christian community. Second, the good news of the kingdom must be proclaimed. Third, some form of the catechumenate should be reinstated in order to help kingdom initiates understand and embrace all six dimensions of kingdom initiation.²⁵

A different portrayal of evangelism is offered by Scott Jones, who insists that evangelism should be theologically grounded in what has become known as Jesus’ Great Commandment, to love God and neighbor.²⁶ Jones suggests that loving God and neighbor are central to God’s intentions for us and as such must be given the highest priority in theological inquiry, as well as in the theology and practice of evangelism. It is out of love for us and all of God’s creation that God came to earth as Jesus and announced the reign of God. Furthermore, the appropriate way to respond to God’s reign is to be a practicing disciple. Therefore, it is through discipleship that we best learn and practice the love of God, neighbor, and self. In this way, Jones connects the prior act and reality of God’s

²³William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 98.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 103.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 167-180.

²⁶Varying versions of the Great Commandment are found in Matthew 22:40, Mark 12:28-34, and Luke 10:28.

love with our consequent response of love for God, self, and others.²⁷ Evangelism, therefore, “is that set of loving, intentional activities governed by the goal of initiating persons into Christian discipleship in response to the reign of God.”²⁸ We note that Jones refers to the initiation of persons into Christian discipleship in response to the reign of God, whereas Abraham refers to initiating them into the reign (kingdom) of God itself. For Abraham, therefore, one might surmise that the kingdom of God is the overarching theme of Scripture, while for Jones it is the love of God for humanity and God’s creation that fulfills that role. In any case, they each attempt to include the kingdom theme in their theological vision for evangelism. Given the strong presence of the kingdom theme in the Synoptic gospels, this is not surprising in the least, and to a certain extent this is helpful. Inclusion of the kingdom theme in evangelistic thought reminds us that the primary role of evangelism is not to guide people toward church membership, but rather is to guide them towards God’s intentions for them. For Abraham, God’s intentions for us revolve around God’s kingdom, whereas for Jones those intentions revolve around the love of God, self, and others that becomes possible through Christian discipleship.

It is not the purpose of this project to engage in a point-by-point debate with Jones and Abraham concerning their evangelistic visions. Furthermore, there is much to value in each of their visions. There is no question that Jones is correct in insisting that evangelism must move persons toward discipleship, and that this discipleship must be grounded in the love of God, which is a foundational characteristic of God. Likewise, Abraham’s desire to honor the kingdom theme in the Bible and to avoid undue focus

²⁷Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003), 13-18; 50-65; 99.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 18.

upon introducing persons to the institutional church is an appropriate emphasis. There is, however, another theme that is *prior* to their themes of choice: **life**. As will be developed further in the Theoretical Framework, a strong case may be made that God's prior (primordial) intention for humanity and all of creation is full, vibrant, teeming life.

God's reign as both embodied and proclaimed by Jesus is vitally important to the biblical portrayal, and so too is a life of discipleship grounded in love; but each of these may be appropriately viewed in relation to the foundational theme of life. The kingdom, for example, could be thought of as the "arena" in which God-intended life is best experienced. Where God's ways prevail, there is where the full life God intends for all of creation will be fostered.²⁹ In a similar fashion, a life of discipleship grounded in love could be envisioned as descriptive (either partially or fully) of how a person could best follow Christ and in that way experience the life He intends for them. In addition to the excellent scholarship that Abraham and Jones contribute to evangelistic theory and practice, we may applaud their specific foci, for they add to the range of understandings and images that may be used in evangelism to draw persons toward choosing the life which God offers in Jesus. Their evangelistic visions are not considered incorrect or less valuable than a life-based one. A life-based evangelistic vision, however, is equally as valuable as theirs. Furthermore, a life-based evangelistic vision is biblically and

²⁹Based on the Hebrew *malkut*, the Aramaic *malku*, and the Greek *basileia*, "kingdom" refers primarily to kingship, sovereignty, reign, or rule, and secondarily to the realm of that rule. See G. R. Beasley-Murray, "The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35:1, March (1992): 19; Chrys C. Caragounis, "Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 417; and George Eldon Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1964), 118-144.

theologically *prior* to those based in God's reign or kingdom, for creation of life takes place in the biblical narrative far sooner than any mention of God's kingdom or reign.³⁰

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to discern the evangelistic implications that arise from a strong focus upon the biblical theme of life in its God-intended fullness. There are four clusters of questions that are of particular interest regarding the implications of a life-based evangelistic vision. The first cluster pertains to the *gospel*. What is the "good news"? What is *good* about the "good news"? In inviting others to Christ, what is it that we are inviting non-Christians toward? What are we asking them to embrace? Do our general theological understandings connect with our specific gospel understanding? To what extent does our full-life understanding influence our communication of the good news with others?³¹ If it is included in our gospel communication, is it also included in the invitation that is extended to non-Christians? Is invitation intrinsic to the gospel? Does a belief in full life in Christ show up in our "Sinner's Prayers," or is there a lack of connection at that point?

³⁰As a person steeped in the Wesleyan tradition, I find it encouraging that Steve Harper links much of Wesleyan theology with a focus on life. When presenting foundational Wesleyan concepts in seminars or workshops, he divides them into three main categories: a) the message of life (grace); b) the means to life (the means of grace); and c) the mission for life. A further delineation is made within each of these three categories. The "message of life" involves a) prevenient grace, the invitation to life; b) converting grace, the entrance into life; c) sanctifying grace, the consecration of life; and d) glorifying grace, the transition to everlasting life. The "means of life" include a) instituted means and; b) prudential means. The "mission for life" comprises of a) redeem the lost; b) renew the church; and c) reform the nation. Personal conversation with Steve Harper, April 27, 2011.

³¹For example, if a person claims to believe in full life in Christ, but utilizes the "Bridge Method" in their gospel presentations, which focuses on the chasm between unredeemed humanity and God, that may represent a lack of connection between theological belief and gospel presentation.

In his investigation of the growth of Christianity from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries, Richard Fletcher poses ten questions that are important to consider. Three in particular are pertinent to the present discussion: a) what were the expectations of the potential converts (what were they being asked to embrace or do)?, b) how was the gospel message communicated (in what language? utilizing what concepts?)?, and c) how adaptable was the gospel message?³² These questions may prove useful as guides in this research journey. Lewis Drummond also provides insight into this cluster of questions. He notes that three New Testament words give us a fuller understanding of the gospel: *kerygma* (proclamation), *soteria* (salvation), and *basileus* (kingdom).³³ Most pertinent to my research is the fact that Drummond invests three chapters in exploring the various facets of *kerygma*, *soteria*, and *basileus*, yet he fails to offer his own description of “the gospel.” This demonstrates how challenging it is for Christians to arrive at a consensus concerning the essence of the gospel. One claim to be considered, therefore, is that many Christians share Drummond’s difficulty in “nailing down” a gospel understanding, and this impacts evangelism. A second claim is that full life in Christ prior to physical death should be incorporated into any definition or description of the gospel.³⁴

³²Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 6-9.

³³The *kerygma* includes a *historical* biblical gospel content that should never be left out. *Existentially*, however, we must remember that particular, present human need is addressed in the gospel communication, with a faith response being invited and anticipated. *Soteria* refers to deliverance from sin, self, and standing judgment. This deliverance is made possible through the substitutionary death of Christ. In addition to being delivered *from* sin, self, and standing judgment, Christians are also delivered *to* justification, redemption, and eternal life. Regarding *basileus*, Drummond notes that Jesus personifies the kingdom, rules in that realm, and is the door through which one enters therein. The central purpose of the kingdom is reconciliation. Lewis A. Drummond, *The Word of the Cross: A Contemporary Theology of Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 203-283.

³⁴A tentative claim that I may explore in a subsequent chapter is whether or not it would be valuable to search for a new verbal articulation of the gospel that would honor the biblical theme of life and also move away from some of the more commonly used expressions in evangelism, such as “accepting Jesus Christ as

A second cluster of questions and claims relates to the notion of allowing the biblical theme of *life* to both inform and motivate the theory and practice of Christian evangelism. What does “life” mean? What kind of life is intended by God for men and women? What does God do to offer us full life? What do human beings need to do to appropriate or access full life? How might we lose this life? What perspectives do we gain from Old Testament scholars who value the life theme? What do New Testament scholars add to the mix? What does the prevalence of the life theme in John’s gospel mean?³⁵

George Hunter offers an important caution to this discussion, for he notes that the gospel is a multi-faceted gem. There are a multitude of biblical themes that are meaningful and appropriate to emphasize. Therefore, I want to guard against so highly elevating a particular theme that I end up with a dysfunctional version of Christianity.³⁶ This is a helpful reminder. I want to better understand the full life that Christ invites us

your Lord and Savior.” I do not propose that we cease using this and other well-known expressions, for they have a certain truth and power of their own. I do suggest, however, that the language of “acceptance” and “receiving” carries with it a range of meanings that may limit our capacity (or willingness) to embrace the complexity of meanings that might be communicated with a different kind of language regarding fullness-of-life. For example, some Christians lean toward a “transactional” understanding of “accepting/receiving” Christ, so that once they have prayed the Sinner’s Prayer, they have “received” their salvation in a transaction between themselves and God. There is a certain sense in which they view their salvation as a “certificate” for heavenly entrance, so that they hold on to it for “insurance purposes,” but it has no lasting impact in their daily living. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson note that there are some metaphors we use in our culture that not only *express* our conceptions of the world, but actually *shape* those conceptions [George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, with new afterword (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3-6]. It is in this context that I wonder about the possibility and value of developing a new way of expressing the gospel to be used in the ministry of evangelism, so that we can more appropriately conceptualize the link between the biblical theme of life and the communication of the gospel.

³⁵In a subsequent section (Methodology) I will explain why I chose to focus on John’s gospel in this project.

³⁶Personal conversation, July 27, 2009.

to, but I don't want to imprison that life in "walls of thought" that I myopically create.³⁷

With this caution at hand, therefore, one claim I would make is that a biblical theme of life is an appropriate and helpful theological lens through which to view all of Scripture.

A second claim is that a strong emphasis on the biblical theme of life will provide a viable and useful theological basis for evangelism.

A third cluster of questions and claims that emerges directly from the previous discussion has to do with the *relationship between the biblical themes of life, the kingdom of God* (especially in the Synoptic gospels), and *eternal life* (especially in John). Given the strong emphasis of Jesus on the kingdom of God in the Synoptic gospels, would one say that the biblical theme of life is somehow subservient to the kingdom theme, vice-versa, or is there another way to conceptualize that relationship? Since John's gospel virtually ignores kingdom language and strongly emphasizes the language of life, especially eternal life, might we conceive of the kingdom and eternal life as two ways to express the same truth(s), or are they separate yet related dimensions of the gospel, or something else?

³⁷In the dissertation I will dedicate a small section to this discussion, dealing with at least two issues. One is the impact that the "already-but-not-yet" nature of the Kingdom has on Christian experience, and therefore on evangelism (see Theoretical Framework for more on this issue). A second issue relates to the cost of full life discipleship. The benefits of Christ-following are enormous, but they come at a price (obedience, service, self-sacrifice, etc.). In our evangelism, therefore, we want to: a) be transparent and honest about the costs of following Christ; and b) not over-promise the fullness of life that persons will experience. That being said, however, I want to reiterate that the purpose of this project is to focus on the full life that is available in Jesus Christ. Thus, while it is appropriate to caution against over-emphasizing full life in our evangelism, it is also possible to under-emphasize it. Moreover, some persons may assume that in *strongly* emphasizing full life, the costly nature of this full life is *automatically* de-emphasized. With this I do not agree. Charles Simeon, in a discussion of divine sovereignty and human accountability, says that "The truth is not in the middle, nor in one extreme; but in both extremes" (W. Carus, ed., *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon*, n.p.: CUP, 1847; 600, quoted in John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001; 85). Stott utilizes this idea in his thinking related to the Incarnation, but it applies here as well. We more appropriately honor both the full-life benefit and the sacrificial cost of Christian living not by trying to strike a balance between them, nor by emphasizing one over the other. Rather, we honor both of them by pushing each of them to their fullest understandings. The purpose of this research is to contribute to an "extreme push" regarding full life in Christ and its implications for evangelism.

A fourth cluster of questions and claims deals with the *relational* dimensions of full life in Christ. What is the relationship between *my* experience of full life in Christ and *your* experience of it? Can a person experience this life outside of relationship? How predominantly does full life in Jesus flow along relational lines to reach those who do not yet follow Him? How privatized can evangelism be? How communal should it be? Philip Potter believes that the experience of full life cannot be privatized, but must include a participation in extending that full life to others. According to his biographer, Potter feels that “the way of Christ (an open door) is always to welcome and enable others to share in a full life.”³⁸ Viv Grigg agrees. He writes that “disciplemaking is the transmission of life-to-life,” it is “God’s love being poured through one life into another, until the second life catches that love.”³⁹ Donald McGavran also highlights the relational transmission of new life in Christ. He contends that evangelism travels most effectively along relational networks.⁴⁰ This issue is so important that George Hunter considers it to be one of the six “mega-strategies” for evangelism.⁴¹ Rodney Stark underscores this issue as well, claiming that “the basis for successful conversionist movements is growth through social networks, through a *structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments*.”⁴² An

³⁸Michael N. Jagessar, *Full Life for All: The Work and Theology of Philip A. Potter; A Historical Survey and Systematic Analysis of Major Themes* (Uitgeverij Boekencentrum: Zoetermeer, 1997), 123.

³⁹Viv Grigg, *Companion to the Poor: Christ in the Urban Slums*, rev. ed. (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2004), 70.

⁴⁰Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005; previously published by World Dominion Press, 1955), 12.

⁴¹George G. Hunter III, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1987), 35.

⁴²Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 20.

important claim in this project, therefore, is that full life in Christ cannot be experienced, expressed, or shared outside the scope of relationships, nor at the expense of other persons.

The U.S. American Context of the Study

It will help the reader to understand that the scope of this project will be limited to the U.S. American context. Given the complexity of the U.S. American demographic situation and the presence of multiple ways of seeing the world, it is difficult (if not impossible) to describe *the* U.S. American context. There are a great many ethnic and linguistic expressions represented in the USA. Additionally, there are varying “worldviews” that shape how persons see the world and respond thereto. One can read a vast array of literature, for example, concerning modern, post-modern, and post-postmodern worldview dynamics.⁴³ Moreover, some scholars believe that generational differences can enlighten us concerning cultural and/or worldview variations, so that in recent years words such as Boomers, Millennials, and Xers have crept into our vocabulary.⁴⁴ Additionally, we could point to the divergent political views that are

⁴³Paul Hiebert, for example, writes about the different dynamics involved in the worldview of small-scale oral societies, the peasant worldview, the modern worldview, the postmodern worldview, and the post-postmodern worldview. See Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 105-264.

⁴⁴A few examples of literature relating to different generations in America include the following: Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2000); Thom S. Rainier and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2011); Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais, *Millennial Momentum: How a New Generation Is Remaking America* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011); J. Walker Smith and Ann Clurman, *Generation Ageless: How Baby Boomers Are Changing the Way We Live Today . . . And They're Just Getting Started* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2007); Amy Hanson, *Baby Boomers and Beyond: Tapping the Ministry Talents and Passions of Adults over 50* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Jonathan Boehman and David Weighelt, *Dot Boom: Marketing to Baby Boomers Through Meaningful Online Engagement* (Great Falls, VA: LINX, 2009); Tamara J. Erickson, *What's Next, Gen X?: Keeping Up, Moving Ahead, and Getting the Career You Want* (Boston, MA:

represented in the USA, as well as the broad array of religious (or irreligious) perspectives. Any perceptive observer of the U.S. American context will understand that it includes a diverse representation of many viewpoints.

In spite of this divergent scene, however, one can yet discern a consistent coherence among certain key elements of how Americans in general think and act in their daily lives. Robert Bellah, for example, suggests that through the “institutions” of the state and the free enterprise market, by way of their “agencies” of television and education, “there is an enormously powerful common culture in America.”⁴⁵ Gary Althen and Janet Bennett note that even though there is a wide-ranging diversity in the U.S. American context, when one compares U.S. Americans to people from other nations (such as the Japanese, for example), “it becomes clear that certain attitudes and behaviors are much more characteristic of the Americans and others are far more typical of the Japanese.”⁴⁶ Claude Fischer writes that in spite of the “changes, spikes, sideways moves, and reversals” that may be discerned in United States history, “continuity is a striking feature of American culture,” so that “what seemed socially distinctive about America in the eighteenth century still seems distinctive in the twenty-first.”⁴⁷

Harvard Business School Publishing, 2010); Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . and How to Bring Them Back* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2010); Rob Stam, *Almost Our Time: Generation X Takes On America's Challenges* (Holland, MI: Black Lake Press, 2010). This is obviously not an exhaustive list, but is sufficient to confirm that generational differences is one of the ways that people think about and discuss the U.S. American context.

⁴⁵Robert N. Bellah, “Is There a Common American Culture?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, No. 3 (1998): 614-616.

⁴⁶Gary Althen and Janet Bennett, *American Ways: A Cultural Guide to the United States*, 3rd edition (Boston, MA: Intercultural Press, 2011), xxii.

⁴⁷Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 241.

This does not mean that all Americans think and act precisely the same.⁴⁸ There is variation, uniqueness, and divergence. And yet there are also some deep-seated convictions and behavioral tendencies that permeate much of the U.S. American context.⁴⁹ The available literature about U.S. American cultural tendencies illustrates a large number of things that one might say are important for understanding the U.S. American context.⁵⁰ To be as concise as possible, however, I will limit the ensuing brief comments to the two cultural dimensions that are most pertinent to this project. At later points in the dissertation I will introduce additional U.S. American tendencies that are germane to specific topics being discussed at those times.

⁴⁸Bellah observes that “common cultures are normally riven with argument, controversy, and conflict,” so that even minor cultural differences between persons within the same community (community in this context can be as small as the family) “can give rise to significant differences in identity” (Robert N. Bellah, *Is There a Common American Culture?*, 620-621). In a similar vein, Edward Steward and Milton Bennett conceive of a culture not as a “monolithic structure” but rather “more like a river composed of many channels.” In this sense, “cultures are composed of variations and provide guidance, not control” (Edward C. Steward and Milton J. Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, revised edition [Boston MA: Intercultural Press, 1991], 173).

⁴⁹Though I have been exposed to a great deal of anthropological and sociological research, neither anthropology nor sociology are my fields of expertise. For the purposes of this project, therefore, I will not attempt any strict definitions of culture, worldview, and the like. These kinds of definitions and the distinctions between them can be quite helpful, of course, but they can also be confusing and complex. Steward and Bennett, for example, talk about the difference between cultural assumptions and cultural values (*American Cultural Patterns*, 14). Bellah refers to the fact that culture and identity are dissimilar, yet both are important (*Is There a Common American Culture?*, 620-621). Althen and Bennett use a varied terminology to denote what they mean by culture, including ideals, attitudes, behaviors, ideas, and values (*American Ways*, xxii). My point is simply to say that in describing the U.S. American context for the purpose of this dissertation, I am focusing primarily on the simple yet important dimensions of how U.S. Americans think and act.

⁵⁰Following are a few examples of themes that are highlighted in the literature. Althen and Bennett highlight eight primary categories: 1) individualism, freedom, competitiveness, and privacy; 2) equality; 3) informality; 4) the future, change, and progress; 5) goodness of humanity; 6) time (linear); 7) achievement, action, work, and materialism; and 8) directness and assertiveness (Gary Althen and Janet Bennett, *American Ways*, 4). Claude Fischer lifts up voluntarism (a combination of individualism and commitment to voluntary groups [more on this later]) as the most distinctive element of U.S. American culture, but also stresses the role of security, material goods, and self-perfecting (*Made in America*, ix and 8-9). Steward and Bennett mention several of the themes that are highlighted by Althen and Bennett, plus they refer to pragmatism, null logic, causation, achievement, and time thrift (*American Cultural Patterns*, 33-74). Charles Taylor contends that secularity is a pervasive feature of the U.S. American context. He describes secularity as “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently, not the easiest to embrace (*A Secular Age* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007], 3.

The dimension of the U.S. American context that is by far the most pervasive and impactful is the passionate stress on individualism. Robert Bellah talks about this in reference to the strong emphasis in the USA on the “sacredness of the individual conscience, the individual person.” He traces this emphasis back to the sectarian religious groups that landed on American shores in the seventeenth century. These sectarians brought with them an intense commitment to “the absolute centrality of religious freedom, of the sacredness of individual conscience in matters of religious belief.”⁵¹ Since that time, the emphasis on individualism has expanded to include not only a focus on individual conscience but also an understanding of the individual “self” as distinct and unique. In this regard, Steward and Bennett write that “Americans naturally assume that each person is not only a separate biological entity, but also a unique psychological being and a singular member of the social order,” so that “me and my” is “one of the sharpest dichotomies of American culture.”⁵² Diane Asitimbay asserts that one of the reasons this individual stress is so robust in the USA is that we are immersed in this reality from a very early age. She notes that “the notion of individual needs coming before the needs of others is taught before you can even talk.” Additionally, children are taught that they have freedom to make choices. “You choose. This is what you hear, like an echo, from every corner of the United States.”⁵³ Many other sources could be cited to echo the belief that individualism is a driving force (most likely *the* driving force) of U.S. American culture. The reader will encounter repeated references to the impact of individualism in

⁵¹Robert N. Bellah, *Is There a Common American Culture?*, 617.

⁵²Edward C. Steward and Milton J. Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, 129.

⁵³Diane Asitimbay, *What's Up America? A Foreigner's Guide to Understanding Americans*, 2nd edition (San Diego, CA: Culturelink Press, 2009), 9.

this dissertation. To cite just one example, individualism influences how willing (or able) U.S. Americans are to respond to the idea that God created us to be relational and social beings, and this impacts our understanding of the vital role of participation in communities of faith as integral to our Christ-following journey.

The second dimension of the U.S. American context that is germane to this project is privacy, and it grows out of the emphasis on individualism. Because we conceive of the individual “self” as a distinct and unique entity, we also therefore view ourselves as separate from all others, and hence we attach a strong value to privacy. Since we are different from everyone else and have our own unique identity, we “tend to assume that most people ‘need some time to themselves’ ... to think about things or recover their spent psychological energy.”⁵⁴ Just as individualism makes it difficult for people to respond fully to God’s intentions for them to live as relational and social beings, so too does privatization make it challenging to embrace God’s intentions for our Christ-following journey to impact us not only in the private, interior spaces of our lives but also in the exterior, public spaces of our lives. A related point that Steward and Bennett make is that the concept of people being “unique individuals with private selves inaccessible to others” makes it problematic for U.S. Americans to “form the kinds of deep and lasting friendships in which friends become mutually dependent upon each other.”⁵⁵ This presents a two-fold blow to the relational and social character of the life God intends for us. Individualism in and of itself makes it difficult to embrace that life, and the privacy which individualism fosters makes it yet even more difficult, for it

⁵⁴Gary Althen with Janet Bennett, *American Ways*, 11.

⁵⁵Edward Steward and Milton Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, 101-104.

imprisons us in an existence that is virtually devoid of the kind of deep friendships through which we could learn how to live in profoundly relational and social ways.

Theoretical Framework

The tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of the kingdom of God serves as the starting point for the theoretical framework of this project. As many biblical scholars and theologians recognize, the kingdom was a primary focus of Jesus’ ministry in the Synoptic gospels. Mark shows Jesus’ public ministry commencing with the announcement that “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”⁵⁶ Matthew portrays a similar beginning after Jesus’ wilderness experience, noting that “from that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”⁵⁷ Luke introduces Jesus’ connection with kingdom thinking even before Jesus’ birth, as the angel Gabriel tells Mary that the child to whom she will give birth “will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”⁵⁸ The importance of “kingdom” to Jesus’ ministry and teaching is seldom in dispute. However, the intended meanings, understandings, and applications of Jesus’ kingdom imagery have received a wide variety of interpretations through the years. One of the issues that has created a great deal of discussion has to do with whether

⁵⁶ Mark 1:15, *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version (hereafter referred to as ESV).

⁵⁷ Matthew 4:17, ESV. Though some scholars believe that Matthew’s designation of the kingdom of *heaven* should be interpreted differently than the designation of the kingdom of *God* in Mark and Luke, the majority of scholars view these designations as referring to the same symbolic concept. Caragounis, for example, says that the “equivalence” of these two designations “is indicated by their content, context and interchangeability in the Gospels” (Chrys C. Caragounis, “Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992], 417).

⁵⁸ Luke 1:33, ESV.

or not and/or when the kingdom of God will be (or has been) fulfilled, consummated, brought to some sense of completion.

Albert Schweitzer, for example, believed that Jesus was originally awaiting a kingdom consummation in some sort of parousia, so that when that failed to materialize, Jesus and His followers began to re-imagine and reformulate their views about the kingdom's nearness, pushing the coming of the kingdom out to the future. He follows the lead of the "thoroughgoing eschatological school," noting that "the whole history of 'Christianity' down to the present day, that is to say, the real inner history of it, is based on the 'delay of the parousia.'"⁵⁹ Schweitzer is not alone in his emphasis upon a future-oriented understanding of Jesus' kingdom teachings. Regarding the prevalence of kingdom imagery in the Gospels, Darrell Bock writes that "the bulk of the uses look to the future consummation of the kingdom."⁶⁰ C. H. Dodd, on the other hand, believed that the predominant lens through which we should view Jesus' kingdom language is that of "realized eschatology," by which he meant that "it is not that the Kingdom of God will shortly come, but that it is a present fact."⁶¹ This perspective led Dodd to interpret most of Jesus' kingdom-related parables as focusing on present impact rather than referring to future events. Thus, for example, in commenting on the four "parables of crisis"⁶² ("therefore keep watch"), Dodd observes that "it seems possible, therefore, to give to all

⁵⁹Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: First Complete Edition*, ed. by John Bowden (London, England: SCM Press, 2000), 328.

⁶⁰Darrell Bock, "The Kingdom of God in New Testament Theology," *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 40.

⁶¹C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 143.

⁶²The Faithful and Unfaithful Servants (Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:42-46); The Waiting Servants (Mark 13:33-37 and Luke 12:35-38); The Thief at Night (Matthew 24:43-44 and Luke 12:39-40); and The Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-12).

these ‘eschatological’ parables an application within the context of the ministry of Jesus. They were intended to enforce His appeal to men (sic) to recognize that the Kingdom of God was *present* in *all* its momentous consequences, and that by their conduct in the presence of this tremendous crisis they would judge themselves as faithful or unfaithful, wise or foolish.”⁶³ For Dodd, therefore, the kingdom had already arrived in the person and ministry of Jesus, while for Schweitzer the kingdom had not yet made its appearance or reached its fulfillment. A large number of scholars today prefer to include both these dimensions in their thinking about the kingdom, so that they reach what Caragounis calls “mediating positions according to which the kingdom of God is conceived as both present and future.”⁶⁴ The basic conception is that in Jesus the kingdom has already come, as validated by His miracles (especially His power over Satan), confirmed through His sacrificial death (a coronation of sorts), and vindicated through His resurrection; and yet the final fulfillment of the kingdom is yet still to come in the end times with the parousia and the great wedding banquet of the Lamb.

There are a wide variety of perspectives on how one might conceive of the “balance” or “tension” between the already and the not-yet of kingdom fulfillment. Beasley-Murray writes that “the believer’s experience of grace is set between an accomplished redemption and an awaited consummation.”⁶⁵ Kummel prefers to think of the kingdom as being expected in the near future (and therefore not yet here), so that Jesus’ miracles served as “premonitory *signs* in the present.” Yet he notes that there is

⁶³C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 138-139; emphasis added.

⁶⁴Caragounis, “Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven,” 421.

⁶⁵G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 338.

also a sense in which the kingdom is already present in Jesus, the Strong Man. The tension, therefore, lies between the *promise* of a future consummation of history and the *fulfillment* of that history (and the salvation which accompanies it) in Jesus.⁶⁶ Cullman grounds his views in the understanding of *time* among early Christians, who thought not in terms of “the spatial contrast between the Here and the Beyond, but from the time distinction between Formerly and Now and Then.”⁶⁷ This means that the Judaic view of two ages (this age and the age to come) has been altered in Christianity, for Jesus has divided time in a fresh way, having become the center of the age to come. Believers, therefore, know that while the war is still being fought, the decisive battle has already been won.⁶⁸

These examples serve to illustrate that a great deal of material has been written on the theme of the already and not-yet character of the kingdom’s fulfillment.⁶⁹ For my

⁶⁶Werner Georg Kummel, *Promise and Fulfillment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus* (London, England: SCM Press, 1961), 21 (emphasis added); 109; 155.

⁶⁷Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time: the Primitive Conception of Time and History*, rev. ed., trans. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1964), 37.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 81-87.

⁶⁹As one might imagine, much has been written concerning other dimensions of the kingdom too, with a broad variance of perspectives. Perrin, for example, building on his own work in biblical studies plus the work of Philip Wheelwright in *Metaphor and Reality*, contends that the kingship-of-God myth in ancient Israel led to the emergence of the symbol of the kingdom of God, and that Jesus’ use of this symbol is tensive (carries a wide range of meanings) rather than steno (a more fixed meaning). To interpret the kingdom symbol in the New Testament, therefore, one must consider whether the kingship-of-God myth has meaning to those who hear Jesus’ use of the kingdom of God symbol, and what that symbol might evoke in the hearers in relation to that myth (Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976], especially 1-45; 202). Bock, however, is uncomfortable with Perrin’s insistence that all of Jesus’ kingdom language is tensive, so he argues that Jesus’ kingdom language was tensive but built on a stable (steno) base (Darrell Bock, “The Kingdom of God in New Testament Theology,” in *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001], 36). From a completely different perspective, Houtepen refers to the kingdom more as a prophetic reality than an apocalyptic one, and speaks of “eschatological ontology” in terms of God as “creative advance” (Anton Houtepen, “Apocalyptic and the Kingdom of God,” *Exchange* 28:4, October (1999): 291-311). Waltke speaks of the kingdom in terms of God’s establishment of his *moral* rule, and then discusses the four primary Old Testament themes related thereto (common people, land, law, ruler), and how those themes were re-

purposes, however, the most important factor to note is how the *tension* between the already and not-yet dimensions of kingdom fulfillment relates to the biblical theme of life, and then consequently how this will relate to the theory and practice of evangelism. *Tension* is the critical word here, for it helps us understand that the dynamic more appropriately has to do with the tension between the both/and of the already and not-yet dimensions of the kingdom than with any attempt to choose between these two dimensions in an either/or way.⁷⁰ James Dunn suggests that Paul sees an eschatological gap opening up with Jesus, so that the starting point of the future age has been “pulled back into the present age, to begin with Christ’s resurrection;” and the “distinctive feature of Paul’s theology is *not* the eschatology, but the *tension* which his revised eschatology sets up.”⁷¹ Peter Davids also characterizes the already and not-yet dynamic as a tension, observing that “the king may have come, but he is still coming. The kingdom is already here in the presence of the king, but the kingdom has not yet arrived.”⁷² Bosch shares these sentiments, and he helpfully notes that not only is this tension unresolved in Jesus’ usage (he prefers the designation of “reign of God”), but should remain that way, for “it

interpreted in the New Testament (Bruce Waltke, “The Kingdom of God in Biblical Theology,” in *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001], 15-27). A myriad of other illustrations could be given, but these suffice to portray the broad diversity of views related to the kingdom of God. My project, however, is not finally about the kingdom of God but about the evangelistic implications of a strong emphasis on the biblical theme of life. Thus I want to limit my focus in the theoretical framework to the relationship between the already and not-yet dimensions of kingdom fulfillment, the biblical theme of life, and evangelism.

⁷⁰O. V. Jathanna addresses the tension by suggesting that “life” is an “intensive metaphor,” which means that its meaning goes beyond both the literal and metaphorical associations of the term. “It refers to what is transcendentally and eschatologically real – i.e., in view of reality-as-it-should-be and reality-as-it-will-be, and in the proleptic event of Christ reality-as-it-already-is.” O. V. Jathanna, “Jesus Christ – The Life of the World: An Indian Christian Understanding,” *Indian Journal of Theology* 31:2, Ap-Ju (1982): 78.

⁷¹James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 464-465.

⁷²Peter H. Davids, “The Kingdom of God Come With Power,” *Criswell Theological Review* 2:1, Fall (2004): 19.

is precisely *in* this creative tension that the reality of God's reign has significance for our contemporary mission."⁷³ In keeping with the spirit of Bosch, I suggest that the tension between the already and not-yet dimensions of kingdom fulfillment bears a strong relationship with the biblical theme of life. It is the recognition of this tension that prompts us to ask whether the kingdom has come fully enough in Jesus that we can experience the life which God intends for us when we submit to Jesus' reign and rule, or whether it is only possible to experience partial life in Christ because the kingdom's fullness remains to be seen at some future time.

The tension between the already and not-yet dimensions of kingdom fulfillment helps us understand that while there is a certain measure of life that we will only be able to experience in the future, there is also a vibrant fullness of life that can be experienced now. It's not that we receive a little bit of life now and then at a later point we will receive eternal life: we receive eternal life *now*. We receive the very Spirit of God. We are renewed in Christ and the Spirit. We are transformed. We are made alive in a way we never experienced or understood before. Is this transformation made instantaneously complete? Not at all: what has begun is a process of transformation that will endure a lifetime and beyond, into chronological eternity. However, our incomplete transformation is not due to the reception of an incomplete (or insufficient) life, but to the overlapping of the two ages (the old age and the age to come). It is not that we have been given only partial life in Christ, but rather that the full life in Christ which is ours is "crowded out" and "cluttered" by the old age.

⁷³David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 32; emphasis added.

A word of cautionary clarification is in order here: I am not proposing a re-formulation of the no-more-problems version of the gospel. I affirm the truth that we will not experience the *complete and final* fullness of God-intended life prior to our own death. We will continue to struggle with sin, illness, sickness, and death. This is due to the fact that we are living between the times. We are living in the overlap of the old age and the age to come.⁷⁴ We cannot (nor should not) do away with the tension between these two ages. However, too many Christians erroneously assume that the tension is between a *fully* powerful-and-present old age and a *partially* powerful-and-present age to come. Thus, the biblical and theological concern here is that we not undermine or minimize the fullness of what God has done in Christ. The new age (the age to come) has come in its fullness. We have *already* received the possibility of new life in Christ in *full* measure. The reason we sometimes do *not yet* experience the full measure of this new life is that we live in the overlap between the old age and the age to come, and thus, the complete destruction of the old age has not yet taken place.⁷⁵ It is *not* that we live in some *third* age in which the fullness of life is weaker than it will be in the age to come. Rather, it is that the old age continues to exert its influence and power: or as Dallas Willard phrases it, “*other* ‘kingdoms’ are still present on earth along with the kingdom of the heavens.”⁷⁶ These other “kingdoms” play a role in the extent to which we experience the

⁷⁴For an excellent treatment of the tension created by this overlap, see James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 461-498

⁷⁵Another factor involved in our less-than-full experience of life on earth is that we are created as finite beings. I will deal with this topic in a subsequent chapter, utilizing insights from David Kelsey (who speaks of living on “borrowed breath”) and Karl Barth (who talks about the provisional nature of our life in Christ).

⁷⁶Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 29.

full measure of life which God's kingdom brings, but their presence does not mean that God's kingdom has only come in partial measure.⁷⁷ Thus, instead of focusing on the *impossibility* of experiencing full life in Christ due to the presence and power of the *old* age, Christians, in both discipleship *and evangelism*, should focus on the *possibility* of experiencing full life in Jesus due to the presence and power of the *age to come*.⁷⁸

One might surmise from the tenor of this discussion that the kingdom provides the foundation for an understanding of life. To a certain extent this is true. The prevalence of kingdom language in the Synoptic gospels prompts us to consider the kingdom to be a central (for some people, *the* central) theme or organizing principle for biblical and theological work. However, a strong case can be made from a different perspective: the biblical theme of life could also quite legitimately serve as the central organizing principle of the Bible.

Several Old Testament scholars highlight the importance of life in the Bible. As mentioned earlier, Hans Klein postulates that the Old Testament focuses on life and the New Testament on new life. Edmond Jacob notes that "the idea of eternity is secondary to that of life. God is not living because he is eternal, but he is eternal because he is

⁷⁷Perhaps a similar belief in the fullness of God's kingdom that was present in Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection is what led John Wesley to believe in Christian perfection to the extent that he did. He acknowledged that Christians are not exempt "either from ignorance, or mistake, or infirmities, or temptations," due to their continued presence in the old age; and yet because they also experience the full power of the age to come, "Christians are saved in this world from all sin, from all unrighteousness; that they are now in such a sense perfect, as not to commit sin, and to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers" (John Wesley, "Christian Perfection," in *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. VI*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979], 1-19).

⁷⁸In this recommendation I do not assume that the ministry of evangelism will "deliver" full God-intended life-in-Jesus, for that is more appropriately the role of the ministry of discipleship. I do, however, suggest that the ministry of evangelism should cast the vision of the full God-intended life-in-Jesus. This is more faithful to the core message of the good news of the gospel; it helps non-Christians more fully understand what they are being invited to embrace (on the front end of their journey); and it more appropriately "sets up" the ministry of discipleship by providing a more complete biblical frame of reference for the full life that discipleship is to help us grow into.

living.”⁷⁹ Otto Baab observes that the designation of God as living (or alive) is attached more than sixty times to formulaic oaths that include God’s name. Baab places strong emphasis on the fact that because God is living, God is therefore involved in all aspects of human life. For those who follow God this is of utmost value, for God “delivers, redeems, saves, helps, and blesses.”⁸⁰ Walther Eichrodt refers to two leading motifs regarding the Jewish attitude to the defeat of death. One relates to “the conquest of death as an eschatological event.”⁸¹ The second motif refers to the belief that prior to history’s end there is a sense in which, through our relationship (encounter) with God, life “acquires an indestructible content.”⁸² Eichrodt notes here that we are speaking not so much of resurrection as we are of the realization that included in our life with God is an understanding that God provides a life-filled “Yes” to God’s worshippers. This “Yes” provides the God-follower with a vision and experience of life that *supersedes* whatever may happen in physical death.

John’s gospel offers insightful perspectives on the life theme as well. Raymond E. Brown suggests that “the Fourth Gospel may be called the Gospel of life,”⁸³ and Rudolf Schnackenburg remarks that “everything the Johannine Jesus says and does, all that he

⁷⁹Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), 38.

⁸⁰Otto J. Baab, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1949), 26.

⁸¹Walther Eichrodt, “The Indestructibility of the Individual’s Relationship with God (Immortality),” *Theology of the Old Testament, Vol. II*, 496-529, translated by J. A. Baker, The Old Testament Library Series, eds. Peter Ackroyd, James Barr, Bernhard W. Anderson, and James L. Mays (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1967), 509.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 517.

⁸³Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Vol. 29 of The Anchor Bible, William F. Albright and David N. Freedman, gen. eds. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1966), 505; emphasis added.

reveals and all that he accomplishes as ‘signs’, takes place in view of man’s (sic) attaining salvation, in view of his gaining divine life.”⁸⁴ D. Moody Smith concurs, writing that “the eschatological goal, the essence of salvation, according to the Fourth Gospel is *life*.”⁸⁵ Finally, Leon Morris writes that John’s purpose is to convince his readers that Jesus is the Christ, “in order that he may bring them to a place of faith and accordingly to new life in Christ’s name.”⁸⁶ These are a few examples that illustrate the importance of the life theme among some Old Testament and Johannine scholars. Space does not permit a further treatment at this time, but more attention will be given this subject in a subsequent chapter. For the moment, my purpose is simply to illustrate that a strong case can be made for placing a premium value on the theme of life in the Bible. One may agree, however, that the life theme is important in the Bible, yet question whether it could serve as the central organizing principle thereof. Some persons feel that it is inappropriate to even look for a central organizing principle of the Bible.⁸⁷ Others may find such a search to be appropriate, but would choose some other theme, such as covenant, promise, or redemption. Given the focus of my project, I will not attempt to

⁸⁴Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John, Volume One: Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1-4* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1990), 155.

⁸⁵D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, New Testament Theology, James D. G. Dunn, gen. ed. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 149; emphasis added.

⁸⁶Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, 39-40.

⁸⁷Some scholars say that it is impossible to conceive of *an* Old Testament theology or *a* New Testament theology, much less *a* biblical theology. I do not share this perspective, but neither do I want this project to get overly burdened with this discussion. It is for this reason that I am consistently referring to the biblical *theme* of life, rather than the biblical *theology* of life. For my purposes, it is sufficient to note that the life theme is quite important in the Bible and to attempt to discern the evangelistic implications of a strong emphasis on that theme. For more reading regarding biblical theology, I recommend James Barr’s book, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London, England: SCM Press, 1999); and Brevard S. Child’s book, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992).

address all the permutations of an objection to the life theme as the central organizing principle of the Bible. It would be helpful, however, to deal with the life theme in relation to the kingdom, and then proceed from there.

In my earlier discussion concerning the evangelistic visions of William Abraham and Scott Jones, I offered examples of how we could link kingdom-based evangelistic visions with a life-based evangelistic vision. At this point, I would like to introduce a related yet different concept for consideration: that we frame the relationship between “life” and “kingdom” in reference to ultimate goal or purpose, as distinct from the instruments or vehicles which lead to that ultimate goal or purpose. In this context, the kingdom of God symbolic concept could serve as an *instrument* of God’s desire (goal) to bring restoration of life to God’s human creatures (and all of creation). Instructive in this regard is an analysis of kingship in the Ancient Near East (hereafter referred to as ANE) and ancient Israel, for “kingship” bears a direct relationship to “kingdom.” It is worth asking the questions: “What role does kingship serve?” and “What are kings supposed to accomplish?” There is widespread agreement among scholars that in the ANE, at least until the first millennium BC, kings (in a political sense) were to provide a secure and just environment for the enjoyment of prosperous well-being. In conjunction with this, in a religious sense, they were to mediate the blessings of the gods (or God). Thus, for example, Whitelam writes that “it was the king’s primary duty to guarantee the true administration of justice,” which “also guaranteed prosperity and fertility for the nation as a whole.”⁸⁸ Lambert agrees, noting that in the three ancient Mesopotamian cultures of Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria, “rulers ruled by the express authority of the gods, and

⁸⁸Keith W. Whitelam, *The Just King: Monarchical Judicial Authority in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1979), 36.

were expected to create a prosperous, well-governed land.”⁸⁹ Some scholars feel that this positive view of kingship in the ANE and its direct correlation to the well-being of the people was shared by the Israelites. In a study of the priestly role that Israelite kings occasionally fulfilled, Rooke concluded that the king would not assume normal priestly duties related to the sanctuary, but that on occasion it would have been “necessary for him to undertake the mediating, priestly role when national interests were at stake, because he was responsible under Yahweh for the nation’s well-being.”⁹⁰ Whitelam concurs that Israel shared the ANE view of kingship, stating that the Israelite view of kingship was “remarkably consistent” with similar views in the ANE.⁹¹

Others scholars disagree, however, about the Israelite appreciation for kingship, especially during the first millennium BC. Some suggest that the positive view remained until the time of Jesus (reformulated among Jews primarily in Messianic terms), while others suggest that this positive outlook waned dramatically. Some writers, for example, view Deuteronomy as a pivotal example of this diminishing appreciation of kingship. John Baines characterizes the Deuteronomistic tradition as being hostile to kingship,⁹² and J. G. McConville suggests that Deuteronomy elevated the role of the Torah (constitutional law) in the life of the people, so that “it provides for a kind of kingship that is radically different from kingship as it is known from ancient Near Eastern custom

⁸⁹W. G. Lambert, “Kingship in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John Day (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 55.

⁹⁰Deborah Rooke, “Kingship as Priesthood: The Relationship between the High Priesthood and the Monarchy,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John Day (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 94.

⁹¹Keith Whitelam, *The Just King*, 36.

⁹²John Baines, “Ancient Egyptian Kingship: Official Forms, Rhetoric, Context,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John Day (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 46.

and practice.”⁹³ Ezekial is also cited as an anti-kingship document in Israelite tradition. Paul Joyce suggests that with Ezekial’s strong focus on the holy God Yahweh, the mediating function of the monarchy has disappeared (“melted away”).⁹⁴

Given this divergence of opinion about the positive appreciation of kingship in the Judean world during the time of Jesus, some might suggest that it is difficult (perhaps even impossible) to place much stock in the idea of kingship being seen as one of God’s instruments to bring about God-intended fullness of life. However, the prevalence of kingdom language in the Gospels demonstrates that Jesus assumed at least some basic level of common understanding among the people regarding kingship. Furthermore, He assumed this understanding to be positive (or at worst, neutral). If kingship was in such a state of disrepute as some scholars believe, Jesus would not have utilized that image, nor would He have assumed that people would respond to it in any positive way (as illustrated in the link He makes between the announcement of the kingdom and the call to repentance). The key distinction to make is that the Judean population may not have valued *human* kingship as strongly as in the past, but they maintained a high esteem for *God’s* kingship. Thus, “kingdom hope by the time of the Babylonian captivity is driven forward by the vision of the fullness of *God’s rule* showing up one day. It was to *this hope* that Jesus preached.”⁹⁵ The primary point of this discussion is that Jesus’ primary goal in announcing the kingdom and inviting people to respond to it was *not* so that they

⁹³J. G. McConville, “King and Messiah in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John Day (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 281.

⁹⁴Paul M. Joyce, “King and Messiah in Ezekial,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John Day (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 337.

⁹⁵Darrell Bock, *The Kingdom of God in New Testament Theology*, 33; emphasis added.

could be counted as citizens of the kingdom for the sake of the *king* or the *kingdom*, but *for their own sake*, because it is through submission to the rule of king Jesus that they would receive new *life* in Him.

The intention here is not to devalue the symbolic concept of God's reign. There are times when finite languages simply cannot do justice to thoughts involving the infinite God. The reference to kingdom as the instrument and life as the goal is meant to elevate the concept of life for the theory and practice of evangelism, but it is not meant to diminish the concept of kingdom. It may be that the two themes could be considered as parallel concepts offering different conceptual images for us to choose from in developing theological constructs and ministry practices. Perhaps future scholars will develop improved ways to treat both of these vital topics without diminishing either one. It might even be that we could find ways to link the two. Craig Keener, for example, in discussing the life theme in John's gospel, links the two concepts by referring to "the *life* of the *kingdom* era" which "is available to those living in the present through faith in Christ."⁹⁶ On the other hand, I want to be careful that the attempt to avoid devaluing the kingdom concept does not in turn diminish the clear point that full, vibrant, teeming life is portrayed in the creation narratives as God's original intention for us and God's creation. If, therefore, we think of Jesus' purpose to be a restoration of God's original intention, we must view this full, vibrant, teeming life to be what God seeks to give us in Christ.

⁹⁶Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Vol 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 328-329; emphasis added. I affirm Keener's attempt to link "kingdom" and "life" in John's gospel, but the use of the phrase "kingdom era" makes me a bit uncomfortable because it could be interpreted by some people to refer to a new version of dispensationalism.

Furthermore, this proposal of life as the goal need not be limited to how it relates to the kingdom. The Mosaic covenant could be considered in the same way. The purpose of the covenant was not so Yahweh or the Jews could announce that they were in a covenantal relationship. The covenantal relationship was the vehicle through which the people could experience life as God intended. One may call to mind those powerful words that Moses spoke just prior to his death: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. *Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.*”⁹⁷ Going back further in biblical history, we see that the purpose of the covenant God made with Noah included both preservation of life (in terms of a promise not to ever again destroy the world by flood) *and* a fertile experience of life: “And you, be *fruitful and multiply, teem* on the earth and multiply in it.”⁹⁸ The Abrahamic promise and call can be viewed in the same light. “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you *all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*”⁹⁹ The goal of the Abrahamic promise was to bring the rich blessing of God-intended life to all the families of the earth.

To re-iterate the point: “having a covenant” is not God’s ultimate purpose for us. “Being a citizen of the kingdom” is not God’s ultimate purpose for us. These kinds of statements could be conceived of as instrumental. Covenant, kingdom, promise, reconciliation, and atonement: these (and many others) are vitally important concepts and

⁹⁷Deuteronomy 30:19, ESV; emphasis added.

⁹⁸Genesis 9:7, ESV; emphasis added.

⁹⁹Genesis 12:2-3, ESV; emphasis added.

themes—but their value lies in what they relate to: vibrant, abundant life.¹⁰⁰ From the perspective of Scripture this emphasis on life as the initial and central intention of God does greater justice to the fact that the biblical tradition begins with creation. What God intended for all of God’s creation in the beginning is reflected in the creation narrative(s), with beautiful expressions of *teeming life*, *fertile abundance*, and *multiplication*, all of which God pronounced as *good*. If creation of and participation in life was God’s original intention for creation, then God’s intention in Jesus is a restoration and re-creation of that same life: teeming, fertile, abundant, and good.¹⁰¹ This directly and powerfully impacts the theory and practice of evangelism, for it helps shape our understandings of what we are offering in our communication of the good news. We are offering the possibility of participation in the fully-orbed life that God originally intended in creation. We are communicating the good news that vibrant living is possible now. We are inviting people to follow the way (reign) of Christ in their lives so they can participate with Him in all that He intends and desires for us. The “shape” or “contours” or “ingredients” of this life will be more fully developed in subsequent chapters. At this juncture, I simply (yet importantly) want to re-affirm that while the theoretical framework for this project rightly

¹⁰⁰I am grateful to Joe Dongell for helping me more fully grasp the distinction between instrumentality and goal. Personal conversation, February 2, 2010.

¹⁰¹Jurgen Moltmann disagrees with this perspective. He argues that we should not conceive of God’s intention to be that of a restoration back to the original situation that existed in creation. Because the resurrection of Jesus is “something completely new in history,” we should visualize God’s intention to involve something that has yet to be created, rather than visualizing a return to the old Eden. “We really have to look ahead to the future of God in the power of hope if we want to understand the new character of this life.” See Jurgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 30. I applaud this mindset, and see no problem with envisioning a full life that goes even beyond God’s original intention in creation. However, because this “new thing” that will be created in God’s resurrection future does not yet exist, we find ourselves limited to the biblical portrayals of what *was* created by God in the beginning. It might be possible to develop a theology of life based on portrayals of the new heaven and the new earth in the book of Revelation, but I would not want to do this at the expense of leaving out references to God’s original intentions in creation. The creation narratives and various references to creation throughout the Bible are essential ingredients to a biblically-based theology of full life in Jesus.

begins with the already and not-yet tension of the fulfillment of the kingdom of God, it more rightly ends with an emphasis upon God's ultimate goal of full life, and it then yet even more rightly provides the starting place for evangelism. Offer them life!

Methodology

Introduction

This project will focus on the relationship between a strong emphasis on the biblical theme of life and the theory and practice of Christian evangelism in U.S. America. I will proceed in Chapter Two with Old Testament and Johannine scholars who highlight this theme and other themes related thereto. From there, the focus will turn in Chapter Three to six theologians who either focus on the biblical theme of life or demonstrate a life-oriented anthropological perspective in their theological work. A field research component of this project (Chapter Four) will allow me to begin the process of discovering how some Christians conceptualize and/or experience the role (or lack thereof) of life in evangelistic theory and practice. In addition to the direct connection the field research has with this project, it will also lay the groundwork for future research in this area. I hope to do future studies in Venezuela, Costa Rica, and the USA. The field research portion of the dissertation will allow me to begin the learning curve for how to most effectively engage in field research concerning the relationship between evangelism and a strong emphasis on the biblical theme of life. In Chapter Five, I will assess the field research data in conjunction with the discoveries that were made in the theological and biblical studies materials, with the intention of discerning important implications for

evangelistic theory and practice that arise from a strong emphasis on the biblical theme of life.

Interrelationship of Biblical Studies Research, Theological Research, and Field Research

The previous description of the methodological process to be utilized in this project might lead the reader to believe that the three dimensions of research are considered to be stand-alone endeavors, with little interplay between them. Due to simple logistics, this is true to a minor extent. The field research interviews, for example, will be completed prior to the in-depth work that is done in biblical studies and theology. Hence there may be some themes which arise during that later in-depth work that will not be addressed in the field research. Additionally, the biblical studies exploration will be done prior to the theological exploration. This will be done to help me stay focused in one primary area and not become overly distracted by too broad a range of themes. Obviously, if I engage in the theological work prior to the biblical studies work, this may change my perspective on particular themes that arise during the biblical studies work. I want to focus on biblical studies prior to theology because I want the biblical perspective to help direct the theological work, rather than the other way around.

One may discern, therefore, that due to logistical issues, I will engage in the various dimensions of research in a somewhat stand-alone fashion for the sake of the integrity of the research within each section. This will allow me to draw out the strengths of each section to the fullest, which will serve me well when I later integrate the outcomes from each. The important point to understand in the midst of this discussion is that there is an underlying dynamic interrelationship between the different research

streams. Regarding the field research, for example, there may be some themes that are not addressed in the interview questions because those questions will be designed prior to the in-depth work in biblical studies and theology. At the same time, however, a great deal of preliminary work was completed in theology and biblical studies during the proposal phase of this project, and this preliminary work will strongly influence the development of the field research questions. Similarly, though the field research interviews will be completed prior to the extensive treatment of biblical studies and theology, the analysis of the data resulting from those interviews will be carried out after that extensive treatment. This will allow the themes which emerge from biblical studies and theology to more fully inform the analysis of field research data. Moreover, in the final chapter of the dissertation I will have completed the research in all three streams, and this will permit me to assess the research as a whole, so that the biblical studies, theology, and field research dimensions of the project lead to a comprehensive perspective concerning the implications of a life-based evangelistic vision.

Old Testament

The Old Testament is an important resource for this research for it is there that we encounter the beginning of the life theme. This is not only true of the creation narratives but is also true of much of the prophetic writing, as seen in the contrasts that many of the prophets make between the living God of the Israelites and the dead idols that they often choose to worship. Moreover, in the priestly narratives and the wisdom literature one encounters descriptions of the blessed-by-God life that may be experienced as persons remain loyal to Yahweh and obey Yahweh's commands. It is impossible to include

insights from all available scholarly resources in biblical studies for such a project as this. Therefore, of necessity, I will limit the Old Testament scholars whom I consult in this section. Attention will be given to such scholars as Hans Klein, Otto Baab, Edmund Jacob, Walter Eichrodt, Claus Westermann, and Michael Brown. Klein's selection is obvious, since he articulates a vision of life as the central organizing theme of the Bible. Baab and Jacob will be included because they each draw insightful implications from the Old Testament emphasis upon God as the living God. In addition to the focus on the living God, Eichrodt will be consulted due to his understanding of the relational nature of God's interactions with humanity. Westermann makes a vital contribution with his distinction between "deliverance" and "blessing," because this provides a conceptual frame for distinguishing between the blessing of knowing God and the other tangible blessings that God also bestows upon us.¹⁰² Michael Brown will be included because he offers a good perspective on the fully-orbed nature of the life that God envisioned and intended for God's people, the Israelites. Other scholars will be investigated too, as they offer insights pertinent to specific issues that arise during the Old Testament phase of the research.

John's Gospel

In addition to other biblical references to life, careful readers are struck by the prevalence of life in John's gospel. This is a prominent theme from beginning to end. In his prologue, John writes that "in him was life, and the life was the light of men."¹⁰³

¹⁰²This will be treated more fully in Chapter Two.

¹⁰³John 1:4, ESV.

Toward the end of the gospel John declares that he wrote down the signs that Jesus did “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”¹⁰⁴ Between these two “bookends” there are 14 additional verses that mention life in relationship to Jesus, plus 17 verses which refer specifically to eternal life.¹⁰⁵ This gives one an idea of the *number* of recurrences of the life theme in John. To gauge the *breadth* of these recurrences throughout the gospel, it is helpful to note that life references are found in chapters 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, and 20 (out of 21). Leon Morris feels that the references to life in John’s gospel are best understood in relation to the rest of the New Testament. The gospel of John has over 30 references to life. Revelation has 17, Romans has 14, and John’s first epistle has 13. John’s gospel has more than one-fourth of all the references to life in the New Testament.¹⁰⁶ This does not mean that John portrays a life free of problems. He also writes of persecution, sorrow, and the need to lose one’s life in order to save it. However, the predominant picture is that of a marvelous quality of life that one can experience in this world *before* one’s physical death. People do not have to wait until heaven to experience the life which God intends for them and made possible for them through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the Johannine section, I will focus on a few of the well-known 20th century Johannine scholars, such as Raymond Brown, Leon Morris, C. K. Barrett, F. F. Bruce, W.

¹⁰⁴John 20:31, ESV.

¹⁰⁵This is based on a word search in the Greek New Testament in relation to *zōe* (life) and *aiōnios* (eternal), *Novum Testamentum Graece*, E. Nestle, B. Aland, K. Aland, J. Karavidopolous, and C. M. Martini, eds., 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsch Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).

¹⁰⁶Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, F. F. Bruce, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: 1971), 82.

D. Davies, Gerard Sloyan, C. F. D. Moule, and Stephen Smalley. These are well-recognized scholars in the field of biblical studies, and serve as a good base on which to ground my work in John's gospel. I will also include insights from Gail R. O'Day, Ben Witherington, and Craig Koester. In addition to being well-recognized scholars, they are a bit more recent than some of the other scholars I mentioned previously. They began publishing in the later 20th century and on into the early 21st century. This combination of longer-established Johannine scholarship with more newly-established Johannine scholarship provides a wide perspective for my work in John's gospel. Other writers will be investigated too, as they provide insights related to specific issues that emerge during the Johannine exploration.

Selected Theologians

In the theological section, I will limit my focus to six theologians who write from a wide variety of perspectives. They each share, however, an understanding of the relationship between theology and anthropology. This emphasis on anthropology is helpful because unless we understand who God intends (and originally intended) us to be as human beings, we cannot fully grasp who God intends us to be as followers of Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁷ In addition to being one of the theological giants of the 20th century, Karl Barth will be included because he offers a strong connection between our experience of the life which God intends and our relationship with God. Jurgen Moltmann will be consulted because his theology has had a long history of interest in the life theme, and also due to

¹⁰⁷Ray Anderson phrases it this way: "the essential nature of human beings is determinative for our understanding of the kind of redemption God has wrought for human beings through his Son, Jesus Christ." Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 70.

the comprehensive impact that he believes our Christ-following should have on all dimensions of our lives. I will add Thomas Oden to this group because his comprehensive systematic theology is grounded in the notion of life, to the extent that each of the three volumes makes reference to life in the titles.¹⁰⁸ David Kelsey's work in theological anthropology will be part of this section because he offers a very strong conceptual link between theology and anthropology and then fleshes out what that link means in theory and practice. Ray Anderson is another scholar who values the interrelated nature of theology and anthropology, and more importantly, he moves from that recognition to a coupling of anthropology with evangelism. Paul Hiebert rounds out the starting field of six theologians. Hiebert has long been recognized in intercultural studies as a leading thinker, anthropologist, and philosopher, and he will serve me especially well as I eventually seek to investigate the impact of the life theme outside the U.S. American context. Many other scholars will be consulted too, in conjunction with themes that arise during the theological investigation.

Field Research

Process

The field research took place in 8 churches, 6 of which are United Methodist, one of which would be most accurately classified as evangelical Anglican, and one of which is a community church with a former evangelical United Methodist serving as pastor. The goal was to select churches that are effective in helping non-Christians choose to become Christ-followers, and interview four groups of people: pastors, key leaders (official

¹⁰⁸*The Living God, The Word of Life, and Life in the Spirit.*

leaders plus others whom the pastor suggested exercise significant influence), recent converts (less than two years), and evangelistically gifted leaders (as identified by the pastor and key leaders).¹⁰⁹ I made the determination of “effective” churches based in part on Thom Rainer’s use of a “conversion ratio,” which is the ratio between church membership and conversions. Rainer suggests that an “effective evangelistic church” will have a ratio of less than 20:1, plus a minimum of 26 conversions per year.¹¹⁰ Because I wanted to include some new churches in my research, I chose not to utilize the 26 conversions per year yardstick in the selection process, since some new churches begin relatively small and require a few years to gain sufficient momentum to reach that many persons. Additionally, however, I utilized the ratio between conversions and average worship attendance, because in some congregations average worship attendance is a better measure of congregational strength than church membership.¹¹¹

Five of the congregations provided statistics for all or most of the years during the five-year period 2004-2008. Two of the congregations are new church plants, and therefore do not have statistics prior to 2006, so they gave me a three-year range of statistics (2006-2008). The Anglican congregation offered statistics for 2005-2008, plus the statistics from 2000 to use as a baseline. During the pertinent time frames, all six of

¹⁰⁹When logistically possible, I prefer interviews to surveys because the researcher can allow respondents to go in unanticipated directions, and while some respondents may get too far afield, other respondents will share rich insights that the researcher was not expecting. Open-ended interviewing permits the researcher to learn what the respondents truly think about the issues and themes that are being investigated. It also allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions. Logistics will determine how many interviews will be conducted with individuals and how many with small groups.

¹¹⁰Thom Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, 23.

¹¹¹Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), xxiii.

the United Methodist churches had a conversion ratio less than 20:1.¹¹² In other words, these churches were consistently effective in their ability to help non-Christians choose to become Christ-followers. All of the United Methodist churches are located in the state of Georgia. The community church that is pastored by a former United Methodist (he never served as a UMC pastor, but was the son of a UMC pastor in the Florida Conference) is located in Illinois. This congregation also had a conversion ratio less than 20:1 during the five-year period (with an average of 9:1). The evangelical Anglican congregation is located in South Carolina. Though this church did not fall within the 20:1 conversion ratio range that Rainer recommends, I chose to include it in the research because the trajectory of the conversion ratio over the five-year period was moving strongly in that direction. The conversion ratio in 2005 was 56:1, whereas in 2008 it had moved to 20:1. Moreover, utilizing the ratio between average worship attendance and annual conversions, it moved from a ratio of 33:1 in 2005 to a ratio of 11:1 in 2008.

I developed a base set of questions to use for all four groupings, and then made adjustments as necessary. For example, not all the questions were asked of the Key Influential Leaders, because those interviews primarily took place in small groups, and there was not sufficient time to address each question. The comprehensive list of questions included:

- Compared with other congregations, your church appears to be more effective than some other churches in reaching people who have little or no previous Christian background. What do you think are some of the key factors in your church's effectiveness in helping non-Christians choose to follow Christ?
- Could you please describe the process or series of events that led to your initial decision to follow Christ?
- Sometimes we refer to the "gospel" as "the good news." In your experience and/or understanding, what are some of the "good" dimensions of "the good news"?

¹¹²The average conversion ratio for these congregations was as follows: Church A, 12.8; Church B, 5.8; Church C, 10.3; Church D, 14.9; Church E, 11; Church F, 15.7.

- Who or what was influential in your initial decision to follow Christ?
- Imagine that you are talking with a non-Christian friend about Jesus, and your friend has arrived at a point of interest concerning the Christian life. If your friend asks you, “*Why* should I become a Christian?” how would you respond?
- If your friend asks you, “*How* can I become a Christian?” how would you respond?
- Would you characterize Christ-following as a private affair between an individual person and Jesus, a social affair that includes other people, or something else?
- What, in your opinion, is the essential Christian message?
- Is there any sense in which you are more alive now than before you became a Christ-follower? Please describe.
- What are some of the things that you believe your non-Christian friends think about the most?
- What are some of the things that you believe your non-Christian friends worry about the most?
- Keeping in mind what you just told me that your non-Christian friends think and/or worry about, what in your own experience of following Christ might be something helpful to talk about with them that would help draw them toward choosing to become Christ-followers?
- Why did you decide to follow Jesus?
- Do you believe your non-Christian friends think much at all about life-after-death? Please elaborate.
- In the gospel of John, there are a lot of verses about life: In your experience and understanding, what does “life in Christ” mean?
- Does Jesus promise us a life free of problems? Please elaborate somewhat.
- Does Jesus promise us financial wealth? Please elaborate.
- What, therefore, do you think Jesus means in John 10:10 when he says “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly”?
- Do you feel like you decided to follow Christ based more on the benefits or consequences that this decision would have on your life now or based more on the benefits or consequences that this decision would have on your life after death?
- What difference has Jesus made in your life?
- Is there anything you’d like to add about anything that we’ve talked about?

Analysis

The general spirit of my analysis throughout this project will be that of hypothesis-seeking rather than hypothesis-testing.¹¹³ Though I do have some “hunches” about this project, I will not attempt to frame and test specific hypotheses related to those

¹¹³I am grateful to Steve Ybarrola for insight related to this distinction. Personal conversation, November 13, 2009; Wilmore, Kentucky.

hunches. I will not, therefore, attempt to define and test dependent and independent variables related to specific hypotheses. Instead, I will sift through a broad array of material and discern important themes and issues which can offer tentative recommendations related to evangelistic theory and practice, and to inform future research. In this sense, then, *theme analysis* serves as the primary analytic framework. I will explore the Old Testament, Johannine, and theological materials, plus the field research notes, in relationship to the clusters of questions which my research is addressing. I will also try to make note of any additional themes that arise during the research phase. I hope to maintain a spirit of discovery throughout this project, as distinct from a spirit of “point-proving.” During the analysis of field research data, I will pay special attention to the relationships between themes.¹¹⁴ This will be of particular assistance in discerning implications for evangelism as well as areas for future research.

Definition of Key Terms

These are four of the key terms for this project as I define them in the early stages.

Full life

This term describes the kind of life which God intends for all of God’s creation, including people. This life is made possible through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, in conjunction with our obedient following of Him and our participation in His ministry in the world, within the context of a local expression of His Body, the Church. Concerning “full,” Hans Klein refers to the “life” of

¹¹⁴See James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, 195.

the Old Testament and the “new life” of the New Testament.¹¹⁵ I prefer, however, to think of new life in Christ as “*full* life” rather than “*new* life.” Full life includes new life, but I conceive of it as moving beyond the newness of our life in Christ at the beginning of our relationship with Him and His Church, so that it includes a growing awareness and embrace of all that God intends for us in Him, throughout our lifetime. I envision this full life to include such things as significance, meaning, purpose, joy, fulfillment, love, intimate and vital relationships with others, and well-being. Moreover, full life is experienced most deeply when we help other people experience it, when we help them thrive. Full life includes participation in God’s intentions for our lives and the lives of others. In addition to insights from biblical theology and the focus on eternal and abundant life in John’s gospel, I am also influenced in part by David Kelsey, who utilizes the phrase “human creaturely flourishing” and contends that this flourishing is best described as “blossoming.”¹¹⁶

Evangelism

Evangelism is an essential core dimension (in theory and practice) of the mission of God’s people, in partnership with the Holy Spirit, in which they communicate, share, and embody the possibility of experiencing full life in Jesus Christ, and invite non-Christians to a complete Christ-centered reorientation of their lives, within the overall

¹¹⁵Charles H. H. Scobie, “The Structure of Biblical Theology,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (1991): 177.

¹¹⁶David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 309-322.

context of the mission of God, so they too can experience this full life.¹¹⁷ If one thinks of Christian life as a hike of participation in God's desire to restore full life to God's creation, evangelism describes the ministry through which believers effectively¹¹⁸ guide non-Christians to the trailhead and invite them to begin the journey of experiencing, expressing, and sharing full life in Jesus Christ.¹¹⁹

Eternal life

As stated earlier, "eternal" includes the sense of "forever" (a designation of chronological time), but it also includes a fullness, abundance, and vitality of life here on this earth. "It is a powerful and instructive description of what has happened and is happening to the child of God."¹²⁰ E. Stanley Jones: "Jesus is the Yes to all of God's promises: that there is a God, a Father lying behind this universe caring for all creation; that this Father is manifested in the face of Jesus Christ, for ours is a Christlike God; that humankind can be different, and life can be utterly changed; that our emptiness can become fullness as every recess of our inner and outer life is invaded and empowered by the Holy Spirit. To all these promises Jesus Christ is the Divine Yes, and we belong to Him."¹²¹ Experiencing the "Yes" in Jesus both now and forever is eternal life.

¹¹⁷See "Toward a Constructive Understanding of Evangelism," in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 411-420.

¹¹⁸Recall the earlier point about McGavran's concept of effective evangelism.

¹¹⁹The trailhead imagery comes from conversation with Art McPhee, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY.

¹²⁰J. W. Roberts, "Some Observations on the Meaning of 'Eternal Life' in the Gospel of John," *Restoration Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1963), 186.

¹²¹E. Stanley Jones, *The Divine Yes* (Nashville, TN: Pillar Books for Abindgon Press, 1976), 21.

Kingdom of God

Based on the Hebrew *malikut*, the Aramaic *maliku*, and the Greek *basileia*, “kingdom” refers primarily to kingship, sovereignty, reign, or rule, and secondarily to the realm of that rule.¹²² “Kingdom of God,” therefore, refers to the sovereign reign that God exercises over creation, including individuals, peoples, and cultures. In different terms, this may also be referred to as the “range” of God’s “effective will.”¹²³ In this regard, therefore, it does not refer to a spatial, territorial, political, or national kingdom, and yet it would be inappropriate to conceive of the kingdom of God as having no impact in those arenas,¹²⁴ for wherever God’s reign is present all dimensions of life are impacted.

Significance of the Research

This project will contribute to the field of evangelization studies in several ways. First, it will be a fresh (or first) attempt at making a conceptual link between the themes of eternal and abundant life in John’s gospel and the notion of full life as one of the central organizing principles of Scripture. This will help ground evangelism a bit more deeply in biblical theology as a whole. Second, I will describe a set of implications for evangelism theory and practice in direct relationship with the theme of full life, through which I expect to discover, or at the very least, reclaim, important insights for such theory

¹²²See G. R. Beasley-Murray, “The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35:1, March (1992): 19; Chrys C. Caragounis, “Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 417; and George Eldon Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1964), 118-144.

¹²³Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 21.

¹²⁴Dennis C. Duling, “Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume 4*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 50.

and practice. Third, more by example than by claim, I will be proposing a closer connection between the field of biblical studies and the field of evangelization studies. Overarching the entire project is the simple yet important fact that I will be reflecting critically about a range of issues related to evangelization studies in direct association with biblical studies. This critical reflection will add a thin yet helpful layer to the knowledge base for the ministry of evangelism.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL STUDIES EXPLORATION OF THE LIFE THEME

In the first chapter, the foundation for this project was set forth, and the process to be utilized was described. The premise is that the biblical theme of life may be viewed as one of the primary themes of the Bible, and as such, provides a strong and helpful foundation for the theory and practice of evangelism. It will be essential, therefore, to explore the life theme from the perspective of biblical studies, and that is what will take place in this chapter. It is obviously impossible to engage in a comprehensive survey of all the resources available in the field of biblical studies. Emphasis, therefore, will be given to selected Old Testament and Johannine scholars. Priority will be given to those scholars who deal directly with the biblical theme of life, or who offer helpful insights regarding other themes related thereto. The chapter will begin with material related to the Old Testament and conclude with material related to the gospel of John. This journey into the field of biblical studies will be guided by the four clusters of questions that were described in the previous chapter, but will not be limited thereto. As the chapter unfolds, it is likely that certain themes will arise that are more important than others, and more attention will be given to those themes, not only in this chapter, but also in the succeeding chapter on theological insights.

Old Testament

Klein--Life is the Goal

Earlier reference was made to the 1991 article by Charles Scobie that mentions a 1983 article by Hans Klein in which Life (Old Testament) and Full Life (New Testament) are proposed together as offering a centralizing theme for biblical study. A point that was not mentioned earlier is that Klein does not view Life/Full Life “as the *centre (Mitte)* of the Old Testament and New Testament respectively but rather as the *goal (Zielpunkt)* which they envisage.”¹²⁵ This supports my earlier claim concerning the relationship between full life and the kingdom of God, in which life may be considered to be the ultimate goal for human beings and creation, with the kingdom viewed as either one of the instruments God chooses to bring that goal to fruition, or as the arena in which God’s full-life intentions take place. Scobie does not support the notion that it is possible to view the Bible through the lens of one theme or topic, because “exclusive emphasis on one theme tends to downplay other major themes which run through both Testaments.”¹²⁶ In assessing Klein’s proposal, however, he does applaud Klein’s attempt to use life as the leading idea of the Bible, because it acknowledges the strong differences between the Old and New Testaments, while at the same time highlighting that “all areas of life belong to life under God.”¹²⁷ One may appreciate this recognition by Scobie (through Klein) concerning all of life belonging to God. This is one of the reasons that a strong emphasis

¹²⁵Scobie, Charles H. H. “The Structure of Biblical Theology.” *Tyndale Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (1991): 177; emphasis added .

¹²⁶Ibid., 178.

¹²⁷Ibid.

on the biblical theme of full life provides a significant and helpful foundation for the theory and practice of evangelism. Even for persons who prefer not to view full life as the principle theme of the Bible, a strong emphasis on that theme reminds us that evangelism begins with God's intention to create, bear, and nurture life. Evangelism is intrinsically connected not only to God's creation, but also to God's creative *intent*. This is a point which merits serious consideration in evangelistic theory and practice.

It Starts with the Living God, and we are Included

Otto Baab emphasizes the fact that “perhaps the most typical word for identifying the God of the Old Testament is the word ‘living.’”¹²⁸ As the living God, God acts in history, displays power, and delivers. Baab notes that the designation of God as living (or alive) is attached more than sixty times to formulaic oaths that include God's name. Of special importance is how the Old Testament characterizes all other gods (idols) in comparison to the living God. Other gods are lifeless, dead, weak, and inadequate.¹²⁹ Only the living God, Yahweh, *could* help, save, and deliver, and only Yahweh *had* helped, saved, and delivered. Based on their personal experience with the living God, therefore, the Old Testament writers conceived of God as being active in history, active in their personal and corporate lives. “This is God, not simply an idea, therefore; he is an experienced power, acting upon and through human life and the natural order which

¹²⁸Otto J. Baab, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1949), 24.

¹²⁹For example, Habakkuk writes “What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols! Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it” (Habakkuk 2:18-19 ESV).

sustains it.”¹³⁰ Baab also writes that “since God is a living God, he is *unavoidably* involved in all of the complexities and uncertainties of life. His life *interacts* with that of his people.”¹³¹ This makes the link between the nature of God’s “living-ness” and the inclusion of humanity in God’s acting even more explicit.

Edmond Jacob also places a strong emphasis on the theme of God as a living God. In the first chapter, we noted Jacob’s contention that “the idea of eternity is secondary to that of life. God is not living because he is eternal, but he is eternal because he is living.”¹³² Jacob expands on this idea by stating that “life is what differentiates Yahweh from other gods.”¹³³ Moreover, he shares Baab’s perspective that there is a strong link between God’s “living-ness” and God’s interactions with humanity. “Just as life is a mysterious reality which can only be recognized, so God is a power which imposes itself on man (sic) and *comes to meet him* (sic) without his being always prepared for it.”¹³⁴ Even more significant is Jacob’s further contention that not only does God meet us in an imposing way, but the nature of this meeting includes an invitation to choose life for ourselves, as highlighted by Deuteronomy 30:19. It is only by virtue of making this choice “that man (sic) truly becomes what he is.”¹³⁵ This concept is helpful because it not only stresses the importance of the theme of life for those who relate with Yahweh, but it also speaks to the nature of what humanity is invited to. We are invited to life, and the

¹³⁰Baab, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 26.

¹³¹*Ibid.*; emphasis added.

¹³²Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), 38.

¹³³*Ibid.*, 39.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 38; emphasis added.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, 180.

One who issues that invitation is the Living God who created life, sustains life, and redeems life. This invitation to life should be given a valuable place in evangelistic theory and practice.

The Living God Interacts with Us Relationally

Also germane to this project is the perspective which Jacob and Baab share concerning the relational nature of God's interactions with humanity. Based on a study of God's interactions with Moses at the burning bush, Jacob suggests that one of the important concepts regarding the name of God is that when the Israelites said the name of God, it was God's presence that was emphasized, not God's eternity. Thus, "God is he who is *with* someone."¹³⁶ This perception that relationship with God is inherent in the Israelite understanding of God as the living God is further underscored in Jacob's section on life as the destiny of humanity. He stresses that though God has created human beings as independent persons, humanity "only attains that independence by ever-renewed contact with the one who is the source of his life and the source of all life."¹³⁷ Baab speaks to this point as well. In a discussion of the implications of viewing God as Creator, he remarks that "man (sic) and the universe are contingent upon the fact of God. They derive their existence from him and are consequently not self-sufficient or self-contained. They have meaning and value...only in the light of their relation to him."¹³⁸ He strongly reiterates this theme in a subsequent section on God's love and grace. "God

¹³⁶Edmund Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 52.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 177.

¹³⁸Otto Baab, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 47.

as father and savior does not remain aloof from men (sic); it is his nature to participate aggressively and creatively in their lives, giving of himself for the sake of their redemption. He ‘comes’ to them with a decisiveness and a certainty of action that cannot be ignored.”¹³⁹ Thus, we cannot conceive of the life God intends for us without also conceiving of God relating with us, participating in our lives.

Walther Eichrodt shares similar convictions concerning the relational nature of God’s interactions with humanity as evidenced in the Old Testament. He notes a growing awareness throughout Old Testament history of this relational dynamic, and suggests that it reached its zenith with the prophets. Based on a sharp focus on the *personal* nature of God’s holiness,¹⁴⁰ the overriding concern for the Israelite people became the question of how they stood in the sight of their holy, sovereign, and covenant-making God. The prophets helped shape a move toward a more individual (not individualistic) understanding of the need to make decisions regarding obedient participation in God’s ways in the world. A distinction was made, therefore, between persons who were Israelite by birth and persons who were considered to be a part of God’s people through virtue of their individual decisions to obey and follow God.¹⁴¹ Most germane to the current discussion concerning the relational nature of God’s interactions with humanity is Eichrodt’s concluding statement that “what raised the individual divine-human relationship to a new plane, making it a full and living reality, was the way in which the

¹³⁹Otto Baab, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 126

¹⁴⁰Walther Eichrodt, “The Indestructibility of the Individual’s Relationship with God (Immortality),” *Theology of the Old Testament, Vol. I*, trans. J. A. Baker, The Old Testament Library Series, ed. Peter Ackroyd, James Barr, Bernhard W. Anderson, and James L. Mays (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1967), 276.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*, 353-358.

prophets carried to its logical conclusion the belief that man's (sic) relations with God were explicitly *personal* in character."¹⁴² As we will continue to see, this emphasis on the relational and personal nature of God's interactions with persons is highlighted throughout the Bible, and most pertinent to this project, in the Gospel of John. It is also a strong focus of many theologians, and will be dealt with further in the chapter on theological insights.

This Receiving of Life from God Involves Obedience

As introduced with Eichrodt's previous comment about "individual decisions to obey and follow God," it becomes quickly obvious to any reader of the Old Testament that God's granting of life is directly linked to personal and/or national obedience. This is how an integral relationship with the God of life is maintained. Moses' well-known exhortation in Deuteronomy 30, "therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live," is immediately followed with "loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him."¹⁴³ Earlier in Israel's history, in Exodus 23, in the midst of giving directions to the people (through Moses) regarding the entering of the Promised Land, God directly links obedience to God's command concerning idolatry, promising to bless their bread and water, remove sickness from among them, prevent barrenness or miscarriage among the women, go before them to drive out their enemies, and grant them God's intended length of life for them.¹⁴⁴ These are just two of many possible examples

¹⁴²Walther Eichrodt, "The Indestructibility of the Individual's Relationship with God (Immortality)," 357; emphasis added.

¹⁴³Deuteronomy 30:19-20, ESV.

¹⁴⁴Exodus 23:20-33.

illustrating the direct connection between the obedience of God's people and the experience of full life as God intended it for them. Michael Brown helpfully notes that more is envisioned here than simply receiving the health benefits of the "hygienic practices legislated in the Torah," for "...the text indicates that covenantal obedience would bring about *supernatural* blessings of health--i.e., *more* than just reaping the rewards of 'clean,' godly living."¹⁴⁵ Norman Whybray echoes this sentiment in his treatment of the Old Testament conceptions of "the good life." After a chapter-long survey of Exodus through Numbers, he concludes that "these books, while celebrating Yahweh's power and his desire for his people's welfare, will have served as a warning to later generations that the good life is attainable only by faithful obedience to his laws."¹⁴⁶ This is a theme which we will return to in the section on insights from the Gospel of John. Before proceeding further, however, it would be prudent to discern how the Old Testament authors conceive of life.

The Concept of Life in the Old Testament

For the purposes of this study, it would be helpful to focus a bit on what the Hebrew people had in mind during the periods when they conceived of "life" as something which they could experience during their earthly lifetime. As has already been seen in the earlier references to Exodus 23 and Deuteronomy 30, the Israelites, if they remained faithful to God's covenant, pictured themselves receiving *physical sustenance*

¹⁴⁵Michael L. Brown, *Israel's Divine Healer*, Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995). 76-77; emphasis added. The "text" to which Brown is referring is Exodus 15:26, but in a parenthetical comment he refers to the "related Torah promises" in Exodus 23, Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 7 and 28.

¹⁴⁶R. Norman Whybray, *The Good Life in the Old Testament* (London, T & T Clark, 2002), 41; emphasis added.

(blessing of bread and water, Ex 23:25), *physical health* (removal of sickness, Ex 23:25), *reproductive fertility* (no miscarriages or barrenness, Ex 23:26; abundantly prosperous in the fruit of your womb, Deut 30:9), *long life* (fulfillment of number of days, Ex 23:26), *victory over enemies* (Ex 23:27-28, Deut 30:7), *success and prosperity* with crops and livestock (Deut 30:9), security in the *land* (Deut 30:16), and *compassion* (Deut 30:3).

These same themes are highlighted in Leviticus 26:

If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will remove harmful beasts from the land, and the sword shall not go through your land. You shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand, and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you.¹⁴⁷

Other OT passages refer to the tangible experience of God's intended life. Psalm 84:11b says that "...no good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly."¹⁴⁸ Psalm 23 refers to green pastures, still waters, an overflowing cup, continual goodness and mercy, and "not wanting" (lacking). Psalm 107 recounts the Lord's wondrous deeds among the redeemed, including deliverance from trouble (verses 6, 13, 19, 20, and 28), a city to dwell in (verses 7 and 36), healing (verse 20), plentiful water (verse 35), and a fruitful yield with crops and livestock (verses 37-38). Concerning prosperity, Proverbs exhibits a judgmental attitude to the unjust use of riches, but not toward riches in and of themselves. "Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your

¹⁴⁷Leviticus 2:3-9, ESV.

¹⁴⁸Psalm 84:11b, ESV.

produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.”¹⁴⁹ Proverbs also contends that the search for wisdom and understanding is far more important than the search for gold and jewels, but this does not mean that tangible blessings are contrary to wisdom’s desire. To the contrary, “*long life* is in her right hand; in her left hand are *riches* and *honor*. Her ways are ways of *pleasantness*, and all her paths are *peace*. She is a *tree of life* to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called *blessed*.”¹⁵⁰ Speaking of blessed, in Genesis we read of God’s promise to bless Abraham, and though the Scripture does not specifically apply this blessing to Abraham’s tangible well-being, it is noted soon thereafter that “. . . Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.”¹⁵¹ Concerning fertile reproduction, one may recall that prior to the birth of Isaac, God told Abraham in a vision that his offspring would be comparable to the uncountable number of stars.¹⁵²

Other Old Testament passages could be shared to demonstrate the very tangible ways the Hebrew people conceived of “life,” but these suffice to make the point. These concrete and perceptible notions concerning what life actually *is*, are fairly strongly agreed upon by a variety of Old Testament scholars. Michael Brown, for example, suggests that there was a shared idea among Mediterranean peoples that God (or whichever deity a people worshipped) would grant blessing to “soil, body, and womb.” Thus, the Hebrew people conceived of “life” as “adequate food supply, health, longevity,

¹⁴⁹Proverbs 3:9-10, ESV.

¹⁵⁰Proverbs 3:16-18, ESV; emphasis added.

¹⁵¹Genesis 13:2, ESV.

¹⁵²Genesis 15:5, ESV – “And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”

and the ability to reproduce.”¹⁵³ Sister Marie de Lourdes, in commenting on the Hebrew word *hayyim* (life), writes that “for the Hebrew, existence was not sufficient for life. To live meant to be vibrantly happy, to have good health, to be considerably successful in undertakings.”¹⁵⁴ Levenson echoes some of these sentiments, proposing that the Hebrew Bible’s concept of life includes “...power, skill, confidence, health, blessing, luck, and joy.”¹⁵⁵ In his discussion of the Hebrew word *barak* (to bless), Oswalt mentions the concepts of long life, fertile reproduction, prosperity, and success, and goes on to say that the primary role of blessing “...seems to have been to confer abundant and effective life upon something ...or someone...”¹⁵⁶ Norman Whybray engaged in an extensive survey of parts of the Old Testament in an attempt to detect the Old Testament’s conception of “the good life.” As a result of this survey, he identified twelve features that appear to be prominent: security, a land to live in, power, food, long life, wealth, family, justice, laws, wisdom, pleasure, and trust in God.¹⁵⁷ One may observe in Whybray’s list that there is a mixture of tangible features such as food and wealth, and intangible features (though no less real) such as power, justice, wisdom, pleasure, and trust in God. This leads into the next section, which considers a related insight by scholars concerning a shift that took place in Israelite conceptions of life.

¹⁵³Michael Brown, *Israel’s Divine Healer*, 70.

¹⁵⁴Sister Marie de Lourdes, “Wellsprings of Life,” *The Bible Today* (December 1978), 1825-1832.

¹⁵⁵John D. Levenson, *The Papers of the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology*, Vol. VI, ed. Christopher I. Wilkins (Pittsburgh, PA: The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, 2003), 142.

¹⁵⁶John N. Oswalt, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, R. Laird Harris, ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 132.

¹⁵⁷Norman Whybray, *The Good Life in the Old Testament*, 6.

The Correlation between Life as “Knowing God” and Life as “Receiving God’s Gifts”

Jacob and Eichrodt discuss how the Old Testament develops a distinction between the blessing of being in fellowship with God as independent from the other blessings which God’s people may experience in this life. Jacob talks about the relationship between “blessing” and the experience of “shalom.” As the creator and giver of life, blessing originates with God. It is a gift. The result of blessing in the life of the Israelite believer is shalom, “which suggests the idea of abundance, prosperity and peace; this state will only be fully attained in the last times, but for the righteous it can be a *present* reality, so true is it that *there is nothing hoped for which cannot be translated immediately into actual life.*”¹⁵⁸ Jacob goes on to comment, however, that there was a shift in Israelite attitudes. Over time they moved to a declining emphasis on earthly abundance and success as the central aspects of the blessed life to a stronger emphasis on relationship with God. This “led to a view of life as no more the possession of God’s gifts but of God himself.”¹⁵⁹ Eichrodt observes that this trend was especially powerful in exilic and post-exilic times. The Hebrew people had experienced horrendous loss during these times, so that their previous vision of what it meant to be blessed by God underwent significant change.¹⁶⁰ They were no longer members of a prosperous nation that seemed

¹⁵⁸Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), 180; emphasis added.

¹⁵⁹Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 180.

¹⁶⁰A related observation is made by Levenson, who notes that earlier in Israelite history the tension between God’s promise of life and the fact of death was somewhat (though not completely) resolved by the “semantic range” of the Hebrew Bible’s concept of life, so that “when ancient Israelite texts speak of ‘life,’ they usually mean not deathlessness, but a healthy, blessed existence.” In post-exilic times, however, due to the traumatic events the people had experienced, a new model began to appear, that of a future resurrection of the dead. Jon D. Levenson, “The Fact of Death and the Promise of Life in Israelite Religion,” pp. 139-154, in *The Papers of the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology*, Vol. VI, Christopher I. Wilkins, editor.

to be enjoying God's favor. Their world had been turned upside down. Thus, "in a situation where the individual was struggling for certainty about what the goal of his conduct should be, without having the life and prosperity of his nation to guarantee that his efforts were being successful, and where at the same time the external pressures which burdened the life of the community made a return to a naïve interrelation of blessing and assurance of God impossible, men (sic) readily accepted the prophetic proclamation of fellowship with God as the supreme good."¹⁶¹ I suggest that this declining stress on "God's gifts" (Jacob) or "natural goods" (Eichrodt), along with an increasing stress on "God himself" (Jacob) or "the religious good of salvation"¹⁶² (Eichrodt), has also found its way into current Christian understanding, and this is quite relevant to the ministry of evangelism.

A relationship with God through Jesus Christ is an essential (and probably *the* essential) dimension of what it means to be a Christ-follower.¹⁶³ In this context, then, some Christians choose to downplay the day-to-day blessings of God in life, and also, therefore, in evangelism. This can inadvertently lead to an understanding of the gospel that focuses primarily on an internal relationship with God and ignores the other

Series in Theological Scholarship and Research. Pittsburgh, PA: The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. 2003.

¹⁶¹Walther Eichrodt, "The Indestructibility of the Individual's Relationship with God (Immortality)," *Theology of the Old Testament, Vol. II*, translated by J. A. Baker, The Old Testament Library Series, eds. Peter Ackroyd, James Barr, Bernhard W. Anderson, and James L. Mays (Philadelphia, PA:Westminster, 1967), 360.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, 360.

¹⁶³In *The Genesis Accounts of Creation*, Westermann makes an interesting comment in relation to Genesis 2:26, in reference to the phrase, "in our image, after our likeness." He says that "God made man after his image so that the stream of life might flow in the encounter between God and man, in that which transpires between God and man...This description means...that man can maintain his humanity only in the presence of God. Man separated from God has not only lost God, but also the purpose of his humanity." Claus Westermann, *The Genesis Accounts of Creation*, trans. Norman E Wagner, Facet Books, Biblical Series, Vol 7, John Reumann, gen. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1964), 20-21.

dimensions of what full life in Christ should and could mean for Christ's followers. God's intentions would be better served, however, if *both* dynamics were included in gospel understandings and gospel invitations. Yes, first and foremost, we can and should be "in possession of God," but we can also be in "possession of God's gifts" (to use Jacob's words). Why must we divorce the two? Is it really possible to divorce the two? Are not God's gifts of peace, joy, provision, happiness, reconciliation, service, significance, worship, and more, included in a "package deal" when we are in relationship with God? Can we not invite persons to be in relationship with God and at the same time inform them that this relationship will include God's blessings? Certainly, we must be careful how we communicate the interrelationship between personally relating with God and experiencing God's "other" blessings. We do not want to convey a tit-for-tat, reap-and-sow invitation, such that persons only enter into relationship with God in order to receive God's abundant blessings. The interface between being in relationship with God and receiving God's blessings is more holistic and integrated than that.

Viewed from the other side of the coin, however, this is precisely the point. Just as we do not want persons to seek God's gifts without seeking God Himself, *neither* do we want them to seek God Himself without also seeking God's gifts. If the interface is holistic and integrated, it must be seen as such from *each* dimension. Claus Westermann's perspective is useful at this point. In *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, he makes a careful distinction between God's deliverance and God's blessing. Deliverance describes the saving "acts" or "events" of God, while blessing describes the working of God in the processes of history to bring about fullness of life in

daily experience.¹⁶⁴ In a different work (*What Does the Old Testament Say About God?*), Westermann offers a keen observation concerning the relationship of humanity's creation to this notion of God's working within the processes of history. He suggests that the tendency in Christian theology is to conceive of a disconnect between human creation and the rest of creation, and that this conception is quite unfaithful to the Biblical material concerning creation. Human existence is inextricably tied to "living-space (the garden), the provision of food (the trees of the garden), work (the commission to cultivate and preserve), and in particular the community ('a helper fit for him' Gen. 2:18)," so that people "are only human *in* these relations, not beyond them in an abstract existence." In the context of this theological anthropology (or anthropological theology), we can more fully grasp the importance of understanding the role of "blessing" in Christian life and understanding. "It is the working of the blessing that allows all these necessary parts of human existence to persist: God's blessing allows humanity's food to grow and prosper, preserves human living-space, gives people success in their work, and grants peace (*shalom*) within the community."¹⁶⁵ "Blessing" for Westermann, therefore, is an ongoing experience.

In a discussion of what "salvation" means in the Old Testament, Baab notes the integral link between having a relationship with God and the experience of God's

¹⁶⁴Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), 11-14. Elmer Martens also makes a distinction between deliverance and other dimensions of God's intentions with his suggestion that God's four-fold design is clearly outlined in Exodus 5:22-6:8 and offers the framework for understanding the Old Testament (and indeed much of the material in the New Testament). This design includes the four components of deliverance, community, relationship, and an enjoyment of the good life. See Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 3rd ed (N. Richland Hills, TN: Bibal Press, 1998), 3-13.

¹⁶⁵Claus Westermann, *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?*, ed. Friedemann W. Golka, (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1979), 41-42.

blessings. “By tentatively defining salvation as the good which comes to men in their life with God, we are able to avoid the artificial separation between processes and their consequences, which underlies the general misunderstanding of the Old Testament as reflecting a religion primarily of concrete rewards for good conduct.”¹⁶⁶ Eichrodt shares a related insightful viewpoint. He notes that though the exilic and post-exilic *prophetic* posture helped shape the theological conviction that fellowship with God was the supreme good, the *priestly* interpretation of the covenant relationship was “characterized by the *organic synthesis* of earthly blessing and the supreme gift of salvation.”¹⁶⁷ He further contends that these two perspectives were “impossible to unite in fruitful tension,”¹⁶⁸ resulting in either a strong focus on fellowship with God as the most valuable consequence of God’s salvation, or on natural goods as the most valuable consequence thereof. In spite of the difficulty in maintaining a fruitful tension, I encourage us to put forth the effort to move toward an organic synthesis, both in theology and in evangelism. Let us not, therefore, cast away God’s blessing(s) too quickly. After all, God is the creator and giver of life. It was God’s original intention in creation for humanity and all of creation to experience fertile life, and this continues to be God’s intention. As John Oswalt says, “God gives life. Neither God, nor man, nor rite can do so. Nor does God have to be cajoled to give his blessings. He *wishes* to give it to all who will trust him (Gen. 12:3).”¹⁶⁹ Let us not downplay God’s intentions for us. Let us include God’s blessings in our evangelistic vision, communication, and invitation.

¹⁶⁶Otto Baab, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 119.

¹⁶⁷Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament, Vol. II*, 363; emphasis added.

¹⁶⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹Oswalt, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Vol. I*, 132; emphasis added.

Two Tensions or Continuums are Clearly Present

Before shifting to the section on insights from John's gospel, it would be helpful to note that two tensions or continuums are clearly emerging from these Old Testament insights. The first is the tension or continuum between conceiving of life in terms of God's tangible blessings versus conceiving of life as the "overall or general" blessing of knowing God. Hopefully, the importance of addressing this issue was made obvious in the previous section. I will return to this theme in the context of Johannine perspectives on life. The second tension or continuum is that which Jon Levenson noted between God's promise of life and the clearly observable fact of death, and the post-exilic development of a concept of the resurrection of the dead to address this situation. This is quite similar to the already/not-yet tension related to the kingdom of God which was discussed in Chapter One. I do not wish to revisit that discussion. However, I would like to note that the post-exilic development of the resurrection concept resulted in the postponement of the expectation for earthly benefits related to the life which God would share with God's people. In this context, I want to share pertinent findings from my field research concerning the "this-life" benefits of following Christ and the "after-life" benefits of following Christ.

"Why did you decide to follow Jesus?" is the question that I wish to focus on related to this issue. From the 97 interviewees who responded to this question, a total of 113 responses were recorded (some respondents gave more than one reason for deciding to follow Jesus). Of these 113 responses, eight of them made specific reference to following Jesus because of the result this would have on their life after death (expressed either as fear of hell, desire for heaven, or desire for eternal life). Conversely, 50

responses related directly to some form or measure of improvement in this life. These responses included comments such as “there was a void”; “provided the missing piece”; “I wanted security”; “for protection”; “desire to be loved”; and “I needed a change in life.” Several references were made to this-life benefits of security, peace, direction, purpose, and hope. These responses were spread fairly evenly throughout all three groups that were asked this question (Staff, Recent Converts, and Evangelistically Gifted Leaders), so that no strongly discernible trend could be seen between the groups. They all expressed a strong interest in (or influence of) this-life benefits as motivating factors in their decision to follow Jesus. In terms of percentages, however, the recent converts leaned somewhat more heavily in this direction. Recent converts represented 33 percent of the total respondents to this question, but in terms of specific references to this-life benefits such as security, peace, purpose, etc., they accounted for 44 percent of those references. I would not consider this a significant difference, but it does teach us the value of being aware of how profoundly motivating this-life benefits may be for people who have not yet chosen to follow Jesus.

The remaining 55 responses ranged across a wide spectrum, and some of these could also be considered as references to this-life benefits of following Jesus. Examples include “something to believe in,” “someone to trust,” “I needed him,” “it just made sense,” “it felt right,” and “it seemed like what I was supposed to do.” An argument could be made, for example, that having “something to believe in” provides a sense of meaning and purpose in this life. Likewise, choosing to follow Jesus because “it just made sense” could be construed as contributing to a person’s experience of meaning and purpose, because it provides them with a perception of intellectual and/or philosophical cohesion.

In an effort to be careful that I don't allow my pro-life bias to overly influence my interpretation of these responses, I did not include them in the statistical analysis offered in the previous paragraph. However, if one were to add these types of responses to the total number of this-life references, the final number of this-life references would be 75, compared to 8 references to the after-life.¹⁷⁰ Obviously, this is a huge differential. Of the 113 total responses, the 75 this-life responses represent 66 percent, whereas the 8 after-life responses represent only 7 percent. A valuable insight from the analysis of these responses, therefore, is that we would be wise to pay close attention to the ratio of this-life references versus next-life references in our evangelistic ministry. If the majority of non-Christians are seeking peace, joy, meaning, purpose, sense-making, love, fulfillment, security, etc., in *this* life, and we focus inordinately on "getting right with God" so they can prepare themselves for the after-life, we are communicating with non-Christians in what essentially amounts to a foreign language.

The Concept of Life in John's Gospel

Zoe, Aionios, and Psyche

It would be wise to begin with a brief treatment of the three primary Greek words related to "life" in John's gospel. We will then explore a variety of themes related to the concept of life in John's gospel. *Zoe* is the word most often translated as "life" in John, and *aionios* is the adjective that is translated as "eternal." Marianne Thompson suggests that in the Synoptic gospels the terms "life" and "eternal life" are used interchangeably

¹⁷⁰The additional 25 this-life responses consist of the following: 4 responses regarding following Jesus as "the right things to do"; 7 persons stating that "it just made sense"; 5 references to "truth" or "teaching" or "belief system"; 4 respondents suggesting that "it felt right"; 4 viewing their Christ-following decision in terms of "something to believe" or "someone to trust"; and 1 person who simply said "I needed Him."

with “kingdom of God.” The life referred to in this regard speaks not only of quantity of years, but also of a quality of living that would be consistent with “the age to come.” This “age-to-come” life had a strong futuristic orientation in the Synoptics, so that while a person’s present life strongly *impacts* a person’s future, for those who responded to Jesus’ call the anticipated blessing of eternal life would be primarily *experienced* in some “future state of blessedness.”¹⁷¹ Thompson believes that in John’s gospel “life” and “eternal life” are also synonymous, and though the phrase “kingdom of God” only appears twice, it is used interchangeably with “life” and “eternal life” (in the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus in chapter 3). Thompson notes that though many biblical scholars attribute an “age-to-come” character to life and eternal life in John’s gospel, just as in the Synoptics, there are some who would question this. Most notably is Schackenburg, who believes that John’s distinction is not between life in this age versus life in the age to come (temporal), but rather life in this earthly realm versus life in the heavenly realm (spatial).¹⁷²

Though this contrast is helpful, an even more helpful contrast is that between John’s use of *zoe* and his use of *psyche*. *Psyche* in John normally refers to “human life which can be given up” and is most often translated in English as “soul,” though sometimes also translated as “life.” Thompson notes that though *psyche* can be given up (such as when Jesus refers to giving up his “life” for the sheep in John 10), “*zoe* is life which cannot be taken away, life which is imperishable. *Zoe* cannot be lost, since it is true, heavenly, God-given life.” All human beings have *psyche*, but not all human beings

¹⁷¹Marianne Thompson, “Eternal Life in the Gospel of John,” 37.

¹⁷²*Ibid.*, 38.

have *zoe*, for *zoe* only comes from God through Jesus.¹⁷³ Leon Morris also deals with John's usage of *zoe* and *psyche*. Regarding *zoe*, he agrees with Thompson that "life" and "eternal life" mean the same thing for John. Concerning *psyche*, Morris shares Thompson's basic sentiments, but he phrases it just a bit differently. Morris refers to *psyche* as "ordinary physical life" and observes that most often John uses this word when he refers to someone giving up or laying down their life. A good example of the distinction between the two is found in John 12:25, where Jesus says "whoever loves his life (*psyche*) loses it, and whoever hates his life (*psyche*) in this world will keep it for eternal life (*zoe*)."¹⁷⁴ Clearly John makes an important distinction here in the use of *psyche* and *zoe*, but it is difficult to discern with certainty what that distinction is. Does *psyche* refer to life on the "earthly plane" while *zoe* refers to life on the "heavenly plane"? Is *zoe* a reference to divine life while *psyche* is a reference to human life? Neither of these questions seems satisfactory because they appear to devalue the "crossing of planes or realms" that Jesus undertook in the Incarnation. Thompson is heading in the right direction when she says that all people have *psyche* but not all people have *zoe*, but to state any definitive conclusions beyond this assessment would be unwise.

Despite some uncertainty about the precise Johannine distinctions between *zoe* and *psyche*, one of the commonly shared beliefs among many biblical scholars is that John's perception of "life" has a strong emphasis on its source in God. C. H. Dodd, for example, proposes that the adjective "eternal" is more a qualitative than a quantitative description. It includes a reference to "everlastingness," but "its everlastingness is a

¹⁷³Marianne Thompson, "Eternal Life in the Gospel of John," 38-39.

¹⁷⁴John 12:25, ESV. Leon Morris, *Jesus is the Christ*, 190-191.

function of its divine quality,” not the other way around.¹⁷⁵ Richard Thomas also emphasizes the relationship of “eternal” to its source in and connection to God. He writes that “the epithet ‘eternal’ indicates the divine source and permanent nature of the life that Jesus proclaimed and proffered.”¹⁷⁶ J. W. Roberts makes a similar point when he says of eternal life that “it is Christ’s own resurrection life shared by him with those who have believed in him.”¹⁷⁷ We recall that this Johannine connection of life to its source in God was a prominent Old Testament theme as well.

The Relationship of Eternal Life to Knowing God

Knowing God is Eternal Life

As one studies John’s gospel, it becomes quickly apparent that the Old Testament tension or continuum between the blessing of knowing God and the “other” blessings of God’s tangible gifts has remained an integral part of the experience of God’s followers. Perhaps more than any other gospel, John makes a strong case for conceiving of life as the gift and experience of *knowing* God relationally through believing in Jesus and obeying God’s word (written and Incarnate).¹⁷⁸ In this sense, then, John seems to characterize life not as a “commodity” that one is given (or awarded) in consequent response to one’s choice to believe, know, and obey God. Instead, the very experience itself of believing, knowing, and obeying God is life. John lays the foundation for this

¹⁷⁵C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 149.

¹⁷⁶Richard W. Thomas, “The Meaning of the Terms ‘Life’ and ‘Death’ in the Fourth Gospel and in Paul,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 21:2, June (1968), 204.

¹⁷⁷J. W. Roberts, “Some Observations on the Meaning of ‘Eternal Life’ in the Gospel of John,” 192.

¹⁷⁸More will be said later about the relationship between believing, knowing, and obeying.

perspective from the beginning of his gospel by noting the direct connection between God, the Word, creation, and life. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.”¹⁷⁹ Previous mention was made of the strong Old Testament assertion that God is the living God, and is, therefore, the source of all life. As the Incarnate Word who shared in the creation of life and all that exists, and as the one who has been granted by the Father to have life in himself (see John 5:26), Jesus is the source of life for those who believe in Him and, therefore, have experiential knowledge of God. In Jesus’ prayer as recorded in chapter 17 of John, He said “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And *this is eternal life*, that they *know you* the only true *God, and Jesus* Christ whom you have sent.”¹⁸⁰ Jesus says very plainly here that to know God *is* eternal life.

Marianne Thompson agrees with this perspective, asserting that “only those who know God, who live in fellowship with God and in harmony with the purposes of God, have eternal life, not because living in fellowship with God merits eternal life as a reward, but because fellowship with God is already to have a share in God’s own life.”¹⁸¹ Thompson is accompanied by many others who share this view. Leon Morris writes that “the knowledge of God and of Christ is itself eternal life. It is not that it brings eternal

¹⁷⁹John 1:1-4, ESV.

¹⁸⁰John 17:1-3, ESV; emphasis added.

¹⁸¹Marianne Meye Thompson, *Eternal Life in the Gospel of John*, 40.

life: it is itself that life.”¹⁸² I made earlier mention of John laying the foundation for this perception in the early verses of his gospel. Craig Koester roots his viewpoint in the Prologue as well, observing that the theme of God as creator and giver of life is very basic to John’s theology, and that the early mention of life, creation, and light indicates that if human beings “are to live they must receive life from God. This means that in John’s Gospel life is understood relationally. To have life is to relate to the God who is the source of all life... To have true life is to *know* and trust God and his Word.”¹⁸³ C. K. Barrett agrees, noting that the relationship which Jesus has with the Father involves “love, obedience, and mutual indwelling,” and that when a person knows God through Jesus a comparable relationship develops. Furthermore, this knowing “of God and Christ confers, or rather is, eternal life.”¹⁸⁴ Likewise, J. G. van der Watt points out the common theme of the “immanence” of believers and Jesus that is found in the bread of life discourse in John 6:32-51 and in the vine and branches discourse in John 15:1-8. He goes on to suggest that “this implies that another way to say that the person has life is to say that the person is in Jesus and Jesus is in him/her.”¹⁸⁵ We can readily see the strong argument that can be made from John’s gospel to conceive of life more in terms of the general blessing of knowing God than in terms of the more tangible and specific blessings God grants us. This line of reasoning is strengthened even further when one explores more fully the relationship between believing, knowing, and obeying God, along

¹⁸²Leon Morris, *Jesus is the Christ: Studies in the Theology of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 204.

¹⁸³Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 31-32; emphasis added.

¹⁸⁴C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John. An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955), 136.

¹⁸⁵J. G. van der Watt, “I am the Bread of Life: Imagery in John 6:32-51,” *Acta Theologica* (2001:2), 200.

with the closely-linked idea of abiding. Though scholars will not agree about every detail and nuance of this discussion, there is a generally agreed upon perspective that John's gospel portrays "life in Christ" as an ongoing relationship with God through Jesus that begins with "believing" (trusting, following, surrendering to), which results in "knowing" (experiential, relational knowledge), and is continuously sustained through "obeying" (the Incarnate Word and the written word, through the guidance of the Spirit) and "abiding" (staying connected to Jesus and bearing fruit in community with other believers).

Believing, Knowing, Obeying, and Abiding

Believing

This ongoing relationship, from the human perspective, begins with believing. Leon Morris tells us that the verb "to believe" is used 98 times in John's gospel, far more than any other New Testament book, while the noun for "faith" is not used at all.¹⁸⁶ Morris goes on to summarize John's use of the verb under four headings. The *simple dative* "conveys the idea of giving credence to someone or something, of accepting a statement as true." *Believing that* (with the Greek word *hoti*) underscores that "believing" has specific content, so that John's reader is not invited simply to believe in a non-directed, general sense, but rather to believe specifically in Jesus. *Believing "in" or "on"* (often with the Greek preposition *eis*, which signifies "into") indicates that not only is Jesus the intended "target" or "content" of believing, but further indicates that believing has more to do with personal trust than with acknowledgement of factual veracity. As

¹⁸⁶Leon Morris, *Jesus is the Christ*, 170.

Morris phrases it, “there cannot be the slightest doubt that when John uses the expression *pisteuein eis*, he is conveying the idea of wholehearted trust in Jesus Christ.” Finally, the *absolute use* stresses the essential relationship between believing and experiencing real life. Life is made available through Jesus, but only if the person believes. “There is nothing we can bring to the quest for life; it comes as God’s good gift. All that we do is receive it trustingly.” Morris goes on to suggest that one should not over-emphasize the specific differences of John’s four uses of “believe,” but rather should see the basic unity present among them all, so that the general point is that it is through believing in Jesus, God’s Son, that people receive the life (Morris sometimes uses “salvation” in place of “life”) which He came to bring.¹⁸⁷

F. F. Bruce also shares helpful insights regarding the richness of John’s conceptions of “believe.” One suggestion he makes is that “faith involved both believing in and believing that: believing in Jesus is emphasized as the way of life through the gospel, but believing in him implies certain things about him – that he is ‘the Christ, the Son of God.’”¹⁸⁸ Bruce later refers to “believing in” as “personal faith” and “believing that” as “propositional faith,”¹⁸⁹ which is somewhat similar to Morris’ contention that believing must have content. Perhaps more closely related to Morris’ understandings, however, is Bruce’s proposal that believing in Jesus involves “total self-commitment” to Him.¹⁹⁰ George Mlakuzhyll has studied the gospel of John from an Indian perspective as

¹⁸⁷Leon Morris, *Jesus is the Christ*, 170-189.

¹⁸⁸F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 12.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., 395.

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 153.

influenced by Hindu religious tradition. He notes that in the Hindu tradition three paths of salvation are offered: works, knowledge, and loving devotion. He suggests that John's gospel emphasizes the path of faith and love, which results in the believer experiencing a relational knowledge of God that transforms the person's life and leads them to be an instrument of God's love for others.¹⁹¹ Of particular interest to our discussion of what "believing" means in John's gospel, Mlakuzhyll proposes that one of the primary features of faith in John's gospel is that a person becomes a believer through welcoming the Word of God, and that "it is not enough to welcome the Word of God once and for all, but one must constantly be under the influence of the Word of God to continue to be a child of God...this continuity of personal commitment is implied by the present participial phrase 'those believing in his name' (1,12; see also 'believing' at 20,31)."¹⁹² Morris concurs with this viewpoint. In commenting on Jesus' words in John 6:29 ("This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" ESV), he says that "the present tense here denotes continuing attitude, not the once-for-all decision."¹⁹³ Morris, Bruce, and Mlakuzhyll are just three of many scholars who emphasize the ongoing nature of "believing" in John's gospel. With differences concerning the details, it would be fair to say that there is a generally agreed upon view among Johannine scholars that John thinks of "believing" as a lifelong relationship of trusting in Jesus and following His ways, as

¹⁹¹Mlakuzhyll writes that "the Beloved Disciple invites the readers to a *life of faith and love*, a faith in Jesus Christ that grows into an experiential knowledge of him and ensues in Christlike love, a love that is enlivened by a dynamic faith and enlightened by an intimate knowledge, a life that is transformed by faith in and knowledge of Jesus Christ, a '*Christic*' life (life that flows from Christ) flowering into mutual love." George Mlakuzhyll, *Abundant Life in the Gospel of John* (Delhi: ISPCCK, 2007), 8.

¹⁹²George Mlakuzhyll, *Abundant Life in the Gospel of John*, 23-24.

¹⁹³Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 360.

opposed to a one-time faith transaction that has little or no impact on the rest of a person's life.

Knowing and obeying

We can quickly recognize, therefore, that believing is part of a lifelong process that includes knowing God and obeying God. In order to discuss the truths involved, we must necessarily speak of them as separate and distinct entities, but believing, knowing, and obeying are very closely connected. As a person enters into the lifelong relationship of trusting Jesus and following His ways, that person, therefore, also begins the process of knowing God (through Jesus) relationally, and the following of God's ways clearly implies a level of obedience. The themes of obeying God and relating with God personally were dealt with in the previous section on insights from Old Testament scholars, and they are certainly no less important in John's gospel. It is crucial to John's conception of "life in Christ" that believers actually know God in a personal, relational, and intimate manner, and that this experiential knowledge results in obedience to God's ways. D. Moody Smith agrees with this idea, but he offers additional insight by observing that we should avoid thinking of knowing God as *subsequent* to believing God. Smith proposes that knowing God is not "a step beyond believing, but the *correlate* of believing. Such knowledge can never be divorced from faith or be played off against faith, for it belongs to the very nature of faith in Jesus Christ to know the one who is believed and trusted."¹⁹⁴ This notion of "correlatedness" helps us more fully grasp the

¹⁹⁴D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 97; emphasis added.

strong interconnectedness between believing, knowing, and obeying God.¹⁹⁵ Smith, in fact, follows up his comments about faith and knowledge with subsequent thoughts related to obedience. In a section of his book dealing with Jesus and the community of believers, he writes that “*believing obedience* is the essence of discipleship and the church.”¹⁹⁶ Bruce echoes this concept, noting that “there is no true faith without obedience, no true obedience without faith.”¹⁹⁷ Just as our believing in Jesus does not occur in a vacuum, neither is our lifelong relationship of believing (trusting and following) disconnected from our knowing and obeying God.

Abiding

Abiding is a concept very closely related to this discussion. Raymond Brown’s treatment of the relationship between abiding and ecclesiology is helpful in this regard. Brown maintains that the vine and branches imagery in chapter 15 of John, taken along with the sheep and shepherd imagery in chapter 10, help us understand that “the core of ecclesiology is a personal, ongoing relation to the life-giver come down from God,” so that “it is all important for each person not only to believe in Jesus but to remain attached to him, for he continues as an active life-giver and life-nourisher in the community.”¹⁹⁸ Additionally, F. F. Bruce contends that the language of Jesus in John 6:56 (“whoever

¹⁹⁵In a corollary fashion, John Oswalt highlights “the interdependence of belief and love and obedience” in 1 Jn 5:1-5, and uses the phrase “delighted obedience” to refer to the character of our obedience to the One whom we trust and know. See John Oswalt, *On Being a Christian: Thoughts from John the Apostle* (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury Press, 2008), 79-86.

¹⁹⁶D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, 138; emphasis added.

¹⁹⁷F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, 160.

¹⁹⁸Raymond Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1984), 87-95.

feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” ESV) “denotes that faith-union by which a mutual indwelling, a ‘co-inherence’ of Jesus and his people is established.”¹⁹⁹ Gerard Sloyan also observes a strong sense of intimacy and abiding in the bread of life discourse. He notes that “‘belief’ in the Johannine sense is impossible apart from a close, personal relationship with the Son of man who is in heaven. It is the ‘abiding’ in another in an almost unheard of intimacy (v. 56), a living by the other’s life (v. 57) for which the only fit parallel is the co-inherence of Jesus with the Father in which he lives with the Father’s life (v. 57).”²⁰⁰ Leon Morris shares a similar perspective concerning John 6, writing that the person “who eats and drinks ‘abideth’ (the tense is continuous; it denotes more than a reflecting contact) in Christ.”²⁰¹

Believing, knowing, obeying, and abiding – hearing directly from John

In addition to gathering insights from biblical scholars concerning these critical concepts, it would also serve us well to hear directly from John. In the Prologue, for example, John writes of the light (which most scholars take to mean Jesus the Incarnate Word) that “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.”²⁰² It is instructive that in detailing the human situation that the Incarnate Word was sent to earth to address, John first mentions not unbelief as the primary dilemma, but a lack of knowing God. In chapter 3 John the Baptist says that “whoever

¹⁹⁹F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, 160.

²⁰⁰Gerard S. Sloyan, *John: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 73.

²⁰¹Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 380.

²⁰²John 1:10, ESV.

believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”²⁰³ A direct connection is made here between believing and obeying. In chapter 10 Jesus uses the imagery of the sheep and shepherd to describe (at least in part) what it means to experience life in Him. Strong emphasis is given to the fact that the shepherd knows the sheep and the sheep know the shepherd. They know the shepherd’s voice and will follow Him when He calls them in or out of pasture.

Furthermore, Jesus links “knowing” with “believing” as He continues His discussion with the unbelieving Jewish leaders. “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”²⁰⁴ In the Lazarus story, we find Jesus saying to Martha that “everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”²⁰⁵ Note the grouping together here of “living” and “believing.” In chapter 15, Jesus is addressing the disciples, and He tells them: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”²⁰⁶ Jesus is straightforward in relating obedience (keeping of commandments) with relationship (abiding in His love). These passages from John’s gospel help illustrate his deep-seated belief that life in Christ involves believing, knowing, obeying, and abiding.

²⁰³John 3:36, ESV; emphasis added.

²⁰⁴John 10:25-27, ESV.

²⁰⁵John 11:26a, ESV.

²⁰⁶John 15:9-10, ESV.

The Relationship Of The Johannine Conception Of "Life In Christ" To Believing, Knowing, Obeying, And Abiding

Given this strong emphasis throughout John's gospel, it is no surprise that some biblical scholars suggest that the Johannine conception of "life in Christ" focuses primarily on the general blessing of knowing God and pays scant attention to other tangible blessings of God. In a book concerning early Christianity and the Jewish perspective on "land," W. D. Davies connects this Johannine perspective to the reformulation that John crafts concerning the "holy spaces" of Judaism. He proposes, for example, that in chapters 8 and 9 of his gospel, John portrays the replacement of the Jerusalem temple with the temple of Jesus' body. Based especially on Jesus' "I am" claim in 8:58 and his departure from the temple in 8:59, Davies suggests that "we find the implication that, for John, 'I am' has departed from the Temple, that 'holy space' is no longer the abode of the Divine Presence. The Shekinah is no longer *there*, but is now found wherever Christ is."²⁰⁷ He makes a similar point regarding Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. In this passage, Davies sees a contrast being made between the water that Jesus provides and the water that one can draw from Jacob's well, so that the focus is not on contrasting Jesus with Jacob, but contrasting the holy space of Jacob's well with the new source of living water. Likewise, in the healing at the pool of Bethesda in John 5, "there is here a replacement of a Jewish holy space, with its holy water, by the living Word."²⁰⁸ Davies even suggests that the vine and branches discourse

²⁰⁷W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 295.

²⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 309.

in John 15 is an illustration of a holy “sphere” or “space” in Jewish tradition being replaced by a new focus on Jesus. He bases this on an understanding of the vine being an Old Testament “symbol of what attaches a man to the land, of God’s hopes for the land,” based on Amos 9:13-15, and similar metaphorical images in Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekial.²⁰⁹ In the final analysis, then, Davies suggests that “our discussion of the Fourth Gospel in this way drives us back to the beginning of the Gospel to 1:14, where the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth is said to be the seat of the Logos: that Logos, whether as Wisdom or as Torah is no longer attached to a land, as was the Torah, but to a Person who came to his own land, and was not received.”²¹⁰ The strong implication throughout Davies’ treatment of John’s gospel is that John centers all his attention on Jesus as the source of life and sustenance, so that if one wishes to speak of “life in Christ” one must speak primarily of Him and not of any tangible gifts that would be “external” to Him. As Davies says, “what was significant to John was the descent of Jesus from above and his ascent thither. The fundamental spatial symbolism of the Fourth Gospel was *not horizontal but vertical*.”²¹¹

The idea of focusing our attention on Jesus is certainly laudable, for He is the author, source, and giver of life. There is no question that John invites his readers to believe, know, obey, and abide in Him, and that in so doing they will experience the life that He came to give. Unfortunately, however, my experience has been that some persons who embrace this strong emphasis upon Jesus make a corollary assumption that does not necessarily follow. They assume that one should not speak of knowing Jesus

²⁰⁹W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 332.

²¹⁰*Ibid.*, 333.

²¹¹*Ibid.*, 335; emphasis added.

experientially in a personal, trusting, obedient, and abiding relationship, and *also* speak of experiencing tangible blessings from God such as health, provision, joy, peace, meaning, and significance. Davies, for example, shares important insights regarding the Johannine replacement of Jewish holy spaces (and I would add Jewish holy “practices”) with the living person of Jesus. However, he goes too far when he ignores the “horizontal” spatial symbolism (to use his words) that is found in John. Consider the incident at the pool of Bethesda. Davies makes a valid point in contrasting the healing that is now found in Jesus with the healing that was previously found at this sacred site, but it’s almost as though he forgets that what took place that day was, in fact, *a healing*. A man had been lame for 38 years, and Jesus made it possible for him to *walk again*. Certainly in that man’s mind his new ability to walk was part of his experience of life in Christ. Similarly, Davies points out the contrast made in John 4 between the water of Jacob’s well and the living water of Jesus, and this is a contrast well worth observing. Yet after leaving the region of Samaria and arriving in Galilee, Jesus heals the official’s son (from a distance, no less), and after healing the man at the pool of Bethesda, He feeds the 5,000. Surely the official and his son would have considered the son’s healing to be at least one dimension of their experience of life in Christ, and so would the 5,000 have felt about being fed the loaves and fishes by the seashore; and not only were they fed, but they were fed until all were satisfied, and they had enough leftovers for each disciple to take a basketful of food with them. This is an example not only of provision, but of provision in abundance.

We should not downplay the vital importance of knowing God as the central experience of the life which Jesus came to bring us. However, neither should we downplay the other tangible gifts that Jesus grants to His followers. Health, provision,

peace, joy, purpose, significance, human relationships: all these and more are included in the life which Christ offers us. I am reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew 6 where He encourages His followers not to worry about what they will eat or what they will wear, because if they seek God's kingdom and righteousness, "all these things will be added to you."²¹² We are invited by Jesus to focus on developing our relationship with Him, which involves believing, trusting, knowing, obeying, and abiding. This is to be what centers us in the life which He brings. With this we may wholeheartedly agree, and this is expressed by Jesus in John 6 when He tells the crowd not to "labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life."²¹³ In this context, our focus should not be on a selfish seeking after tangible blessings instead of a healthy seeking after relationship with God. However, we may also expect that because of Jesus' great love for us, and because of God's original intention in creation for us to live with health, provision, peace, joy, and significance, we *will* experience tangible gifts and blessings as part of the process of our lifelong journey with Christ. This is an appropriate Biblical portrayal of "life in Christ." Furthermore, since this is an appropriate Biblical portrayal of the life that persons are invited by Christ to enter into, it is imperative that we discern ways to include this portrayal in evangelistic theory and practice. I honor the tension that exists here. I understand how difficult it is to focus on knowing God while yet also anticipating God's tangible blessings to be a part of that experience of knowing.

The difficulty of doing this, the tension that this creates for us, is evident among biblical scholars. Philippe Kabongo-Mbaya deals with this tension in his treatment of what John means by "life in abundance" in 10:10. He proposes that we must consider the

²¹²Matthew 6:33b, ESV.

²¹³John 6:27a, ESV.

context of chapters 8 and 9 in interpreting this phrase. Chapter 8 shows Jesus in the temple discoursing with the Jewish leaders, and chapter 9 shows an unflattering picture of the Jewish synagogue following the healing of the blind man. In addition to this immediate context within John's gospel, Kabongo-Mbaya also suggests that we remember the historical context of the gospel, which was written around 90 A.D., and was most likely written by a representative (or representatives) of the Johannine Jewish-Christian sect that had been removed from the synagogue due to their theological stance.²¹⁴ The shepherd and sheep imagery in chapter 10, therefore, was the Johannine community's way of "affirming their own status in relation to the rabbinate and other Jewish and Judeo-Christian currents of the time; they were attacking the very foundation of the synagogue's superiority and its claim to be the sole and exclusive place of communion with the God of the Covenant."²¹⁵

In this context, then, "the abundance in question here cannot be reduced simply to an abundance of goods, giving life an unlimited, but one-sided quantitative dimension."²¹⁶ Moving out of poverty and having their other troubles (exclusion, loss of

²¹⁴There is fairly wide agreement among biblical scholars concerning this historical context to John's gospel. F. F. Bruce, for example, observes that "the debate between the disciples and the synagogue authorities reached a critical stage around AD 90, when one of the prayers in the synagogue service was reworded so as effectively to exclude the followers of Jesus. It was probably against this background that the Fourth Gospel was published" (F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983], 13). Similarly, Gerard Sloyan notes that "John was the document of a local church that had broken finally with the synagogue" (Gerard S. Sloyan, *John: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988], 1). Raymond Brown concurs with this general sentiment, noting that "by the time the gospel was written the Johannine Christians had been expelled from the synagogues," and though "expulsion from the synagogues was now past" the "persecution (16:2-3) continues." He also dates the writing of the gospel at around AD 90. See Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979), 22-23.

²¹⁵Philippe B. Kabongo-Mbaya, "Life in Abundance: A Biblical Reflection on John 10:10," *Reformed World*, 53:2-3 (2003), 73.

²¹⁶*Ibid.*, 73-74.

identity, etc.) disappear, therefore, is not what the Johannine Christians equated with life in abundance, but rather it was “in face of these realities and despite them, opposing them and going beyond them that Johannine theology articulates the quality of trust in God—a God who lends our finite lives a fullness of meaning and truth that no extravagance of bread, no orgy by the powers-that-be can give them.”²¹⁷ It seems at this point, therefore, that Kabongo-Mbaya wants to emphasize the “trust in God” and the consequent “fullness of meaning and truth” over against the “extravagance of bread.” If we are truly speaking of an undue “extravagance” of bread, one would heartily agree, but an “extravagance” of provision or an “orgy” of health is not what is being proposed. Rather, the proposal is that adequate provision to sustain life on the “horizontal” sphere is part of God’s intention in the life which Christ came to bring. The imagery in John 10 lends itself to this proposal too, for the shepherd’s job is not simply to keep the sheep safely guarded in the sheepfold at night, but is also to provide them safe passage to and from the pasture, so that they can find the basic provisions of food and water. Kabongo-Mbaya seems to agree on this point, for at the conclusion of his article, he writes that “abundant life in John 10.10 is a complex and essentially *inclusive* image. It links the sheepfold and pasture; it guarantees the possibility for the sheep, henceforth to go in and out. *Life inside and life outside are held together* and reconciled, as are security and freedom.”²¹⁸ Kabongo-Mbaya struggles with the tension, but in the end he embraces it rather than attempting to dissolve it, and this is noteworthy.

²¹⁷Philippe B. Kabongo-Mbaya, “Life in Abundance,” 74.

²¹⁸*Ibid.*

V. J. John also embraces the tension. He compares abundant life with “plentiful pasture,” and writes that life in its “highest degree” is life “lived in relation to God,” which makes it “more meaningful and enriching.” While emphasizing life lived in relation to God, though, he also asserts that “life cannot be viewed apart from socio-economic realities and its relation to physical wellbeing,” for “while they in themselves are not enough to lead an abundant life, together with them life becomes more meaningful and enriching.”²¹⁹ Stephen Smalley suggests that the incarnation helps us understand how God gives of God’s self through material things, so that in John the notions of creation and history are taken very seriously. This leads to an appreciation of the sacramental nature of John’s writing (which in this context means not an emphasis on particular sacraments, but rather on the how “the spirit can give life to matter in a qualitatively new way”), and this in turns teaches us that for John “life in all its aspects – physical as well as spiritual—engaged his attention.”²²⁰

C. F. D. Moule addresses the tension between what Smalley calls “physical” and “spiritual” by reminding us of the general biblical perspective that human beings are indivisible wholes that should not be thought of primarily as consisting of separate component “parts” such as “soul” and “body.” With this foundation, he then addresses the raising of Lazarus, and points out that this sign shares with the Johannine signs that precede it “the characteristic that Jesus is portrayed as bestowing something that belongs to the normal, physical life on earth, but bestowing it in an abnormal, a transcendent,

²¹⁹V. J. John. “The Concept of ‘Life’ in the Gospel of John: An Ecological Perspective,” *The Indian Journal of Theology*, 47:1&2 (2005), 96-97.

²²⁰Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (London: Paternoster Press, 1978), 207-209.

manner.”²²¹ In Jesus, therefore, Moule sees a bringing together of all “degrees of being,” which means that “in this life Christ brings life and food and health and sight,” but “if you ask what the bigger life of the age to come looks like, you are told nothing at all except that it means contact with God and Christ, and that such contact is a matter of obedience.”²²² Moule is not correct in asserting that we are told nothing at all about the life of the age to come, but this is not the place to address that issue. The more important insight related to the present discussion is his notion that all “degrees of being” are brought together in Jesus, for this seems to be a helpful image for how to address the tension which we have been dealing with. Ben Witherington, in commenting on Jesus’ bread of life conversation in John 6, acknowledges the admonition of Jesus in verse 27 that I have referenced previously, where He encourages the crowd to seek not food that perishes, but rather seek the food that endures to eternal life. Witherington goes on to add, however, that since Jesus did in fact feed the 5,000, He is not depicting a spitefulness or disdain toward food or other physical things, but “rather that he wishes to use them to point to a food that is more sustaining, crucial, indeed, a food that endures to eternal life.” In this sense, therefore, “Jesus is portrayed as being willing to provide *both* physical and spiritual food, not just the latter.”²²³

One dimension of Witherington’s “interpretational context” is his firm belief in the relationship of John’s gospel to the Jewish Wisdom literature. He feels so strongly about this that he even suggests that any pastor or teacher who wishes to preach or teach

²²¹C. F. D. Moule, “The Meaning of ‘Life’ in the Gospels and Epistles of St. John,” *Theology* 78, March (1975), 122.

²²²*Ibid.*, 124.

²²³Ben Witherington, III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 155; emphasis added.

from John “will necessarily have to familiarize themselves and their audience with Jewish wisdom literature, including Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon.” Especially pertinent to the present study is his definition of “wisdom” as “skill in living well, making the right decisions, which prolong and promote life, health, and happiness, even in a dark world.”²²⁴ It is obvious that if John is founded in part on a clear relationship to Jewish Wisdom literature, then one cannot ignore this emphasis on living well and enjoying health and happiness in this world. To do so would be to disregard an important dimension of the context of John’s gospel.

Raymond Brown also notes the Wisdom connection to John’s gospel, but he conceives of Wisdom differently than does Witherington. Brown suggests that Wisdom’s role is to lead people to life and immortality by giving them guidance concerning how to do God’s will and please God, teaching them about “things that are above,” and uttering truth. His description, therefore, is far less specific in terms of this-life benefits such as health and happiness. A simple survey of Proverbs, however, quickly demonstrates the multiple this-life connections that are present in God’s instructions through the wisdom literature. Wisdom will protect us from “the ways of wicked men” (1:12) and save us from “the adulteress” (1:16). Wisdom will add “years of life” (3:2) and provide “healing to your flesh” (3:8). And even though wisdom is to be sought after more than silver and gold, yet “long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay

²²⁴Ben Witherington, III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel, John’s Wisdom*, 58.

hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed.”²²⁵ Furthermore, “the reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life.”²²⁶

In evangelistic theory and practice we should *not* suggest that persons can get rich if they follow Jesus, nor should we promise them a long life free of illness. We should, however, with integrity, invite persons to an experience of full life in Jesus Christ that centers on developing a believing, trusting, obeying, abiding relationship with Him. Moreover, we should mention that this experience of full life in Jesus will almost certainly include some portion of the tangible benefits of health, provision, joy, peace, significance, and purpose. I say “*almost* certainly include *some* portion of the tangible benefits” because we are not God and we are unable to know the future for each individual. We do not know why some persons die of cancer and others do not, or why some persons lose their jobs while others do not. We do not know which persons will experience a call from God to a life of poverty working in the slums of Calcutta or which persons will be called to witness to Jesus’ grace in the boardrooms of the world’s business leaders. However, we do know that God’s intention in Jesus is for us to experience full and vital living that is centered in a personal, obedient, experiential relationship with Him, but also experienced in the tangible physical world.²²⁷

²²⁵Proverbs 3:16-18, ESV.

²²⁶Proverbs 22:4, ESV.

²²⁷Since my focus in this section is on insights from John’s gospel, I will postpone further comments on this issue until Chapter Three, where I will discuss insights from scholars and theologians outside the family of specifically Johannine and/or Old Testament scholars.

Eternal as Future and Present in John's Gospel

In addition to the tension or continuum regarding life as the general blessing of knowing God versus life as receiving God's more tangible blessings, we may also query John's gospel concerning the continuum or tension we discovered in our Old Testament work regarding the "when" of the life which God intends for us. We learned that during post-exilic times a postponement took place in Jewish eschatological expectation, so that rather than anticipating God's blessings and/or deliverance to occur in this life, that anticipation was postponed to a future resurrection of the dead. I commented earlier on the connection of this Old Testament shift to the already and not-yet tension or continuum concerning the kingdom of God. What, therefore, is the general perspective found in John's gospel concerning the "timing" of when Christ-followers experience eternal life? The general consensus among biblical scholars is that eternal life for John is consistent with the general perspective of the already and not-yet nature of the kingdom, but perhaps with a stronger leaning toward a present-day orientation. C. H. Dodd probably leans more passionately toward the present-day experience of eternal life than other scholars. Earlier mention was made of Dodd's "placement" of eternal life more fully in the divine quality of that life rather than in the quantitative length thereof. Dodd, in fact, believes this so deeply that he even goes so far as to say that in John eternal life describes "a life which has properly speaking neither past nor future, but is lived in God's eternal To-day."²²⁸ Dodd does not deny the everlasting dimension of eternal life, admitting that at the general resurrection believers will enter into that everlasting dimension, but he feels that this dimension is far less important to John than is the present

²²⁸C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 150.

experience of the divine quality of that life. Therefore, “for John this present enjoyment of eternal life has become the controlling and all important conception.”²²⁹ Leon Morris makes a similar point in his comments concerning Jesus’ words to Martha in John 11:25-26.²³⁰ Morris acknowledges the relationship of eternal life to the life of the age to come, but he goes on to say that “the moment a man puts his trust in Jesus he begins to experience that life of the age to come which cannot be touched by death. Jesus is bringing Martha a present power, not the promise of a future good.”²³¹

Other scholars agree with the present-day orientation of John’s perspective regarding eternal life, but they also include references to future fulfillment. Barrett, for example, in a discussion of “salvation” in John’s gospel, observes that during the Judaism of Jesus’ day there was a variety of eschatological views, but the general tendency was “to regard salvation as the fruit of a future act of God.” Outside Judaism, however, just the opposite was true. “Salvation was a present experience given by God to men, either through sacraments or through knowledge.”²³² Barrett suggests that John would naturally have been familiar with both perspectives, and perhaps more importantly, he proposes that John considered that “the old eschatological notion of salvation was not adequate for Christian use, because the promised salvation was now partly fulfilled, and could no longer be described as purely future.”²³³ This present partial fulfillment of God’s

²²⁹C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 149.

²³⁰“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (ESV).

²³¹Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 550.

²³²C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 65.

²³³*Ibid.*, 67.

intentions for humankind leaves room, therefore, for an understanding that while eternal life is experienced to some degree prior to death, there is yet more to be experienced in a future time after death. Craig Koester agrees, but he arrives at this perspective a bit differently. He distinguishes between *physical* life and *relational* life, noting that while all persons are given physical life from God, not everyone has the relational life from God that comes through believing in God. For the believer, therefore, “eternal life begins now, in faith, and it continues beyond death through the promise of resurrection.”²³⁴ Stephen Smalley bases a comparable perspective on the notion that eternal life (equated with “salvation”) is “a regular Johannine term for the wholeness which man [sic] needs and can obtain.” Because this wholeness comes through the historical “work” of Jesus (incarnation through exaltation), it also begins historically in the present with the believer, and involves our past, present, and future. We have been led out of our past darkness into present life and light, and in the present, we are sustained by the risen Christ. However, “there is a future tense as well. The person who honors the Son of God now is promised the ‘resurrection of life’ in the age to come.”²³⁵

Raymond Brown approaches this issue by utilizing a vertical versus horizontal framework. He argues that the primary biblical view of salvation is horizontal, because God so often acts within history. A vertical view of salvation focuses more strongly on the existence of an earthly realm and a heavenly realm, so that salvation involves moving from the earthly to the heavenly. Because of the language, imagery, and thoughts surrounding the incarnation (the Word that was with God came to earth), Brown suggests that John leans toward a vertical view of salvation. This is further emphasized by John’s

²³⁴Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life*, 32.

²³⁵Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter*, 203-204.

continual contrast of earthly “gifts” with Jesus’ “real” gifts (we call to mind here Davies’ suggestion that John shows Jesus replacing the Jewish holy spaces with his own Person). There is some of the horizontal view in John too; however, as evidenced by the strong insistence that “salvation is from the Jews” (4:21-23), by the fact that the Word was made flesh (Jesus lived in a particular body, in a particular time, in a particular place), and by the obviously historical and “real” experience of the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Thus, Brown says, “the Johannine view of salvation is both vertical and horizontal. The dominant vertical aspect expresses the uniqueness of the divine intervention in Jesus; the horizontal aspect establishes a relationship between this intervention and what has gone before and what follows.”²³⁶ Brown then couples this discussion with a brief treatment of realized eschatology and future eschatology. He agrees with the large majority of scholars in noting that both present and future are seen in John’s gospel, but that John leans more toward realized eschatology than do the Synoptics.²³⁷

D. Moody Smith addresses the question of “when” in a quite helpful way. He suggests that the eschatological age overlaps with the present age in such a way that though we know we only experience the eschatological quality of eternal life here on earth in a provisional way, what we do experience in the present is indeed of an eschatological quality. “Because of the presence of life, the believing community also participates in other aspects of the eschatological age, such as joy (Greek: *thara*) and peace (*eirene*). When Jesus says that he has come in order that people may have life and

²³⁶Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, 235-237.

²³⁷*Ibid.*, 238-239.

have it more abundantly (10:16) he means life characterized by joy and peace, eschatological life.”²³⁸ Moreover, Smith talks about the relationship between the life we experience now and the fact that the everlasting nature of eternal life does include victory over physical death. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two. Believers know that they will experience life with God after physical death here on earth, and this knowledge impacts their present experience of eschatological life because it frees them from worry about what will happen to them after they die. They are, therefore, able to more fully invest themselves in believing, knowing, obeying, and abiding in Jesus. In this context, therefore, “the possession or gift of eternal life in the believer’s present existence is integrally related to the assurance of its permanence.”²³⁹ Witherington concurs: “At some point faith must win out over fear in the believer’s life, and then she or he becomes free to live and to die without undue concern about the ‘valley of the shadow’, free to risk his or her life for the sake of Christ.”²⁴⁰

John’s Perspective on Human and Divine Involvement in Our Entry into Life

To this point we have discussed the notion of “life” in John’s gospel from the perspective of various tensions or continuums which are apparent there, including that between life as “knowing God” versus life as “receiving God’s more tangible blessings” and that between life as “something we experience now” versus “something we primarily experience after death.” Another possible tension or continuum exists concerning how one enters into the life which God intends to give us in Jesus. There appears to be two

²³⁸D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, 150.

²³⁹Ibid., 149.

²⁴⁰Ben Witherington, III, *John’s Wisdom*, 212.

ways that John conceives of this. One is that the person makes a volitional choice to believe in Jesus (which we have already discussed as involving a lifelong relationship of trusting, knowing, obeying, and abiding). The other way John portrays this issue is that it is the work of the Spirit which ushers a person into the new life that God intends. This tension is especially apparent in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. English translations make it more difficult to pick up on, but when Jesus tells Nicodemus in verse 3 that "unless one is born *ἄνωθεν* (*anōthen*) he cannot see the kingdom of God," John utilizes a verb that carries two meanings. *Anōthen* can either mean "again, a second time" or it can mean "from above."²⁴¹ Some biblical scholars suggest that John intentionally used multiple layers of meaning throughout his gospel, and in this particular passage, Gail O'Day even suggests that Jesus *intended* for His saying to be misunderstood by Nicodemus, so that He could help move Nicodemus into a new understanding.²⁴² As He leads Nicodemus into understanding that entering the kingdom necessitates being born from above and being born again, Jesus uses another word with multiple meanings (*pneuma*), which can be translated as breath, wind, or spirit. The work of God that is involved in this birthing experience is emphasized by Jesus' comparison of the spirit to the wind, which cannot actually be seen, but the effects of which are often easily observable. The emphasis, therefore, according to O'Day, is on helping Nicodemus break out of his customary paradigms and open himself to the new possibilities that God wants to create and give him through Jesus. The emphasis on the exaltation (another word with multiple meanings: *hupsoo*) of Jesus on the cross in verse 14 assists Nicodemus in

²⁴¹Gail R. O'Day, *The Word Disclosed: Preaching the Gospel of John* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002), 19.

²⁴²*Ibid.*, 19.

understanding the strong dimension of divine participation in this process, so that “the point of origin for the one now born is with Jesus, not with ourselves.”²⁴³ Combining this with Jesus’ bread of life discourse, O’Day embraces the tension between human effort and divine initiative by suggesting that there is a human work of faith involved, but that the intent of this work of faith “is to allow ourselves to be fed by Jesus.” This is not easy work for us, however, because we want to hold on to our sense of self-sufficiency and our desire for accomplishment, and this blocks our ability and openness to receive what God wants to give.²⁴⁴

Craig Koester also notes John’s use of *anōthen* and *pneuma* in the Nicodemus story, and he agrees with O’Day that the stronger emphasis is on God’s action in the life-giving process. He cautions us, however, not to take Jesus’ words in verse 6 (“that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” ESV) to suggest that flesh is inherently evil. Jesus’ incarnation makes it plain that this is not the case, for if flesh were inherently evil, Jesus would not have come in fleshly form. Though flesh is not inherently evil, Koester suggests, it is nonetheless limited. This means that “flesh can generate relationships in its own sphere, but not human relationships with God, which are of another order. Such relationships occur only when God initiates contact with people in

²⁴³Gail R. O’Day, *The Word Disclosed.*, 28-29.

²⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 122. The reader may recall that in the early section on the U.S. American context, passing reference was made to the U.S. cultural emphasis on “doing” rather than “being.” Steward and Bennett, for example, suggest that “doing is the dominant form of activity for Americans” (Edward Steward and Milton Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, 69). This focus on doing makes it extremely difficult for U.S. Americans to simply “be.” Moreover, U.S. Americans place a high value on achievement, to the point that “the achievement motivation predominates in America” (Gary Althen and Janet Bennett, *American Ways*, 21). These insights from cultural studies of the U.S. American context strongly confirm the point that O’Day is making here. It is very difficult for U.S. Americans to conceive of receiving a benefit as valuable as being born again and from above without thinking that we have *done* ourselves to *achieve* that benefit.

a life-giving way.”²⁴⁵ This does not, however, invalidate the role of human response to God’s initiative, for Koester goes on to say that it is only through faith that we “partake of the crucified Jesus.”²⁴⁶ D. Moody Smith expresses similar thoughts, observing that John speaks in the language of faith, “which implies a meaningful human decision to believe in Jesus, a decision that expresses one’s conviction and moral intent,” but that he also speaks of being born from God. In an insightful manner, however, Smith then connects this “double-mindedness” (my word, not his) to verses 12 and 13 of the Prologue, which he suggests indicate that “the decision of faith, believing, could only be explained as a new birth.”²⁴⁷

The presence of both human and divine involvement in the life-giving and life-receiving process is not limited in John’s gospel to the Nicodemus story. One may consider, for example, the changing of water to wine in the second chapter. After Mary’s insistence that Jesus involve Himself in the shortage of wine, He is the one who changed the water to wine. This divine involvement is emphasized even more strongly by John’s comment that Jesus manifested His glory through this sign (verse 11). At the same time, however, John follows his comment about Jesus manifesting His glory with the statement that His disciples believed in Him. We thus clearly observe both divine and human involvement in this instance of persons believing. The same is true of the healing of the official’s son in the latter part of chapter 4. The official initiated the encounter by going to Jesus and asking Him to heal his son. Jesus then healed his son from a distance, which

²⁴⁵Craig Koester, *The Word of Life*, 137-138.

²⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 208.

²⁴⁷D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, 94. John 1:12-13 – “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (ESV).

illustrates divine involvement, and the eventual response to this divine involvement was that the man “himself believed, and all his house.”²⁴⁸ In chapter 6 we encounter the feeding of the 5,000 from five loaves and two fish, which obviously illustrates divine involvement. In the ensuing discourse, Jesus speaks clearly to the reality of human involvement in the life-giving and life-receiving process when He says that the “work” which people must do is to believe in Him (verse 26).

I propose that this brief excursion into the relationship between divine initiative and human response in John’s gospel is an important one because it has such strong implications for evangelistic theory and practice. If one leans too heavily in the direction of human response one may be tempted to see evangelism as a primarily human work that is, therefore, mostly devoid of the Spirit’s presence, power, and initiative. Conversely, if one leans too heavily in the direction of divine initiative, one may be tempted to see evangelism as a primarily divine work which does not or should not include human participation. Neither of these perspectives would be faithful to the biblical portrayal of evangelism, nor more specifically to John’s portrayal. There is a strong tendency among evangelistically-minded Christians to lean too heavily in the direction of divine initiative at the expense of human involvement in evangelism, so I will limit the ensuing comments to that issue. We may address this issue from at least two perspectives: that of the non-believer who is moving toward a decision to believe, know, obey, and abide in Jesus; and that of other persons whom God may choose to use in the process that leads that person toward this decision. From the perspective of the non-believer’s journey toward believing, one of the gravest errors that Christians make is to de-emphasize the need for persons to *respond* to God’s initiative. There is such a strong

²⁴⁸John 4:53, ESV.

emphasis on God's work in the evangelizing process that we forget that the person must respond to God's work in their life, and we therefore fail to *invite* persons to respond to the good news of Jesus' offer of life. This may be observed in sermons and other modes of gospel communication in which the good news of Jesus is shared, but with no invitation given to respond. This lack of invitation is in direct contrast to the biblical portrayal. In the Synoptic gospels, for example, Jesus not only proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was at hand, but He preceded that proclamation with the call to repent (Matthew 3:2 and Mark 1:15). In Deuteronomy, Moses went to great lengths to explain to the Hebrew people the options of life and death as they relate to following God's ways, but he did not stop with a declaration. He also included an invitation and encouragement to respond: "therefore *choose* life."²⁴⁹ In 2 Corinthians, Paul says that "we are ambassadors for Christ, *God making his appeal* through us. *We implore you* on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."²⁵⁰

Returning to John's gospel, this is seen clearly in his closing purpose statement: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."²⁵¹ The "so that" phrase clearly indicates that John desires that his readers not simply digest historical information about Jesus, but that they respond to Jesus' call to believe, know, obey, and abide in Him. John's understanding of "so that" is seen in the very beginning of his gospel too, in his comment about John the Baptist: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was

²⁴⁹Deuteronomy 30:19, ESV; emphasis added.

²⁵⁰2 Corinthians 5:20, ESV; emphasis added.

²⁵¹John 20:31, ESV; emphasis added.

John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, *that* all might believe through him.”²⁵² We also see John’s understanding of the need for invitation in the story of the blind man’s healing in Chapter 9. After the Jewish leaders cast him out of the synagogue, Jesus heard of this and searched for him, “and having found him he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him.”²⁵³ Jesus was intentional in seeking the man out and leading him to the place of believing. To offer one more example from John, we note that in the Lazarus story in chapter 11, prior to going to Bethany, Jesus says to the disciples, “Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, *so that you may believe*. But let us go to him.”²⁵⁴ It is clear in John’s gospel that Jesus’ listeners and John’s readers are invited to a response of believing. Invitation and response are intrinsic to evangelism. They should not be considered optional. As Lathem writes, “the Gospel (Good News) is an invitation, a call to action, a converting word. All of these demand a response. Indifference, neutrality and silence are not options.”²⁵⁵

Let us now consider human involvement in the evangelism process from the perspective of persons whom God may use in the process of leading non-believers toward believing. First, there is no question that evangelism begins with God. Evangelism has its root in the loving and relational character of God as expressed in the Trinity. God as Father is compassionate toward God’s creation and yearns for all of creation, including

²⁵²John 1:7, ESV; emphasis added.

²⁵³John 9:35-38.

²⁵⁴John 11:14-15, ESV; emphasis added.

²⁵⁵R. Warren Lathem and Dan W. Dunn, *Preaching for a Response* (Anderson, IN: Bristol House, 2008), 6.

human beings, to be restored to the life-giving relationship with God that was originally intended in God's creative work. God as Son has come to earth to make it possible for that restoration to take place, providing the life-giving answer to the deadly consequences and power of humanity's sin through His life, death, and resurrection. God as Spirit leads the evangelizing process, working in the lives of non-Christians to help them become aware of the possibility of new life in Jesus, and empowering them to turn toward Him, accept His grace, and totally reorient their lives toward Him and His ways, and, thus, receive life. God wants us all to be reconciled with God through Christ and experience the new life which He came to give. God yearns for the restoration of God's originally intended relationship with us. In this sense, God is both the Prime and Primary Evangelist.

Evangelism begins with God, but God also intends, invites, and desires that God's people be active participants in the evangelization process. The Scriptures vividly portray that God's plan for calling God's fallen creation back to God's self includes people as integral ministry partners in this work. From the calling of Abraham to be a blessing to all the families of the earth - to young Mary giving birth to the Son - to the early disciples leading thousands of people to Christ: the Bible makes it clear that God wants to communicate the possibility of new life in Jesus *to* people *through* people. Therefore, though evangelism begins with God and is utterly dependent upon God, God also envisions a vital role for Christians. Without question, God is the sole *source* of new life in Christ. However, this does not automatically mean that God is the sole *agent* in the process that leads us to this new life. God's sovereignty in evangelism does not cancel

out God's intention for us to be used as God's agents in evangelism. Rather, it is *in* God's sovereignty that God has *chosen* us as God's agents.

Charles Finney addresses this issue. He notes that telling Christians they do not need to evangelize since God is the One who brings about new life would be similar to telling a farmer that he or she did not need to plow or sow or weed or harvest, because God would decide whether or not to cause the crops to grow and the farmer's participation (agency) in God's work would be an infringement on God's sovereignty. Should farmers begin to practice farming in this manner, Finney suggests, the whole world would be reduced to starvation. Finney does not discount God's sovereignty in the process of conversion. He acknowledges that no one can be converted without God's blessing. However, in the process of conversion, he maintains that there are always at least two agents (God and the sinner), and sometimes three (*another* person besides the sinner—the evangelist), and there is also always one instrument (the truth). Thus, while God's role is the most important one in the conversion process, it is not the only one.²⁵⁶

Some persons might suggest that this acknowledgement of the human role in evangelism is mostly limited to persons from the Arminian/Wesleyan theological family. Writing from a Calvinistic perspective, however, J. I. Packer notes that the truth of God's sovereignty in evangelism and the truth of the human role must be accepted on faith, even if they appear to our rational minds to be contradictory. Each principle is solidly scriptural, and so we should simply accept them as God's truth even though we may not understand how they fit together. Regarding evangelism more specifically, Packer suggests that even people who believe strongly in God's sovereignty in election must

²⁵⁶Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revival of Religion*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 13-15.

hold to the scriptural view that we are responsible for our participation in evangelism.

“The command to evangelize is a part of God’s law. It belongs to God’s revealed will for His people. It could not, then, in principle be affected in the slightest degree by anything that we might believe about God’s sovereignty in election and calling.”²⁵⁷ Not only should our view of God’s sovereignty not inhibit our commitment to evangelism, but Packer goes on to propose that God’s sovereignty is the primary motivation *for* our evangelism. It is because we know that God in God’s sovereignty has made it possible for persons to be saved that we can be certain our evangelism will bear fruit. Otherwise, we would be awash in the discouraging knowledge that sinful humanity can in no way bring about its own salvation. “So far from making evangelism pointless, the sovereignty of God in grace is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless.”²⁵⁸

Finney and Packer help us immensely regarding the relationship between God’s sovereignty and evangelism. Misunderstanding this relationship is not the sole cause of evangelistic apathy among Christians, but it is certainly one of them. We are not responsible for another person’s decision to accept God’s offer of new life in Christ, but we are responsible for our role as one of the agents or means that God may want to use to bring that person to a point in their lives where that decision is for them a viable one. We recall those haunting words from Ezekiel 33:7-8: “So *you*, son of man, I have made a *watchman* for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall *give them warning* from me. If I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked one, you shall surely die,’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall

²⁵⁷J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1961), 96.

²⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 106.

die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at *your* hand.²⁵⁹ Just as John wrote his gospel *so that* other persons might believe in Jesus, and through believing, experience new life in Him, so too should all Christians be encouraged to develop a strong desire to participate in the evangelizing process, through the guidance and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Individual or Communal?

One of the initial claims in the first chapter of this dissertation is that full life in Christ cannot be experienced, expressed, or shared outside the scope of relationships, nor at the expense of other persons. In this context, an additional relationship which may be discussed from John's gospel has to do with that between the individual nature of the Jesus-following life and the communal nature thereof. It is suggested by some biblical scholars that of all the New Testament authors, John focuses the most strongly on the call of individual persons to believe, know, obey, and abide in Jesus, with very little emphasis on the communal nature of Christ-following. This sentiment is based in large part on the lack of references in John's gospel to the church, church structure, or church order. Raymond Brown, however, warns us that we should be careful not to make too many assumptions about John's ecclesiology based on what he did *not* say in his gospel (sometimes referred to as an "argument from silence"). Just because John did not address ecclesiology in the same manner as Paul or Peter does not necessarily mean that John had little regard for the communal nature of Christian believing and Christian living.

²⁵⁹Ezekial 33:7-8, ESV; emphasis added.

There is no question that John wishes to emphasize that individual persons are called and invited to believe, know, obey, and abide in Jesus, and in so doing receive new life. At the same time, however, John strongly emphasizes the unity of believers and Jesus' insistence that they love one another. The love theme is made very clear in chapter 13 when Jesus tells the disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."²⁶⁰ Likewise, the unity focus is emphasized by Jesus in His prayer to the Father in chapter 17, where He asks the Father to "keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one."²⁶¹ Not only does Jesus envision unity of believers in this prayer, but a unity so strong that it is like that between the Son and the Father. In John's gospel, therefore, is believing, knowing, obeying, and abiding in Jesus an individual affair or a communal affair? The answer is "Yes" and "Yes." As Brown phrases it, "there was no sharp distinction between community and personal union with Jesus. The foundation of community is the response of individuals to Jesus as the revealer of God and the unique way to God, but those individuals form a unity."²⁶² Gerard Sloyan's perspective concerning the shepherding imagery in John 10 is helpful too. He suggests that pastors have "taken over" the shepherd figure and used it primarily to refer to their pastoral role in relation to their congregational flock. A close reading, however, of the various Old Testament texts regarding herds, flocks, and grazing, "reveals that what is being

²⁶⁰John 13:34-35, ESV.

²⁶¹John 17:11, ESV.

²⁶²Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, 226.

illustrated is political rule, not spiritual care in the modern sense.”²⁶³ Sloyan argues that this co-opting of the shepherding imagery by pastors has caused an inappropriate emphasis on Jesus the Good Shepherd as He who provides spiritual care to individual members of the flock, at the expense of an appropriate understanding of the communal nature of Jesus’ use of the shepherd image. “It has made Jesus interested in our individual welfare—which he is—but not in our corporate destiny, in which he is far more interested!”²⁶⁴

In a different yet related discussion, Brown supports Sloyan’s corporate emphasis based on the Johannine references to Jesus as king.²⁶⁵ In comparison to the Synoptic use of the kingdom of God, Brown suggests that John’s emphasis was centered much less on the kingdom and far more on the King. Individual persons are invited in John to believe, know, obey, and abide in and with the King, but the emphasis here is more on the King exercising power and influence in believers’ lives than on any individualistic understanding that Jesus is *my* king more than He is *your* king. The appropriate understanding is that we are personally invited to believe and know the King, and at the same time, we become a part of the overall citizenry of the kingdom, united in our knowing and believing, not divided or separated thereby.

The importance of maintaining an appropriate relationship between personally relating with Jesus and communally relating with both fellow believers and with non-believers has long been an emphasis of the Wesleyan theological family, and this stems

²⁶³Gerard Sloyan, *John: Interpretation*, 129. Sloyan points to Numbers 27:16-18, Jeremiah 10: 21, Jeremiah 23:1 and 4, and Ezekial 34:1-10 as examples.

²⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 129.

²⁶⁵Brown observes that “John refers to Jesus as king fifteen times, almost double the number of times that this reference occurs in any of the other Gospels” (*Introduction to the Gospel of John*, 229).

from Wesley himself. In his sermon on Matthew 5:13-16 (salt of the earth, light of the world), he argues that if someone would try to live as a Christ-follower in a manner that completely separated them from other people, they would not merely experience a less-than-full Christian life, but they would in fact not be experiencing Christian living at all. Wesley insisted that “When I say, ‘This is essentially a social religion,’ I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all, without society, -- without living and conversing with other men....to turn this religion into a solitary one is to destroy it.”²⁶⁶ John Wesley and the author of John’s gospel are in agreement at this point.²⁶⁷

What about the Cross?

Prior to concluding our journey into insights from John’s gospel, we would be wise to consider the Johannine perspective on the cross and the cross’ relationship to atonement. An enormous amount of material has been written on these topics through the years, and we do not have time or space to deal with even a small portion thereof. To help us navigate the aspects of John’s perspective on the cross and atonement that are most pertinent to this project’s focus on life, I will frame this discussion around a “conversation” that takes place between Craig Koester and Gail R. O’Day in a 2005 publication of Johannine studies in tribute to Raymond Brown. Koester suggests that we should think about John’s treatment of the crucifixion utilizing four frames of reference:

²⁶⁶John Wesley, Sermon 24, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Wesley’s Fifty-Two Standard Sermons*, ed. N. Burwash (Nicholasville, KY: Schmull Publishing Company, 1988), 241.

²⁶⁷The relational and social understanding of Christian living is a common theme among biblical scholars, theologians, and anthropologists. I will deal more fully with this theme in a subsequent chapter.

“as an expression of love in human terms, as a sacrifice for sin, as conflict with evil, and as a revelation of divine glory.”²⁶⁸ In his discussion of the crucifixion as a “sacrifice for sin,” Koester argues that in John’s gospel sin has primarily to do with alienation, unbelief, and the actions which result from unbelief. Referring to John 1:29 (“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” ESV), he says that this taking away of sin refers to the removal of unbelief. “If sin is a deadly alienation from God, then faith is a lifegiving relationship with God, and the death of Christ takes sin away when it moves people from sin into faith.”²⁶⁹ In this sense, then, “atonement” in John refers not to a sacrifice that satisfies divine justice, but rather to a defeat of unbelief by engendering belief. Koester agrees with other scholars that the death of Jesus is a sacrificial death, but he advocates that this does not automatically necessitate that we think of that sacrificial death as vicarious or substitutionary. Vicarious and/or substitutionary death revolves around the principal ideas of justice and mercy or law and grace, so that the “price” that should be paid by the sinner is instead paid by Jesus through his death on the cross. Koester believes that this understanding of Jesus’ death is not what John has in mind. Rather, “when the love of God, revealed through the death of Jesus, overcomes the sin of unbelief by evoking faith it delivers people from the judgment of God by bringing them into true relationship with God. This is atonement in the Johannine sense.”²⁷⁰ The emphasis is more on the human need for belief than the human need for divine justice.

²⁶⁸Craig R. Koester, “The Death of Jesus and the Human Condition: Exploring the Theology of John’s Gospel,” 141-157, in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John’s Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown, S. S.* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 143.

²⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 146.

²⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 147.

“Victory over evil” is another frame of reference that Koester explores, based in large part on John 12:31-33: “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die” (ESV). Koester feels that these verses interpret Jesus’ death on the cross in terms of liberating people from the power of evil, so that in this context the issue is “not so much human sin as it is the oppressive power of evil.”²⁷¹ Ultimately, therefore, each person is faced with the decision to choose between the “ruler of this world” and the crucified Jesus. Where will our loyalty lie in the cosmic battle between God and evil? This becomes the crucial question. In the “sacrifice for sin” frame of reference, the person is invited to move from unbelief to belief, and in the “victory over evil” frame of reference they are invited to claim God as their only ruler. In the “sacrifice for sin” frame of reference, the human need which the crucifixion addresses is belief, whereas in the “victory over evil” frame of reference the human need which the crucifixion addresses is liberation.

In Jesus’ prayer in John 17 (among other passages), Koester sees another important frame of reference, the “revelation of divine glory.” The human need that is addressed here is the need to know God. This is based on Koester’s contention that though in John’s gospel “glory” sometimes refers to honor (i.e. in 5:41), it also refers to the nature of revelation. “God’s presence is hidden until God chooses to reveal it. The theme of glory has to do with the way revelation takes place.”²⁷² He connects this belief with the signs in John’s gospel. The signs are a revelation of God’s glory because they

²⁷¹Craig R. Koester, “The Death of Jesus and the Human Condition,” 149.

²⁷²Ibid., 151.

demonstrate God's power. The crucifixion is a revelation of God's glory because it demonstrates God's love. "If glory defines what the crucifixion is, the crucifixion defines what glory is."²⁷³ The link between the crucifixion and God's love is amplified even more fully in Koester's first frame of reference, "love in human terms." He believes that John's gospel emphasizes the self-giving nature of God's love in the crucifixion: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."²⁷⁴ This is something which all of John's readers could immediately understand, and the self-giving, serving nature of this love is strongly reinforced by Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet in chapter 13. Koester proposes that John's depiction of the crucifixion within this frame of reference demonstrates that for love to be given to others it must be given in ways which they can grasp. Additionally, it shows God's desire for love to be lived in human terms. "Since Jesus' love is the source and norm for Christian discipleship, he gives his love in tangible worldly forms so that his disciples might give their love in tangible worldly forms."²⁷⁵

Koester's use of different frames of reference is quite useful, for it helps us grasp different emphases we find in John's gospel concerning the crucifixion. His frames of reference also coordinate nicely with the way we have observed that John conceives of Christian life in terms of believing, knowing, obeying, and abiding. The "sacrifice for sin" frame of reference emphasizes the human need to believe, so this clearly ties the crucifixion to the Johannine emphasis on believing. The "victory over evil" frame of reference highlights the human need for liberation, which Jesus addresses in his healing

²⁷³Craig R. Koester, "The Death of Jesus and the Human Condition," 153.

²⁷⁴John 15:13, ESV.

²⁷⁵Craig R. Koester, "The Death of Jesus and the Human Condition," 145.

of sick persons, restoring sight to blind persons, raising dead persons, and feeding hungry persons. In this sense, therefore, the crucifixion validates the liberation from the powers of evil that is intended to be a part of the experience of Christian living. The “revelation of divine glory” frame of reference speaks directly to the human need to know God, and we have seen many examples of how vital knowing God is to John’s understanding of Christian life, to the point that he describes it as eternal life (17:3). The “love in human terms” frame of reference ties it all together, for we see in the cross that all the rich meanings of the crucifixion rest on the foundation of God’s love for us, and we further see that part of the “obeying” in Christian living involves loving others. With these connections in mind, it is evident that while some of John’s perspectives on the crucifixion and atonement may be different from those of Paul, they are yet quite consistent with the rest of John’s gospel, and they offer strong corroboration for the Johannine emphasis on life. John also shares with Paul a core belief that God’s love is evidenced through the crucifixion in a way that demonstrates both our need for a real change that only God can provide, as well as the possibility of that real change taking place if we will only acknowledge our need for it and accept the life which Jesus came to bring.²⁷⁶

In Chapter One, reference was made to four clusters of questions that this project would deal with, and one of those clusters has to do with our understanding of “gospel.” What is the “good news”? What is *good* about the “good news”? In inviting others to

²⁷⁶T. W. Manson writes that “what both Paul and John maintain is that there are two factors which are necessary to meet the situation in which man (sic) is: an act of God for man’s (sic) deliverance and the humble recognition on man’s (sic) part that he is sinful and helpless and must cast himself on this proffered mercy.” T. W. Manson, *On Paul and John: Some Selected Theological Themes*, Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. Matthew Black (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1963), 121.

Christ, what is it that we are inviting non-Christians toward? What are we asking them to embrace? Koester's multiple frames of reference help us in thinking through these questions from John's perspective. In John's gospel, we are invited to believe in Jesus, to know and obey Him, and to abide in Him. In so doing, we experience a strong measure of the life of the age to come, and we anticipate experiencing this life yet even more fully after physical death. The crucifixion confirms how profound Jesus' love for us is, and the exaltation that takes place at the crucifixion confirms how deeply God the Father shares in this love. We see at Calvary that God is indeed quite serious in God's desire that we experience a full and vital life of believing, knowing, obeying, and abiding. We are people loved by God, and we are people who should joyfully share that love with others and invite (and help) them to experience the full life which we experience through Jesus.

Gail R. O'Day approaches the issue of God's love as portrayed in John's gospel in a very different manner. She affirms that Koester's frames of reference are useful in helping us understand John's perspectives on the crucifixion, but she suggests that the crucifixion is not John's primary concern. Much more than Jesus' death, she contends, John is interested in Jesus' life. The central idea which captures John's interest is not the crucifixion, but the incarnation. "Jesus did not die to make God's love known: Jesus *lived* to make God's love known."²⁷⁷ The "Word made flesh" is introduced quickly in John's gospel (in the Prologue) and Jesus' claim to be one with the Father remains an emphasis throughout. John's major focus, therefore, is not on how Jesus' death brings us life, but on how Jesus' life brings us life. Equally important, according to O'Day, is the Johannine

²⁷⁷ Gail R. O'Day, "The Love of God Incarnate: The Life of Jesus in the Gospel of John," 158-167 in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown, S. S.* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 159.

emphasis in 1:16 on the “fullness” which we receive of “grace upon grace.” This teaches us that John perceives of Jesus’ incarnation as one of fullness and grace, as distinct from Paul’s understanding, which in Philippians 2 focuses on the sacrificial emptying that took place in the incarnation. O’Day does not suggest that Paul’s emphasis is inappropriate, but she laments that his understanding “dominates most Protestant conversations about the life and death of Jesus,” and this prevents us from discerning that “for John the incarnation is not an emptying: it is a moment of fullness.”²⁷⁸ Regarding atonement, therefore, O’Day believes that Jesus’ life, of which his death is a part, “is the locus of revelation and redemption.” She even goes so far as to say that “Jesus’ death is not necessary to redeem humanity, he redeems flesh by becoming flesh.”²⁷⁹

To provide an exegetical foundation for her claims, O’Day offers a brief treatment of John 3:16, in which she asserts that this verse centers on God’s love *in the incarnation*, as opposed to the common understanding that this verse primarily revolves around the giving up of Jesus to death. This assertion is based in part on John’s use of *monogenes* (“only” in ESV, “only begotten” in KJV, and “one and only” in NIV) in verses 16 and 18, which are the only two verses in which he uses this word outside the Prologue. This is a reference to “the birth and generation metaphor field,” and this birth and generation language is consistent with the preceding context of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, in which He has already discussed the need to be born again and from above. The birth and generation connection between John 3:16 and the Incarnation references in the Prologue leads O’Day to suggest, therefore, that this verse far more stresses that eternal

²⁷⁸Gail R. O’Day, “The Love of God Incarnate,” 159.

²⁷⁹Ibid., 160.

life is connected to Jesus' life than to Jesus' death. "One is not required to see a reference to the giving up to death; rather, the Johannine context leads one to see instead the full gift of the incarnation as that which makes eternal life possible."²⁸⁰

O'Day goes on to point out how this understanding helps us more accurately discern the ways that John integrates Jesus' life and death into his telling of the gospel story. This integration, for example, leads to John's eucharistic material being presented in the middle of Jesus' ministry in chapter 6, incorporated in the Bread of Life conversations following the feeding of the 5,000. With this context providing the theological background, John theologially reconfigures the eucharistic meal "as the feast of the living bread, not the feast of betrayal and death. Jesus' life, not solely his death, is celebrated and experienced in the eucharistic meal. The host of the eucharistic meal provides a superabundance of gifts that surpasses the needs and expectations of those who are present for the feeding. The radical interpretation of the eucharistic traditions that John works in chapter 6 presents the eucharistic meal as a sacrament of the incarnation, a meal of Jesus' living presence for the community."²⁸¹

How might one assess O'Day's claims? On the one hand, it is true that great prominence is given in John's gospel to the incarnation and the resulting emphasis on life. This emphasis on life is obviously consistent with the life-based focus of this project, and provides a strong underpinning for the life-based theory and practice of evangelism. O'Day affirms that "John envisions the possibility of grace and new life that come from fullness, not emptiness and sacrifice, from an image of God that creates new possibilities

²⁸⁰Gail R. O'Day, "The Love of God Incarnate," 160-161.

²⁸¹Ibid., 166.

out of the stuff of human flesh, from love that dwells incarnate.”²⁸² There is great value in inviting persons to the new possibilities that exist for them through a life of believing, knowing, obeying, and abiding in Jesus, so in this sense O’Day’s insistence that we include incarnational thinking in theological conversation (to which I would add “evangelistic conversation”) is noteworthy.

On the other hand, she travels too far afield regarding the relationship of Jesus’ death to redemption. Had she limited herself to pointing out how John’s incarnational perspective led him to integrate Jesus’ death and life in the way he told the gospel story, all would have been well. But when she writes that “Jesus’ death is not necessary to redeem humanity,” O’Day loses the very integration that she applauds in John. Yes, John emphasizes the Word made flesh. Yes, John places a strong value on Jesus’ life. Yes, we should go beyond Pauline understandings of the incarnation, crucifixion, and atonement. At the same time, however, we cannot appropriately speak of redemption and/or atonement without reference to Jesus’ death; and neither does John attempt to do so. This is made quite plain in John’s early inclusion of the “Lamb of God” references that John the Baptist makes to Jesus (1:29 and 1:36), which many of his readers would associate with the sacrificial language of the levitical code. It is further reinforced by Jesus’ references to the laying down of His life for the sheep (10: 11; 15; 17) and to His chapter 6 reference to His flesh being the bread of life which He gives for the world (6:51). Moreover, we can point to John’s chapter 11 inclusion of Caiaphas’ statement that “‘you know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.’ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation,

²⁸²Gail R. O’Day, “The Love of God Incarnate,” 167.

and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”²⁸³ Additionally, though O’Day’s treatment of the eucharistic imagery in the chapter six feeding of the 5,000 and the ensuing discourse offers a creative interpretation of that pericope, she ignores the fact that John also included the Passover meal in his narrative (chapter 13), and incorporated Judas’ betrayal in that narrative.

The best way forward, therefore, is to combine the insights from Koester’s multiple frames of reference with O’Day’s emphasis on Jesus’ life and incarnation. In this context, we may view the crucifixion and atonement in terms of how they fit into the comprehensive Johannine picture of who Jesus is. John’s gospel presents a portrayal of the pre-incarnational Jesus who was God (and was with God); the incarnational Jesus who came to earth in fullness to help us know Him; the wise and powerful Jesus who taught, healed, raised, and fed; the compassionate Jesus who died to demonstrate the depth of God’s love; and the resurrected and exalted Jesus who gives us the Holy Spirit to guide us in how to continue abiding in Him (Jesus), and in so doing experience full and vital life. The crucifixion and atonement, therefore, are indeed important to John, but they are important within the larger framework of John’s portrayal of Jesus, and should not be separated from that comprehensive framework. Likewise, the crucifixion and atonement should not be removed from that framework. We are invited to full life in Jesus, and that full life is directly linked to the *fullness* of who Jesus is and was, as well as what He experienced in our stead and on our behalf. This implies that the ministry of evangelism must be envisioned in a comprehensive fashion. I will explore this theme more fully in Chapter Five.

²⁸³John 11:49-52, ESV.

CHAPTER THREE

THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS REGARDING THE LIFE THEME

In the previous chapter the focus was on insights from the field of biblical studies, with primary emphasis on selected Old Testament scholars and a journey into the gospel of John. In this chapter the field of inquiry will be broadened to include theologians and anthropologists who can provide us additional understandings concerning the evangelistic implications of a strong focus on the biblical theme of life. This will help sharpen one's perceptions concerning some of the themes which have already arisen, as well as introduce new themes to open up fuller possibilities for discerning the theoretical and practical implications for evangelism. There are obvious space and time limitations with this project, so though I have researched a large number of scholars, I will limit my current treatment to a select few, based on the helpfulness of their work and the strength of their scholarship. An important point is that the fields of theology and anthropology tend to overlap at various points; and this makes sense given the holistic nature of God and God's creation (including human persons). As one delves into these materials, it also becomes quickly obvious that anthropology seriously impacts evangelistic theory and practice; or perhaps it would be better to say that it *should* do so. Our understanding of what it means to be human relates to our understanding of what it is that God has in mind for us in offering us new life in Jesus. Ray Anderson phrases it this way: "The essential nature of human beings is determinative for our understanding of the kind of redemption

God has wrought for human beings through his Son, Jesus Christ.”²⁸⁴ Whether or not evangelism scholars and practitioners have paid sufficient attention to anthropological insights in the past is subject to debate, but in this chapter those insights will be linked with the theory and practice of evangelism. The chapter will begin with three theologians who accentuate life in their theology: Karl Barth, Jurgen Moltmann, and Thomas Oden. This will be followed by a brief survey of material from three additional theologians who include an explicit anthropological perspective in their work: David Kelsey, Ray Anderson, and Paul Hiebert. This is not intended to be an exhaustive study of these six theologians. The goal is to discover pertinent issues to deal with related to the biblical theme of life and its implications for the theory and practice of evangelism. I will then introduce insights from other theologians related to those issues.

Theological Insights from Barth, Moltmann, and Oden

Karl Barth

In the “Doctrine of Creation” section of the second volume of *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth offers valuable theological insights concerning the theme of life. Three in particular stand out. The first is the way Barth grounds our understanding of life in our relationship with and commitment to God. This helps us avoid the trap of so fully embracing life that we begin to embrace it as an entity in and to itself, separate from the God who created us. Barth reminds us that “life is no second God, and therefore the

²⁸⁴Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 70.

respect due to it cannot rival the reverence owed to God.”²⁸⁵ Yes, we respect life. Yes, we must do all we can to preserve life and help others experience life as God intends. But that is precisely the point: “life as *God* intends,” not life as we or others intend. Anthropologically speaking, Barth observes that human beings are not constituted in any way distinct from God, but rather are constituted directly in relationship to God who has created them and given them freedom to live. “Life as such thus means to live for the One to whom it belongs and from whom it has been received as a loan.”²⁸⁶ This may seem to be a simple theological point, but it is a crucial one nonetheless, for it reminds us that as we investigate the evangelistic implications of a strong emphasis upon the biblical theme of life, we are not trying to portray and invite people to a fullness of life that is experienced *apart* from God, but rather are inviting them to a fullness of life that can only be experienced in an intimate, reverential, and obedient relationship *with* God. This helps our life-focus remain Jesus-focused.

A second emphasis for Barth is one that has already emerged in this project: life is experienced in relationships, most particularly in our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationships with others. Again speaking anthropologically, Barth cautions us that we must never conceive of human persons as being somehow “determined” apart from those relationships. It is not that John Doe as a human being has relationships with God and other people that are distinct from his “being-ness.” Rather, John Doe’s relationships with God and other people are in part *determinative of* his “being-ness.” A human person “is first for God and his fellow-man (sic), and then and for

²⁸⁵Karl Barth, “The Doctrine of Creation,” *Church Dogmatics* Vol. II/4, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 342.

²⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 330.

this reason he exists as this being in accordance with his determination.”²⁸⁷ In addition to our relating with God and other people, Barth also refers to the necessity for grasping the role of the created order as the “indispensable living background” in which we live.²⁸⁸ This reminds us that though the world of plants and animals is provided for our use, we are neither the owners nor the creators thereof. God and God alone is the creator and owner of the created order.²⁸⁹ This “living background,” therefore, adds another dimension to our relational understanding of life, which means that evangelistic portrayals and/or invitations should consider ways to include references to our relationships with God, other people, and the created world.

A third emphasis Barth offers is that “the will for life is also the will for joy, delight and happiness.”²⁹⁰ He mentions the large number of biblical references to “delight, joy, bliss, exultations, merry-making, and rejoicing,” and then further suggests that the joy we are now referring to is “genuine, earthly, human joy: the joy of harvest, wedding, festival and victory; the joy not only of the inner but also the outer man (sic); the joy in which one may and must drink wine as well as eat bread, sing and play as well as speak, dance as well as pray.”²⁹¹ This focus on joy, delight, and happiness is not to be envisioned as a hedonistic pleasure-seeking apart from God, but rather flows out of a deep sense of gratitude for the gift of life which God has granted us. In this sense, then,

²⁸⁷Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/4, 324-325.

²⁸⁸This is similar to Claus Westermann’s point that the tendency in Christian theology is to conceive of a disconnect between human creation and the rest of creation, and that this conception is quite unfaithful to the biblical material concerning the Creation.

²⁸⁹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/4, 350-351.

²⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 375.

²⁹¹*Ibid.*, 376.

our joy, delight, and happiness are a form of praise and thanksgiving to God. Building on his prior comments about the relational dynamics of the gift of life, Barth also highlights that joy is a relational affair, so that we should continually ask ourselves what will give joy to other persons, and try to help them experience that joy.²⁹² Our joy, therefore, is more fully realized when we help others experience their own joy, and our joy should never come at the expense of other persons. An additional important point is that Barth does not conceive of this as a happy-go-lucky joy that ignores suffering and hardship. He observes that “a true and good joy is that we do not evade the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ and are not unwilling to be genuinely joyful even as we bear the sorrows laid upon us.”²⁹³ A final point for Barth is that our joy, delight, and happiness are provisional. We are happy and joyful in this life out of a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunity to live and be in relationship with God and others. Additionally, we are happy and joyful in this life because we know that an even greater joy and delight await us in eternity. There is a symbiotic relationship, therefore, between our anticipation of what is yet to come and our experience of full, joyful living in the here and now.²⁹⁴

Jurgen Moltmann

Jurgen Moltmann also places a strong emphasis on life in his theology. In *The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle*, he focuses on the fact that people are apathetic toward life, and that love is the “antidote” for this apathy. Because love is most fully

²⁹²Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/4, 379.

²⁹³Ibid., 383.

²⁹⁴Ibid., 384-385 (the reader may remember a similar comment in the Johannine section based on insights by D. Moody Smith concerning how the vision of what awaits us in the eschatological age impacts our experience in the present age).

expressed in Jesus' sacrifice at Calvary, it is through following His example of loving self-sacrifice that we most fully experience the vigorous and abundant life that God intends for us. This in turn leads to a stress on the role of human relationships in our following of the messianic lifestyle. Sacrificial love does not take place in a relational vacuum, but by its very definition requires participation in human community. "Hope is lived, and it comes alive, when we go outside of ourselves and, in joy and pain, take part in the lives of others. It becomes concrete in open community with others."²⁹⁵ In addition to this recurring theme of relationships, Moltmann highlights another recurring theme, an emphasis on life before death as opposed to life after death. "Jesus' life is inspired not just by the wish for a life *after* death, but by the will for life *before* death, yes even *against* death. Where the sick are healed, lepers are accepted, and sins are not punished but forgiven, there *life* is present. Freed life, redeemed life, divine life is there, in this world, in our times, in the midst of us."²⁹⁶

Moltmann also highlights the life-now emphasis in a book he wrote twenty years later, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, in which he asserts an intimate relationship between the role of the Spirit and the biblical theme of life. In this context, he writes that "people who ask for the Holy Spirit to come to us – in our hearts, into the community we live in, and to our earth – don't want to flee into heaven or to be snatched away into the next world. They have hope for their hearts, their community, and this earth."²⁹⁷ This does not mean that Spirit-led or Spirit-filled Christians completely

²⁹⁵Jurgen Moltmann, *The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle*, trans. M. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 35.

²⁹⁶Ibid., 24.

²⁹⁷Jurgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 11-12.

ignore the biblically-anticipated future. Moltmann affirms that “the future towards which faith is meant to grow and develop reaches forward beyond this human life into God’s future, ‘the day of Jesus Christ’, God’s eternal kingdom.”²⁹⁸ But this futuristic orientation does not distract us from stressing the present-day impact that God intends in Christ through the Spirit. Furthermore, Moltmann reiterates his belief that the life God brings is experienced in human community. An important added focus in this book, however, is that of God’s creation. The Spirit’s intention is not only to bring life to (and within) human relationships, but to do so in a way that honors the bodyliness of human beings as well as the prominence of God’s physical earth. “Like the Spirit of creation, the Spirit of the new creation creates communities for living shared by human beings and other living things, just as it creates communities among people. The new creation doesn’t abolish bodyliness. It renews it for eternal livingness.”²⁹⁹ One other theme in this book bears mentioning: Moltmann proposes a direct connection between God’s mission, the Spirit, and life. “God’s mission is nothing less than the sending of the Holy Spirit from the Father through the Son into this world, so that this world should not perish but live. The gospel of John tells us quite simply what it is that is brought in to the world from God through Christ: *life*...”³⁰⁰ This linking of God’s mission with the goal of bringing life to the world provides additional theological support for the earlier claim regarding life as the goal and the kingdom as one of the instruments or means of that goal.

²⁹⁸Jurgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 34.

²⁹⁹Ibid., 24.

³⁰⁰Ibid., 19.

A final book by Moltmann that merits study is *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*. In this book Moltmann grounds ecclesiology in his interpretation of the Synoptic emphasis on Jesus' messianic mission. He construes a direct connection to this messianic mission with the community of the exodus (a new exodus in Christ), with the resulting claim that "healing the sick, liberating the captives, and the hunger for righteousness belong to the mission and go together with the preaching of the gospel to the poor."³⁰¹ In this context, "poor" refers to poverty that is experienced in some way by all human beings, because it can refer to economic, social, physical, psychological, moral, or religious poverty. We all, therefore, experience the "fellowship of poverty," for we all experience some measure of enslavement and/or dehumanization. "It is precisely as the partisan 'gospel to the poor' that the kingdom of God brings freedom to all men, for it brings rich and poor, healthy and sick, the powerful and the helpless for the first time into that fellowship of poverty in which it is possible to talk without distinction about 'all men' [sic]."³⁰² Because in Jesus God has come near, all persons are called to "make a fresh start and to free themselves, and this they can do. The gospel itself is the mediation between the coming kingdom of God and the person who is turning to freedom."³⁰³ Moltmann characterizes this fresh start as a turning away from oppression, death, and evil, toward life, righteousness, and freedom.

Important to Moltmann is that this turning must be understood in a holistic way. It is not individual *or* communal, nor is it religious *or* political. It impacts all of life in all its

³⁰¹Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 76.

³⁰²*Ibid.*, 79.

³⁰³*Ibid.*, 80.

spheres. Yes, individuals turn, but they do so within the framework of human relationships. And yes, these newly-turned individuals form what we might call a religious body, the church (the community of the new exodus), but the life, righteousness, and freedom that we are turning toward is also to be offered to and experienced by persons outside that community. Just as Jesus' messianic mission had to do with healing, liberation, righteousness, and preaching to the poor (and remember we are all poor in some sense), so too must the mission of individual Christians and the mission of the community of the new exodus include and impact all those dimensions of what God is doing (or at least intends to do) through the New Messiah. The church's goal "is not to spread the Christian religion or to implant the church; it is to liberate the people of the exodus in the name of the coming kingdom."³⁰⁴

Moltmann goes on to describe with more specificity the forms which this liberation should take. He refers to three "world processes" that must be impacted. First is the economic process, with the emphasis placed on the need for human beings and nature to be liberated from exploitation. Second is the political process, which has to do primarily with who controls the power. In this regard what is required is freedom from human repression of other human beings. Third is the cultural process, which Moltmann views primarily in terms of educational, racial, and sexual "privileges." The goal here is to end the practice of alienation with other persons based on their education, race, and/or gender. In addition to these three forms of liberation that we must strive for, Moltmann underscores the role of suffering and faith, both of which Christians are able to bring to the world as they follow the example of Christ's own sacrificial suffering. He writes that

³⁰⁴Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 81-84.

“it is only the dignity of solidarity in suffering which makes people capable of fellowship. In this context Christianity in the world can be expected to overcome the fatal loss of courage with its *passion for living*.”³⁰⁵ He combines here his strong value for Calvary-based suffering with his keen interest in the life theme.

There is much to value in Moltmann’s theology. His emphasis on life as central to God’s mission and the ministry of the Holy Spirit is helpful, as is his repeated insistence that the life which God intends and brings is not to be limited to any particular area of interest. To the contrary, the life which God intends and brings is to impact every area of life, including personal, relational, political, cultural, religious, and economic. Moreover, this impact is to be felt now, in this life, before death. It is not something that we simply hope for at a future time but is something we trust God for now, and partner with God’s Spirit to help bring about. Accepting and participating in God’s offer of life should make a difference *now*, and it should make a difference in *everything*: how we relate interpersonally; how we vote; how and where we spend our money; which causes we fight for; which oppressions we oppose; which injustices we battle against; and much more. Part of this comprehensive and holistic understanding stems from that fact that Moltmann dealt with the Synoptic emphasis in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, and then later dealt with the Johannine emphasis in *The Source of Life*. This provides a well-rounded gospel foundation to his theology.

Thomas Oden

Oden is another well-respected theologian who has done extensive work. Among his many books, Oden has written a 3-volume series on systematic theology. Germane to

³⁰⁵Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 164-167.

this project is the fact that Oden frames this series around the theme of life. The three volumes are titled *The Living God*, *The Word of Life*, and *Life in the Spirit*. Of particular interest is Oden's treatment of life as the unifying theme of all Christian theology. He addresses this in his second volume, *The Word of Life*: "Christian theology in summary concerns God's own life, God's life offered for humanity, and our life in God."³⁰⁶ He notes how 1 John uses "the Word of life" as its principal theme, and how that theme parallels the Prologue in John's gospel. He goes on to suggest that this theme (the Word of life) is alluded to by Paul in Philippians 2:16 ("holding fast to the word of life" ESV), and further reinforced with Paul's references to Jesus' life at work in us (2 Cor. 4:12), our lives being "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3, ESV), and the fact that Jesus is our life (Col. 3:4). Additionally, Oden notes that "to Jesus the predicate 'life' has been unreservedly, almost recklessly, ascribed in Scripture." Moreover, we can see examples in the book of Acts of how prevalent the life theme was in the early preaching of the church (Acts 3:15, Jesus is author of life; Acts 17:25, Jesus gives all people life; and Acts 5:20, the full message of this new life).³⁰⁷ Oden concludes this volume with a treatment of Jesus' resurrection as relates to apocalyptic hope, and combines that treatment with the life theme: "The Christian presently lives a life hid in Christ – born from above by the power of the Spirit, embodying and declaring the good news, going about doing good, willing to die for the truth, living in newness of life and in hope of the resurrection at the

³⁰⁶Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life, Systematic Theology: Volume Two* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 431.

³⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 432-437.

last day.”³⁰⁸ We see an obvious emphasis here on the life theme being strongly linked with Jesus.

The groundwork for this strong emphasis on the life theme was laid in Oden’s first volume, where like Baab, Eichrodt, and others, Oden emphasizes God as the living God, referring to “God’s unutterable aliveness.”³⁰⁹ As the living God, he is “present amid the people in radical, unceasing spontaneity and limitless energy” and is therefore “the source of our life – active and tireless.”³¹⁰ In his final volume, Oden deals with the role of the Spirit in Christian living, and he reiterates at this point that “the central theme of this systematic theology is life: the living God, the Word of life, life in the Spirit.”³¹¹ Obviously, there is much more to be gleaned from a 3-volume series, but these general life-focused insights serve well in strengthening the theological foundation for a life-based focus to undergird evangelistic theory and practice. More specifically, I submit that Oden’s use of life as the over-riding theme of his systematic theology is a good illustration of how vital it is to understand the distinction between goal and instrument or means. Oden deals with a myriad of theological issues. Examples include omniscience, omnipotence, foreknowledge, human will, divine will, holiness, judgment, justice, righteousness, faithfulness, justification, sanctification, atonement, incarnation, and many more. Each of these issues is important to a comprehensive understanding of who God is, who we are, and how we are to live in relation to the gift of life that Christ came to bring.

³⁰⁸Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life*, 482.

³⁰⁹Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God, Systematic Theology: Volume One* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 64.

³¹⁰*Ibid.*, 65.

³¹¹Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit, Systematic Theology: Volume Three* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 254.

But the ultimate goal, the over-arching interest, is life. We are grateful for our justification, but our gratitude is centered in how our justification contributes to our experience of life. We commit ourselves to lives of holiness, but we do this not simply to say that we are holy, but because holiness leads us more fully into an experience of the full life that God intends for us. Life is the goal, and if life is the goal, then this should be reflected in evangelistic theory and practice.

Insights from Kelsey, Anderson, and Hiebert

David Kelsey

In his theological anthropology, Kelsey observes that three broad categories of questions are normally addressed in anthropological literature: “What are we?”, “How ought we to be?”, and “Who am I and who are we?”³¹² Additionally, there are two contexts which serve as background to anthropological inquiry; proximate and ultimate. The proximate context has to do with “the physical and social worlds in which we live.” The ultimate context has to do with the larger, more fundamental context, which for Christians implies God and how God relates with us.³¹³ Concerning how God relates with us, Kelsey proposes that according to the “narrative logic” of the Bible, God relates to us in three ways: God creates us, God draws us to eschatological consummation, and God reconciles us.³¹⁴ Utilizing these three ways that God relates to us as a comprehensive

³¹²David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 1-2.

³¹³*Ibid.*, 4-5.

³¹⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

framework, Kelsey develops a theological and anthropological depiction of how we are to be and live. His depiction may be portrayed in outline form as follows:³¹⁵

- God Creates Us
 - We are Living on Borrowed Breath (we are accountable to God for the gift of life)
 - We are invited to respond by Flourishing in Faith, which involves the following “existential hows”
 - Practicing Wonder (at that which God has given us)
 - Practicing Delight (in “the sheer givenness” of our fellow creatures)
 - Practicing Perseverance (trusting in the emerging future of God’s hospitable generosity)
- God Draws us to Eschatological Consummation
 - We are Living on Borrowed Time (we have the gift of unanticipated, unearned, and unplanned possibilities)
 - We are invited to respond by Flourishing in Hope, which involves the following existential hows
 - Practicing joyous hopefulness in the “now” of the not-yet-fully actualized borrowed time (with a strong emphasis on liberation)
 - Practicing joyous hopefulness in the “not-yet” of the now of borrowed time (we work now for liberation, but understand the provisional nature of our borrowed time)
- God Reconciles Us
 - We are Living by Another’s Death (Jesus’s incarnation, life, death, and resurrection)
 - We are invited to respond by Flourishing in Love, which involves
 - Love to God – Prayer (passionate desire for communion with the Triune God)
 - Love to Neighbor (based on the Sermon on the Mount), which involves
 - Being *with* fellow estranged human creatures (humility, mourning, kindness)
 - Being *for* fellow estranged human creatures (agents for justice, peace, liberation)

Within this wide-ranging depiction of how we are to be and live in response to God’s relating with us, five themes in particular are pertinent to my project: 1) life envisioned as human flourishing; 2) human flourishing as relates to the provisional nature of living on

³¹⁵I want to be clear that this outline portrays my personal perception of how Kelsey’s comprehensive and lengthy work is generally organized. There is obviously a great deal of material in a 900-page work of two volumes, and many important insights are not included in this outline. However, it does provide a helpful way to get an overall feel for the structure of Kelsey’s material.

borrowed breath; 3) the social, public, and relational nature of our life as part of the quotidian;³¹⁶ 4) love to neighbor; and 5) reconciliation of our estranged proximate contexts through Jesus.

Life Envisioned as Human Flourishing

Kelsey recommends that we base our concept of human flourishing on who the Trinitarian God is. He highlights three features of “the community-in-communion that is God’s life.” First is that Father, Son, and Spirit engage in “reciprocal self-giving” not based on a need for relationship, but based rather on a fullness of being. God’s life is “an immeasurably rich life, inexhaustible in its resources. Second, because of the richness and inexhaustibility of God’s life, we cannot grasp it cognitively. Third, Father, Son, and Spirit each choose to relate one with the other. They are not forced to do so. God’s nature is “radically freely self-determining,” which means that God makes an independent choice to love. Kelsey suggests that human flourishing, therefore, should be thought of in like terms. Human flourishing involves fullness of life, is finally beyond our cognitive ability to grasp, and includes self-determinative choices to relate with and love others.³¹⁷ Based on chapter 10 of the book of Job, Kelsey further explains his theory of human flourishing by contrasting it with the concept of health.³¹⁸ He argues that even persons

³¹⁶Kelsey uses this term to describe what is most often referred to by other people as God’s creation, God’s created world, etc. He describes it as “the lived world...the everyday finite realities of all sorts – animal, vegetable, and mineral – in the routine networks that are constituted by their ordinary interactions.” *Eccentric Existence*, 190.

³¹⁷David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 77.

³¹⁸Kelsey argues that Genesis 1-11 is designed to contribute to the *deliverance* narrative of the Pentateuch, and therefore should not be leaned upon for *creation* theology. The best source for creation theology is the Wisdom Literature, because it “is not bent by the narrative logic of the accounts of God’s acts of deliverance to which it is ordered” (*Eccentric Existence*, 100).

whose bodies are unhealthy can yet flourish in their relationship with God and others, so the related concepts of healthy, unhealthy, functional, and dysfunctional do not serve well as indicators of human flourishing as he conceives it. Flourishing, however, can mean “to blossom” and “to thrive.” Kelsey rejects the use of “thrive” as an indicator of human flourishing because it lends itself too readily to being viewed as a health-related metaphor. “Blossom,” therefore, is his preferred image in this regard. “‘To blossom’ is to manifest the type of beauty of which a given life is capable by virtue of God relating to it creatively.”³¹⁹

Human Flourishing in Relation to the Provisional Nature of Living on Borrowed Breath

An important factor that contributes to Kelsey’s reluctance to utilize health-related metaphors to describe human flourishing is the fact that as persons living on borrowed breath we must consider the role of the finitude of the quotidian. This is a crucial understanding for Kelsey, because it reminds us that we should not look back to Eden to develop our concept of human flourishing, nor should we look ahead to some future time when things will be different, nor should we think of it as transcendent to our everyday lives. Rather, real human flourishing takes place in the midst of a quotidian that is living on borrowed breath, a quotidian that is in fact dying. It takes place in the midst of stress and conflict. This helps us conceive of a human flourishing that is grounded in who God created us to be in relation to the everyday circumstances (place and time, for example) in which God has placed us. “What counts as the flourishing of any given human life must be understood concretely in terms of the particular finite array of powers

³¹⁹David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 315-318.

and capacities that *that* given living body has and the particularities of the finite networks of relationships in which it has been set in its proximate contexts across time.”³²⁰ An important dimension of Kelsey’s point here is that unlike much traditional theology, the creation theology reflected in the biblical Wisdom literature does *not* conceive of the *finitude* of creation as distinct from God’s intention in creation. The “experiential ambiguity” of finitude “is inherent in precisely what God creates.” When we speak of human flourishing, therefore, we are not referring to an ideal notion of a “perfectly actualized human being,” but rather to an “ordinary, everyday human person.”³²¹

The Social, Public, and Relational Nature of our Life as Part of the Quotidian

Given the language of Kelsey’s description of the quotidian as involving “the everyday finite realities of all sorts – animal, vegetable, and mineral – in the routine *networks* that are constituted by their ordinary *interactions*,” it is no surprise that he places a strong emphasis on the social, public, and relational nature of our lives, and therefore of human flourishing. He speaks about a “public *Missio Dei*,” and contends that God’s mission impacts everything related to our public and social contexts.³²² In this regard, therefore, we must not over-emphasize our private, subjective experiences with God.³²³ Kelsey does not suggest that we ignore our personal experiences in relating with

³²⁰David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 315-316.

³²¹Ibid., 201-204.

³²² Ibid., 481-482.

³²³Kelsey acknowledges that each person has an “unsubstitutable personal identity,” but he favors Michael Welker’s position that we must view each person as a “concrete individual” rather than an “abstract individual.” The concrete individual’s unsubstitutable personal identity is both located in and part and parcel of the proximate context in which he or she is placed, so that we cannot truly speak of who a person

God, but he does propose that God's "eschatological blessing engages the *social* and *cultural* dimensions of personal bodies' lives quite as much as it does the privacy of their subjective interiorities and the networks of their more psychologically intimate interpersonal relationships."³²⁴ This focus is seen in the general outline of Kelsey's work that was shared earlier. In each of the three larger categories of flourishing he includes a relational dimension. In terms of God relating to us creatively, we are invited to flourish in faith, which includes delighting in our fellow creatures. In terms of God drawing us to eschatological consummation, we are invited to flourish in hope, which involves joyous hopefulness in the "now" of the not-yet-fully actualized borrowed time, and this includes a strong focus on being agents of liberation. In terms of God reconciling us, we are invited to flourish in love, which involves love to neighbor, and this includes being both for and with our fellow estranged human creatures. Love to neighbor is so important to human flourishing that I have chosen to treat it as a separate theme unto itself.

Love to Neighbor

This dimension of human flourishing is based primarily on Kelsey's interpretation of the Beatitudes, and involves being *with* our fellow estranged human creatures and also being *for* them.³²⁵ In talking of our being *with* them, Kelsey refers to the fact that our estrangement from God has produced proximate contexts that include hatred, violence, and deception. In the midst of these proximate contexts, we are encouraged to share

"is" without also speaking of their social and public networks of relationships. *Eccentric Existence*, 384-401.

³²⁴David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 481-482; emphasis added.

³²⁵*Ibid.*, 797-807.

kindness and mourning with an attitude of humility. Humility, therefore, is not passive in nature but active. We recognize that we too experience the hatred, violence, and deception of our proximate contexts, so in humility we actively seek to be with others who share these same experiences. We mourn with them and we share kindness with them. We intentionally seek to be with them.³²⁶ Being *for* our fellow estranged human creatures means that not only do we cry kindly with them in our shared proximate contexts, but we also try to do something to change what takes place in those contexts. We attempt to serve as agents in bringing about alleviation of suffering and liberation from oppression. We fulfill Jesus' declaration that we are the salt and light of the world.³²⁷ Kelsey's Beatitude-based love-to-neighbor appreciation is shared by Moltmann, who writes that "the church loses its fellowship with the messianic mission of Jesus if it is not 'the people of the beatitudes.'"³²⁸ Christians are encouraged to experience fellowship with Jesus through their resistance to inhumanity and idolatry and their shared suffering with the oppressed and persecuted. We are to "in solidarity enter the brotherhood of those who, in their society, are visibly living in the shadow of the cross: the poor, the handicapped, the people society has rejected, the prisoners and the persecuted."³²⁹ As with Kelsey, this involves more than simply being with those who suffer the consequences of our shared proximate contexts. We are also to serve as active

³²⁶David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 797-803.

³²⁷Ibid., 803-810.

³²⁸Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 81.

³²⁹Ibid., 97.

agents to bring about change, and this must take place in (at the very least) the economic process, the political process, and the cultural process.³³⁰

In addition to sharing a commitment to active love of neighbor in ways that make a difference in the real-life processes (or for Kelsey, proximate contexts) of our lives, Kelsey and Moltmann share a similar perspective concerning the *relationship* between loving God and loving neighbor. Kelsey notes that on the one hand each of these foci stand on their own (are irreducible) because they have different objects: God and neighbor (fellow estranged creatures). On the other hand, however, they are strongly interdependent and both are requisite dimensions of human flourishing. “It is in enactments of these interdependent practices expressive of passionate desire for communion with God and with fellow estranged human creatures that human personal bodies flourish.”³³¹ Moltmann refers to this issue in the context of a dialectical tension between contemplation and political action. He applauds the example of the community of Taizé in southern France, where “the dynamic unity of contemplation and political effort for justice in the world” is clearly lived out. Political action is important because it is through such action that we effect real change in person’s lives and help them experience the life which God intends for them. Contemplation and meditation are important because they keep us rooted in God and remind us that as Christ-followers our efforts to bring about change in the political and/or social arena are based on God’s own mission and are empowered by God’s Spirit. “Our meditation on Christ’s passion and our contemplation of his spiritual presence can alter our praxis more radically than all the

³³⁰Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 164-165.

³³¹David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 813-821.

other alternatives which even the most active among us can conceive.”³³² For Moltmann, it is in our deep communion with God that we become aware of the needs around us and are inspired to do something about them.

Reconciliation of our Estranged Proximate Contexts through Jesus

Kelsey suggests that we live in proximate contexts that can be foundationally described by estrangement.³³³ Grounded in his continuing commitment to the wisdom literature, he maintains that this estrangement is created primarily through our living “foolishly in distorted faith” rather than living “wisely in faith.”³³⁴ When faith becomes distorted through foolish living, then sin and evil follow.³³⁵ This foolish living comprises of the distorted practice of the “faithful existential hows” that were mentioned earlier, and these are primarily based in disloyalty to God and “God’s own creative project.”³³⁶ In the midst of this situation, Jesus brings reconciliation. In a similar fashion to Gail O’Day, Kelsey highlights the Incarnation of Jesus as the key factor in this reconciliation.³³⁷ He suggests that it is through Jesus’ living among us and sharing our estranged proximate

³³²Jurgen Moltmann, *The Passion for Life*, 43-47.

³³³David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 607.

³³⁴*Ibid.*, 402.

³³⁵Kelsey urges a clear distinction between sin and evil. Sin is defined theocentrically, so that it refers to “a distortion of proper human response to God.” Evil is defined from the perspective of the creature, so that it refers to the “violation of creatures’ integrities” which results from sin. Sin is something that we cause through our own distorted response to God, whereas evil is what happens to us as the result of the distorted response of another (402).

³³⁶David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 402-419.

³³⁷*Ibid.*, 607-627.

contexts with us that Jesus exchanged His “true life” for “our living deaths.”³³⁸ Jesus experienced death, and in that sense His death plays a factor in this exchange, but not in as strong a sense as is the case in most theological understandings. His death was to be expected because He was born into the same finite proximate contexts that we are born into. Kelsey, therefore, for example, does not speak in the language of atonement, substitution, or vicarious sacrifice. For him the Incarnation is definitely the key. Through the Incarnation, “humankind’s proximate contexts, in all of their ontological and moral ambiguities, still structured by the dynamic of living death, are set into a new dynamic structure constituted by the triune God’s concrete way of relating to reconcile.”³³⁹ An exchange indeed takes place, but that exchange is principally expressed through the Incarnation, not through the Cross.

Ray Anderson

In a 1982 work Ray Anderson argues for a stronger move among Christian scholars toward a theological anthropology rather than a non-theological one. The dilemma with non-theological anthropologies is that they begin with humanity rather than with God. Theological anthropology of necessity must begin with humanity too, because human existence is the only possible place to start. The difference, however, is that non-theological anthropologies both start with humanity *and* seek to have the ultimate say, whereas theological anthropologies start with humanity but also recognize that God has the final word. Hence, the Word of God made flesh becomes the starting place for

³³⁸David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 642-646.

³³⁹*Ibid.*, 647.

theological anthropology.³⁴⁰ Starting with the Word of God, therefore, leads us to an appreciation of the *Imago Dei* for theological anthropology.³⁴¹ Two dimensions of the *Imago Dei* are highlighted by Anderson: encounter and relation.³⁴² God's essential "personhood" is expressed as a "we" and not an "I." God "exists as a being which encounters and relates to himself (sic)."³⁴³ As persons created in God's image, therefore, we must recognize that it is part of our essential personhood both to relate with other persons and to know that when we relate with them we encounter God's image in them.³⁴⁴ Having cast this foundational vision for the place of the image of God in theological anthropology, Anderson proceeds to delineate several implications for human living. The two implications most pertinent to this project are "freedom in dependence" and "creatureliness as natural life."

*Freedom in Dependence*³⁴⁵

God has created us to be free, but this freedom "depends on the source of the Word." This dependence on God reminds us that we have been created by God and summoned into a relationship with God. In this sense our freedom is "self-determining" for it determines who we are in relation to who God is and how God has created us to be in relationship with God and others. We should see our freedom, therefore, as an

³⁴⁰Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 5-19.

³⁴¹*Ibid.*, 69-73.

³⁴²*Ibid.*, 73-77.

³⁴³*Ibid.*, 73.

³⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 74.

³⁴⁵This paragraph is a summary of Anderson's thoughts concerning "freedom in dependence" that are located in pages 78-82 of *On Being Human*.

astounding gift. Through God's gracious gift of creation and summons, we are free to fellowship with God and participate in God's life. Importantly for Anderson, the freedom we are discussing does not refer to "the autonomy of the human self – a kind of neutrality by which the self exists independently of God's determination."³⁴⁶ Human dignity is often erroneously founded on freedom of choice, but that is not the freedom God intends, because it "denies dependence on the other as the source of one's own personhood."³⁴⁷ John Paul II affirms this perspective, noting that too often our notion of freedom is one that "exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way" and fails to grasp "the *inherently relational dimension*" of freedom. This is a freedom that "negates and destroys life," because it loses its connection with God's truth.³⁴⁸

*Creatureliness as Natural Life*³⁴⁹

As "sixth-day creatures," human beings share solidarity with the rest of creation, and yet we also experience a tension "between the material and immaterial," for God's breathing into us produced "a creaturely soul" that marks us as also different from the rest of creation. Along with Barth, Kelsey, and many other Christian thinkers, Anderson suggests that Christian theology has tended to overemphasize the "creaturely soul" dimension of our existence to the extent that a non-biblical separation of soul and body has been conceived. This has led to an inappropriate devaluation of our bodies as essential to our personhood and to an equally illegitimate conception of our souls as

³⁴⁶Ray Anderson, *On Being Human*, 80.

³⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 78-82.

³⁴⁸John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life [Evangelium Vitae]* (New York: Random House, 1995), 30-37.

³⁴⁹This section is a summary of important points from 132-135 of Ray Anderson's *On Being Human*.

immortal. Anderson argues that “to stress immortality as an abstract psychical experience of the self apart from the body is incompatible with biblical anthropology.”³⁵⁰ Our bodies, therefore, far from being “lower” than our “souls,” are part and parcel of who we are, and who we were created to be, and are included in what God intends for us in Jesus. “The integrity of human personhood is inextricably bound up with physical existence.”³⁵¹ It is imperative, Anderson contends, that rather than think of our “creatureliness” as unimportant to or disconnected from our experience of full life in Christ, we should see it as an integral part of that full life.

Theological Paradigm for Authentic Personhood

After fleshing out his thoughts concerning the significance of being created in God’s image, Anderson then develops a theological paradigm for authentic personhood. The four elements of the paradigm include election (affirmation of the self), covenant (relatedness of the self), salvation/atonement (healing of the self), and eschaton (significance of the self). Each element is directly related to human existential needs.³⁵²

³⁵⁰Ray Anderson, *On Being Human*, 132-134. An attempt at helping us conceive of our essential being as *including* our bodies is one of the reasons that Kelsey refers to human persons as “personal bodies.” Kelsey refers to “personal bodies,” “personal living bodies,” and “living bodies” throughout his work (see especially 301-303, David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*). We may also recall here Moltmann’s contention that “the new creation doesn’t abolish bodyliness. It renews it for eternal livingness” (Jurgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 124).

³⁵¹*Ibid.*, 139.

³⁵²*Ibid.*, 161-178.

Election (affirmation of the self)

The existential human need which election fulfills is the need for me to be affirmed, for someone or something to say “yes” to my condition. In election we learn that “we can become human because we are in fact divinely determined to be human and are human.” Importantly, this “being human” involves not simply to exist but to exist “as one who bears the divine image and likeness.”³⁵³ Thus, we both bear God’s image and are chosen by God.

Covenant (relatedness of the self)

Being in relationship with God and others is fundamental to our humanity, and the theological concept of covenant helps address this essential need. We are different from God and others, but this difference is best described as “differentiation of the self within the structure of relation.” Covenant, therefore, encourages us to embrace the fact that “our fundamental condition is one of belonging.”³⁵⁴

Salvation/Atonement (healing of the self)

There is an existential human need for restoration and healing, and reconciliation is what meets that need. Anderson says that “reconciliation is the restoration of humanity to its true orientation through the new humanity of Christ.” Through Jesus’ incarnation and atonement the “ontological foundation for all renewal and healing of persons” is brought about, and this prepares the way for persons to experience full health, which “is

³⁵³Ray Anderson, *On Being Human*, 162-167.

³⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 167-171.

not the absence of sickness, but a positive orientation of the self toward the objective hope which results from God's initial intention." The crucial question to ask ourselves, therefore, as we seek the healing of salvation, is not "Who am I?" but "Where do I belong? Where is the place which promises my healing and which affirms my health as a person?"³⁵⁵

Eschaton (significance of the self)

The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that He is the *eschatos*, the "last one," and this knowledge provides a sense of comfort and hope in this present age. Our comfort and hope are based on faith, however, for Jesus is not physically with us now. As we walk by faith and are empowered by the Spirit, we continue to reach out for the presence of Jesus, and "in that reaching out we encounter a reality which becomes present to us." This in turn enables us to "reorient life to the final event which constitutes the present," and that fulfills the human existential need for significance. Our lives are significant *now* because in Jesus the *eschatos* they will be significant *then*.³⁵⁶

Anderson moves from his development of a *theological* paradigm for authentic personhood to a *liturgical* paradigm for authentic personhood, with a strong emphasis on the role of community. He contends that Jesus' sharing of life with the disciples throughout His ministry clearly demonstrates that "the fundamental liturgical paradigm of personhood is community," for the "personhood of God himself (sic), which is communal by nature, is itself the paradigm of all personhood. And what we call community is the

³⁵⁵Ray Anderson, *On Being Human*, 172-175.

³⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 175-178.

liturgical expression of that personhood experienced as co-humanity.”³⁵⁷ The community of Christ, therefore, is both “where” and “through whom” the ministry of Christ takes place in the world. Anderson combines this community-based liturgical emphasis with his interest in relating to our core psychological needs, which he suggests are three: integration of the whole person, having value, and survival.³⁵⁸ With respect to these three core human needs, he suggests that community can serve as a paradigm of wholeness (relates to the need for integration), holiness (relates to the need for value), and immortality (relates to the need for survival).³⁵⁹ Especially germane to this project is how Anderson links this community-based emphasis to the ministry of evangelism. He submits that evangelism could be grounded on the fact that a person has value, and that based on that value as communicated through the community, the person could then be invited to believe. From this viewpoint, therefore, it is first through the gift of belonging that a person senses their value before God, and it is only after that holy (“I am valuable to God!”) experience that the person would then be in a position to believe. Anderson suggests that when we divorce evangelism from community and thereby ask the person to believe outside the context of community, any later invitation or encouragement to participate in the community will be conceived of as duty rather than gift. However, when we issue the invitation to believe within the context of an already-present life-in-community, then the person who chooses to follow Jesus will much more naturally and

³⁵⁷Ray Anderson, *On Being Human*, 182.

³⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 183.

³⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 184-187.

easily be able to receive the nurture, support, and encouragement that the community offers.³⁶⁰

Paul Hiebert

There is a wealth of information in the writings of Paul Hiebert. Though his primary interest is to equip Christian leaders who will be serving in intercultural settings, quite a bit of his material is nonetheless applicable to this current project. Two of Hiebert's points provide a framework for our discussion. The first point is that there are three primary dimensions of culture (cognitive, affective, and evaluative), each of which must be involved in our Christ-following journey.³⁶¹ The second point is that the ultimate this-life goal of Christian conversion is to move persons toward embracing a biblical worldview (which is delineated along the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of culture).³⁶² Hiebert admits that it is difficult for us to lay claim to understanding *the* biblical worldview, since "our attempts to understand what God has revealed in Scripture are partial and biased by our historical and cultural perspectives." Given this understanding, it is yet imperative that with humility we strive to understand "the structure of truth revealed in Scripture."³⁶³ Within this context of humble striving,

³⁶⁰Ray Anderson, *On Being Human*, 186-190. Anderson specifically refers to the Lord's Supper, noting that it could be seen as "a liturgical form of evangelism" (189), which he also notes is in agreement with John Wesley's contention that the Lord's Supper is a "converting ordinance."

³⁶¹ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 1985), 30-34, 265.

³⁶²Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 9-12.

³⁶³Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 265.

Hiebert suggests that the following themes (and their corollary counter themes) emerge from Scripture as vital to worldview transformation³⁶⁴:

- Cognitive Themes (*beliefs*, knowledge, logic, wisdom, perceptions of reality)
 - Creator/creation
 - Revelational/human knowledge
 - Kingdom of God/kingdoms of this world
 - Organic/mechanistic
 - Group/individual
- Affective Themes (*feelings*, aesthetics, beauty, likes and dislikes, matter of “taste”)
 - *Mysterium tremendum* (holy awe)
 - Fruits of the Spirit
- Evaluative Themes (*values*, good/bad, true/false, right/wrong, allegiances)
 - Good/evil
 - Justification/restoration

My interpretation of Hiebert’s thoughts as presented here is that the central thrust of these themes taken together is that biblical worldview transformation involves a lifelong journey of Christ-centered relational interactions with God and others that are based in an acknowledgement of God as sole creator and king, and us as those whom God loves and calls into community with God and others. Our relational interactions with God are to be characterized by holy awe in God’s presence (including immense gratitude for God’s love, restoration, and reconciliation). Our relational interactions with others are to be characterized by fruits of the Spirit, resulting in communities and cultures suffused with shalom, love, and peace. The primary agent for bringing about shalom is the community of God’s people.

Following his discussion of the biblical worldview themes that emerge from Scripture in relation to the cognitive/affective/evaluative dimensions of culture, Hiebert

³⁶⁴Hiebert describes the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of culture in 30-34 of *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, and he discusses the biblical worldview themes that emerge from Scripture in relation to the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions in 268-299 of *Transforming Worldviews*.

examines the nature of transformation. Within this examination, of particular relevance is his treatment of the differences between intrinsic sets and relational sets, plus the differences between digital sets and ratio sets, and how those differences relate to transformation.

Intrinsic Sets versus Relational Sets

A consideration of “sets” has to do with the way a culture defines categories. “Intrinsic sets” refers to the cognitive placement of someone or something into a particular category based on characteristics that are intrinsic to that person or thing. I, for example, could be placed in the following categories based on who or what I am: “male,” “Caucasian,” and “adult.” “Relational sets,” on the other hand, refers to the cognitive placement of someone or something into a particular category based on who or what the person is related to, rather than who they are in and of themselves. In this case I could be placed in the following categories: “father of Chris and John,” “husband of Nancy,” “friend of Ralph,” “student at Asbury,” and the like. All cultures use both types of sets, but one tends to dominate.³⁶⁵ In a culture where intrinsic category formation is more prevalent, the category of “Christian” will tend to be defined in ways that clearly demarcate who is a Christian and who is not. So, for instance, we may define a Christian in terms of particular beliefs (creedal orthodoxy) or particular practices. For example, “a person who believes in the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, the deity of Christ, and doesn’t cuss, smoke, or drink: *that* person is a Christian” (and others who do not share those beliefs and practices are *not*). In a relational-set dominant culture, however, the

³⁶⁵Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 34-36.

category of “Christian” will be determined based on who the person is primarily relating with. Are they following Jesus? Do they worship and serve Him? In this view, Hiebert notes that we are able to appreciate that at least two stages are involved in transformation. The first stage is that of rejecting our old gods, turning around, and choosing to follow Jesus. The second stage is our moving closer to Jesus throughout a lifetime of serving, learning, and worshipping.³⁶⁶ Hiebert notes that people who think in terms of intrinsic-set categories are often uncomfortable with relational-set category formation because it is more difficult to discern who is a Christian and who is not. This leads to the next topic.

Digital (Well-formed) Sets versus Ratio (Fuzzy) Sets

Digital sets refer to category formation based on “clearly delineated... sets with a finite number of categories in a domain.” There is absolute clarity concerning who belongs to a particular set or category and who does not. I am either male or female. I am either 50 years old and under or above 50. I am either Caucasian or some other clearly delineated ethnicity. There is no in-between. Ratio sets (also described as “analogical”), on the other hand, are much less clear. These “fuzzy” sets are quite uncomfortable for persons whose worldview executes category formation using digital sets. The Western musician, for example, accustomed to seven notes and five half notes (no more and no less) finds Indian music to be strange indeed, for not only are there sixty-four steps between the “c” and the “d” on the classical scale, but the musician may subdivide even further if he or she so desires.³⁶⁷ The same discomfort is experienced as digital-set

³⁶⁶Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 308-309.

³⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 33-34.

Christians try to conceive of conversion in fuzzy-set terms. Digital-set Christians prefer to say that a person is either a Christian or they are not. “There is no middle ground!”³⁶⁸ Ratio-set Christians, however, may query how realistic this perspective is regarding a Hindu who is considering a life of following Christ and has begun making steps in that direction, but is not yet ready to forsake everything that being a Hindu implies for him or her. Could we not conceive of them as being part Hindu and part Christian until they become fully Christian? Hiebert admits that this raises difficult theological questions, such as whether or not a person can serve Hindu gods and Christ at the same time. But he also wonders if it might be “that what appears fuzzy to us, because we cannot see into the heart, is clear to God.”³⁶⁹

Biblical View of Transformation

Hiebert proposes that the biblical view of transformation is better understood in terms of relational sets than intrinsic sets because relational sets more accurately portray the Hebraic thought underlying much of the Bible. “The emphasis is not on what things are in themselves but on what things are in relationship to other things and to history.”³⁷⁰ In U.S. America our tendency is to think in terms of intrinsic sets, with a consequent stress on right beliefs and right practices. Hiebert does not suggest that right beliefs and right practices are unimportant, but he does point out that the Protestant clarion call of “salvation by faith, not by works” is quite inconsistent with an intrinsic-set insistence on

³⁶⁸I have sometimes heard Revelation 3:14-16 used to substantiate this perspective: “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation. I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth!’” (ESV).

³⁶⁹Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 309.

³⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 310.

what *we* believe and what *we* do, as opposed to the biblical understanding that transformation is “first and foremost the work of God.”³⁷¹ Hiebert also contends that biblical worldview transformation is better served through a fuzzy-set perspective than a digital-set perspective, for this allows us to think more in terms of conversion as a process (as discussed above). Combining the two (the relational-set emphasis with the fuzzy-set emphasis), Hiebert writes that “Conversion then is a point – a turning around. This turning may involve a minimal amount of information regarding Christ, but it does involve a change in relationship to him – a commitment to follow him, however little we know of him, to learn more and to obey him as we understand his voice. But conversion is also a process – a series of decisions that grow out of this initial turning.”³⁷² This view of conversion highlights the need for evangelism and discipleship to be closely linked, and it also reminds us that neither evangelism nor discipleship should be divorced from the church.³⁷³

Implications for Evangelism

Hiebert feels that his proposal carries important implications for evangelism. If we view transformation (conversion) from the perspective of both relational and fuzzy sets, we will see that it means “to turn away (*shub*) from idols and to make Christ the central relationship in our lives.”³⁷⁴ From our perspective the category of “Christian” may be fuzzy because we cannot see the heart. From God’s perspective, however, the category

³⁷¹Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 310.

³⁷²*Ibid.*, 311.

³⁷³*Ibid.*, 312.

³⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 282.

is quite clear (digital), because God does see the heart. The most important test, therefore, is not what a person believes or does, but rather whom they follow as Lord.³⁷⁵ Some new Christians may have scant knowledge of Jesus and His ways, and therefore not really know what they *should* believe; much less what they *do* believe, but they are seeking Him with integrity and passion. Some people who have been following Christ for much longer may have more knowledge concerning what they believe, but they still “live mostly for themselves.” The role of evangelism, therefore, “is not to determine who is in and who is out, but to encourage everyone, nonbeliever and believer alike, to become a totally committed follower of Christ and to grow in relationship with him.”³⁷⁶

Eight Important Themes

Based on the exploration of Barth, Moltmann, Oden, Kelsey, Anderson, and Hiebert, the following eight themes are particularly significant for the investigation of the evangelistic implications of a strong focus upon the biblical theme of life: 1) our experience of life must remain tied to our relationship with and commitment to God who is the source and giver of life; 2) life as God intends is relational and communal; 3) God intends that the life which God gives through Jesus and the Spirit will impact all spheres and dimensions of life (such as personal, familial, communal, relational, social, economic, political, and cultural); 4) God desires holistic flourishing for us; 5) the life of holistic flourishing that God intends will include a biblically appropriate understanding and experience of joy, delight, or happiness; 6) life is God’s ultimate goal for God’s creation and God’s creatures; 7) the balance or tension between life-now and life-then;

³⁷⁵Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 292.

³⁷⁶Ibid.

and 8) life as God intends cannot be divorced from God's created material world. We turn now to a brief treatment of each theme.

Our Experience of Life Must be linked to our Relationship with and Commitment to God

This is a major strength of Barth's contributions to a theological understanding of life, and as stated earlier, though this may seem to be a simple theological point, it is yet a vital one. It helps us remember that though we want to help people understand and embrace the fullness of life that Jesus offers them, in the final analysis we are not inviting them to a "what" (life) but to a "who" (Jesus). The link between our experience of life and our relationship with and commitment to God was also unambiguously seen in the biblical studies material in Chapter Two. Related to the Old Testament, for example, reference was made to the way in which both Otto Baab and Edmund Jacob observe that human beings are "contingent" upon God, so that outside their relationship with God they are not fully human. Similarly, in the treatment of Johannine theology, we discovered John's robust stress on the call to believe, know, abide with, and obey Jesus. It would be impossible for John to conceive of a person experiencing life as God intends outside of or separate from a relationship with Jesus.

Given the U.S. American context of this project, it would serve us well to briefly address the U.S. American tendency to view God as something or someone other than the Creator and Sovereign to whom we would appropriately give our first (and utmost) loyalty, commitment, and love. Several scholars point out that there is a sharp tendency among U.S. Americans (Christians and non-Christians alike) to allow their passion for the ideals of freedom, capitalism, etc., to blind them to the biblical call to worship God

and God alone. Pablo Richard, for example, suggests that the biblical mandate to avoid idolatry is what is needed in evangelization today, for modern capitalism has in effect become a religious system that has replaced God. In this context, persons must be called to a fresh commitment to God as the only One whom we worship and serve, with a corollary devotion to fighting against all other idolatries that call for our allegiance and divert us from being true Christ-followers.³⁷⁷ Leslie Newbigin shares similar sentiments in *Sign of the Kingdom*. He observes that the question which each person must address is: “am I living in total faithfulness, trust and loving obedience to him who is the sovereign?”³⁷⁸ Douglas Harink contributes to this discussion too, based in large part on the influence of Stanley Hauerwas. He proposes that Hauerwas rightly interprets the primary dilemma in U.S. American churches to be divided loyalties. Whether a church is theologically liberal or conservative seems not to matter. The majority of churches (and presumably, therefore, the Christians who attend those churches) are “divided between allegiance to American liberal democracy and society on the one hand and to the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ on the other.”³⁷⁹ “Idolatry” or “divided loyalties” will resurface as subsequent themes are dealt with. For the moment the essential point is that evangelistic theory and practice in the USA must pay attention to the strong tendency for U.S. Americans to compartmentalize any “religious” or “spiritual” experience as part of their religious or spiritual life (as opposed to their life as a whole), to the extent that it has little impact in other arenas. In this manner, therefore, though in church they may

³⁷⁷Pablo Richard, “Biblical Theology of Confrontation with Idols,” in *The Idols of Death and the God of Life: A Theology*, trans. Barbara E. Campbell and Bonnie Shepard (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), 3-25.

³⁷⁸Leslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 35.

³⁷⁹Douglas Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003), 84.

worship God and God alone (or at least think they are doing so), in other dimensions of their lives God is not allowed place or influence. How, therefore, can we portray (and invite persons to) an experience of full life in Jesus that appropriately calls them to center that experience in their commitment to and relationship with God?

Life as God intends is Relational and Communal

There are two dimensions of this theme that are somewhat distinct yet much interwoven. One has to do with God's intent that human beings relate with one another in their experience of the life for which God created them, now made possible through Jesus. The other has to do with God's intent that Christ-followers form a new "people" or "community" or "society" that would in turn be the primary agent of God's work in the world.

We are to Relate with one Another in the Life God Intends

One of the early claims in this dissertation is that full life in Christ cannot be experienced, expressed, or shared outside the scope of relationships. This claim receives clear support from Barth, Moltmann, Kelsey, Anderson, and Hiebert, all of whom strongly emphasize the relational nature of God, human beings, and the community of those who follow Jesus. Moreover, it was supported in the Johannine section of Chapter Two, based in particular upon the shepherding imagery in John 10, the "love one another" command in John 13, the "that they may all be one" phrase in Jesus' prayer in John 17, and Raymond Brown's interpretation of the "king" language found throughout John (if Jesus is the King, then we are all citizens of the same kingdom). Brief mention

was also made of John Wesley's view of Christianity as being social in nature. Howard Snyder's view as influenced by Wesley makes a good starting place for us to now address this issue more fully. Snyder recommends that Wesley's emphasis upon the social nature of Christianity was based on his theological recognition that human beings are created in the image of God, and that one aspect of God's image is the relational ("social" for Wesley) interplay within the persons of the Trinity. It is part of God's very nature to be relational, and it is thus part of our very nature too. "We don't find our true identity as isolated 'individuals' any more than Jesus found his true identity separate from the Father and the Spirit. To be God-imagined is to be social, communal. . . . Sociality and community form the nature of personhood – first in God, and hence in humankind."³⁸⁰ The point to emphasize here is that our relational nature is not simply based on who God created *us* to be, but also on who *God* is.

Miguel A. de la Torre is another theologian who argues against our efforts to privatize the experience of full life in Christ. As with Hauerwas and Harink, he points out the U. S. American tendency to stress individualism and safeguard "the private." However much we may want to apply those sentiments to our experience of full life in Jesus, however, he contends that our relationship with Jesus, though personal and intimate, is never private. He further contends, in fact, that "confining Jesus to my personal life becomes the ultimate act of religious selfishness."³⁸¹ Charles Colson and Harold Fickett also spotlight what they refer to as "the myth of personal autonomy" and

³⁸⁰Howard A. Snyder, *Yes in Christ: Wesleyan Reflections on Gospel, Mission, and Culture*, Tyndale Studies in Wesleyan History and Theology 2, ed. Howard A. Snyder (Toronto: Clements Academic, 2011), 20.

³⁸¹Miguel A. de la Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 136-137.

suggest that to think of our lives as belonging to us is pure folly. “Believing we are independent is simply a fiction – an increasingly unhelpful one. We all live in a vast network of friends, family, coworkers, and the incredibly complex associations that make up a culture. . . . The myth of personal autonomy . . . substitutes an illusion of self-sufficiency for the sustaining reality of nurturing relationships within a community The *good life* is found only in loving relationships and community.”³⁸² Art McPhee agrees with this position. Building on D. T. Niles’ description of evangelism’s purpose as the recovery of wholeness, McPhee maintains that in addition to leading persons back to God, the ministry of evangelism should also lead them to God’s people, “for community is a vital part of wholeness too.”³⁸³ As with other themes we have encountered, the key here seems to be learning how to embrace and communicate the dynamic tension involved in the need and invitation to personally respond to and relate with Jesus along with the need and invitation to do so within an already existing social network, as well as within a new social network of fellow Christ-followers.³⁸⁴

³⁸²Charles Colson and Harold Fickett, *The Good Life* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2005), 112-120; emphasis added.

³⁸³Arthur G. McPhee, *Friendship Evangelism: The Caring Way to Share Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 111.

³⁸⁴Early in Chapter One reference was made to Claude Fischer’s proposal that voluntarism is the predominant cultural reality in the USA. His conception of voluntarism is germane at this point. He agrees with other scholars that individualism is an extremely powerful characteristic of U.S. American culture, but he suggests that we should nuance our understanding regarding individualism to include reference to the participation in groups which is also a prevalent facet of the U.S. American scene. Voluntarism, therefore, consists of two primary elements. The first is “believing and behaving *as if* each person is a sovereign individual,” and the second is “believing and behaving *as if* individuals succeed through fellowship . . . in sustaining, voluntary communities” (Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America*, 10). If Fischer is correct, there is a built-in understanding among U.S. Americans concerning how to value both individualism and participation in groups, and this is germane to the current discussion. A point to be aware of, however, is that in voluntarism, the participation in groups is for the purpose of succeeding as individuals, so though the notion of social and relational participation is present among U.S. American believers and non-believers alike, this notion may be unconsciously driven by self-serving interests.

As we have witnessed throughout this project, we need a both/and attitude rather than an either/or attitude. Gordon Fee, for example, argues against the strongly-held theory among some scholars that a strong emphasis on the individual originated with the Renaissance and the Reformation. Fee advocates instead that the Old Testament clearly depicts the magnitude of the individual's standing before God, as we learned from Eichrodt and others in the Old Testament section of Chapter Two. In the context of Fee's work (*Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*) this means that individuals are indeed invited to respond to Jesus in a personal way. "Although the goal of salvation in Christ is a people for God's name, people enter this community *one at a time*."³⁸⁵ At the same time, however, though people enter the community one at a time, Fee is clear to state that the goal of salvation is "a *people* for God's name." Christian living, therefore, "is not primarily an individualistic one-on-one-with-God brand of personal holiness; rather it has to do with living the life of the Spirit in Christian community and in the world."³⁸⁶ Timothy Keller shares this point of view. He writes that salvation is both individual and communal. God's grace is offered to us, and we must respond to that grace personally in order to appropriate it into our lives and make it "more and more central to everything we see, think and feel." Having responded personally, however, we must then involve ourselves in relationships with other Christ-followers, because "there is no way you will be able to grow spiritually apart from a deep involvement in a community of other believers."³⁸⁷ A great many other authors could be cited who emphasize this point, but for

³⁸⁵Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 74-75; emphasis added.

³⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 99.

³⁸⁷Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 113-127.

the sake of brevity they will not be mentioned. The crux of the matter is this: in our evangelistic theory and practice we must develop ways to communicate the role, need, responsibility, and privilege for persons to follow Jesus within the context of supportive and accountable relationships with other Christ-followers. We cannot allow this to fall solely under the purview of the ministry of discipleship, for when we fail to communicate the relational and communal nature of Christ-following on the front end in our ministries of evangelism, too many new Christ-followers individualize their Christian living, and our discipleship ministries are forced to fight an uphill battle to convince them that their Christian living is intended to be relational and communal. This does a disservice to all parties.

God's New People: becoming God's New Society or Community in the World

The first dimension of this theme has to do with the fact that the individual Christ-follower cannot experience the full life that Jesus intends for him or her outside of relational community. This second dimension has to do with the fact that there is more at stake here than the impact that Christ-following has in my own experience of full life in Jesus. What is also at stake is that the primary agent God wants to use to bring full life to others is the new community that is formed by those who follow Jesus. This has been a passionate theme of many scholars in recent decades, several of whom build on John Yoder's work. The aforementioned Douglas Harink is one such person. Harink argues that not only is the church to be a new socio-political body serving as God's agent in the world, but that this is in fact the key to understanding the Pauline perspective on

justification.³⁸⁸ Justification relates primarily to the making of one “people” out of the Jews and Gentiles through Jesus’ faithfulness, so that “the new creation is a social rather than an individual reality – the gospel is the transformation of social and political existence.”³⁸⁹ Unlike most interpretations of justification as having to do with the individual person being justified through their faith in Jesus, Harink suggests that Pauline justification by faith refers to the *faithfulness of Jesus* (as distinct from *our faith in Jesus*) that is bringing about the justification of the nations.³⁹⁰

In a similar vein, Bryan Stone, who is also deeply influenced by Yoder, urges an understanding of evangelism that grows out of the social, public, embodied witness of the people of God. He suggests that the influence of Constantinian assumptions and Enlightenment philosophy has caused evangelism to be unduly conceived of in terms of winning individual persons to a personal relationship with Christ. In this evangelism, both the individual’s relationship with Christ and the practice of evangelism are divorced from the church, with a primary focus on individual piety rather than the public witness of the ecclesia. In contrast, Stone maintains that the practice of evangelism should be

³⁸⁸Douglas Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals*, 60.

³⁸⁹Ibid.

³⁹⁰Ibid., 60. Harink’s views are strongly influenced by Richard Hays’ 1983 book, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, in which Hays argues that the Greek phrase *pistis Christou*, which is normally translated as “faith in Jesus Christ,” should more appropriately be translated as “the faith of Christ” (see 26-30 and 40-45 of *Paul among the Postliberals*). James Dunn, however, disputes this claim. He notes that “the beguiling attractiveness of the ‘faith of Christ’ reading depends too much either on an atomistic study of the key texts in isolation from their contexts or on the assumptions of an underlying story of Christ’s faith for which the chief evidence is the disputed texts themselves” (James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 379-385). Dunn’s view regarding this specific issue of how to translate *pistis Christou* is preferred. The point that Yoder, Harink, and others make concerning God’s intent to create a new people is still valid, based on the biblical witness as a whole, but it should not be tied to Pauline justification by faith in such a way that it undermines the call for individuals to believe in Jesus (we may call to mind here the strong emphasis in John’s gospel on individual persons being invited to believe in, know, obey, and abide in Jesus).

based upon an understanding of the church's "politic" (a new alternative public) and the church's "economics" (a transformed oikos).³⁹¹ Furthermore, Stone suggests that participation in this social and public life together as God's people is what constitutes the essence of salvation. "These new patterns of kinship and social relation are not merely an *implication* of one's prior acceptance of salvation. Rather, they are precisely that which is offered *as* salvation."³⁹² Thus, Stone argues against the type of evangelism that seeks first to convince persons to accept a personal relationship with Christ and then *subsequently* encourages them to participate in the social and public embodiment of Christ's peaceable reign. He maintains that participation in the social and public embodiment of Christ's peaceable reign through God's people (the church) is part and parcel *of* conversion, not subsequent thereto.³⁹³

Jim Wallis also calls for a social and communal understanding of life in Christ and advocates that there is a vital connection between this understanding and our influence in the world. The early Christ-followers lived in community with one another and patterned their lives after Jesus' teachings, including those in the Sermon on the Mount.³⁹⁴ The result was that "they became well known as a caring, sharing, and open community that was especially sensitive to the poor and the outcast."³⁹⁵ Wallis indicates that this is more than a simple awareness on the part of the world that individual

³⁹¹Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 177-204.

³⁹²*Ibid.*, 78.

³⁹³*Ibid.*, 10-17 (We hear strong echoes here of Ray Anderson's theory that Christian community provides the fundamental liturgical paradigm for authentic personhood).

³⁹⁴Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion: Why Faith is Always Personal but never Private*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 8-17.

³⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

Christians were well known for these things. Instead, “a new human society” had arisen, in which “love was given daily expression.” For Wallis, therefore, it is not simply that this new human society now shares the gospel. It is rather that “the existence of the church itself, that inclusive community that knows no human boundaries, becomes *a part of the good news.*”³⁹⁶ Dallas Willard agrees with this emphasis on the new society that is called out and formed by God, and he even submits that this was part of God’s *pre-creation* plan, which means that it was not simply a response to the need for restoration and redemption that came with the Fall, but rather was included in God’s plan for creation from the very beginning. In part, Willard roots this pre-creation suggestion in his understanding of God’s nature as having the “need” for “totally competent love,” which can only be fulfilled through God being known by God’s creation, and God can only be known through the redeemed community.³⁹⁷ From a different perspective, this pre-creation plan was envisioned by God for our sakes, because “the welfare of every conscious being in existence depends upon their possession of this knowledge of God.”³⁹⁸

As with the previous sub-theme, other examples could be proffered of theologians who agree with the general idea that at least one of God’s primary interests in the world is to create a new “people,” “community,” “body-politic,” or “society” from those who choose to follow Christ, and that this new body is the foremost instrument God wants to use to help all of God’s creation know God and be known by God, and in so doing experience the kind of life that God intended from the beginning. They may not agree on the details, but they agree on this essential point. The related issue that pertains to this

³⁹⁶Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, 117; emphasis added. See also 15-19 and 111-137.

³⁹⁷Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 385-386.

³⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 386,

project is at least two-fold: 1) how accurate is the general idea concerning a “body-politic,” and 2) should it (and if so, how should it) be included in evangelistic theory and practice? Is it that the Christian community is where people best find their way toward choosing to follow Jesus? Is it that through participation in the Christian community they have actually already made that choice? Is it something that combines the two? I believe that a combination of the two is the most helpful way to conceive of this issue, but with a stronger emphasis on the notion that it is in the Christian community where people often find their way toward choosing to follow Jesus. To maintain a heavier emphasis on the idea that through participation in the Christian community a person has therefore chosen to follow Jesus is dangerous in least two ways. First, it blurs the clear distinction between following the person of Jesus and being a part of the worldwide fellowship of those who are also following Him. Second, it potentially diminishes the crucial importance of the need each individual has to make a personal decision to follow Him. This decision is to be made within the context of relationships with other people, so that it is not privatized. Even though not a privatized decision, however, it must yet be a personal one.

God intends that Full Life in Jesus will Impact All Spheres or Dimensions of Life

This assertion is another one which has strong support among a large number of theologians. We recall that Moltmann highlights this theme along two lines. First he notes that life in the Spirit is not to be limited to the new community of the exodus, but rather is to be shared with persons outside that community. Secondly, he refers to the three world processes which must be impacted by the new community of the exodus: economic, political, and cultural. Hiebert’s approach is very different from Moltmann’s,

but he also argues for comprehensive impact. He proposes that Christ-centered transformation must involve all three primary dimensions of culture (cognitive, affective, and evaluative) and that the transformation should work deeply enough to change our underlying worldview. Moltmann and Hiebert are certainly not the lone proponents of the all-dimensions impact that is envisioned when we follow Jesus. We have already observed that a large number of scholars argue against the privatization and individualization of Christian experience. An evident corollary would seem to easily follow: if Christian experience is not to be privatized and individualized, then it certainly must be intended to impact all spheres of life. I believe, however, that there is yet a need to address this as a separate theme. During my 25 years of pastoral ministry, I have observed that there are some Christians in the USA who may acknowledge the need to be in relationship with other Christians as they journey through life, but their primary objective in these relationships is to help *them* grow in *their* relationship with Jesus. In other words, they recognize that they should not privatize their Christ-following experience, but their “sharing” or “flowering” of that experience still primarily impacts them and their small circle of friends. It has little or no influence in the larger world around them. Rather than allowing God’s values to change their perspectives on politics, economics, justice, peace, creation care, and much more, they “baptize” their already-existent beliefs concerning those issues in the name of Christianity. Therefore, though much in their lives may have changed as a result of following Christ, few if any of those changes are felt outside their relational network.

In his development of an ecclesiology for integral mission, Rene Padilla points out that evangelical Christians stress the title “Savior” when referring to Jesus, though the

title “Lord” (*kyrios* in Greek) is used far more often in the New Testament. He notes that not only is *kyrios* the word used to translate the Hebrew YHWH (Yahweh), it is also the title used to refer to the Roman emperor in the first century. For the early Christians to call Jesus *Kyrios*, therefore, suggests “recognition of his sovereignty over the whole of human life and over the whole creation,” and this further suggests that “the integral church is one which recognizes that all spheres of life are ‘mission fields’ and looks for ways of asserting the sovereignty of Jesus is all of them.” In this context, then, Padilla proposes that “the call of the gospel is a call to a total transformation that reflects God’s purpose to redeem human life in *all its dimensions*.”³⁹⁹ Based on a similar emphasis upon God’s sovereignty, Leslie Newbigin proposes that Christ-followers are called to be a “sign, instrument, and foretaste” of God’s sovereignty in all of life.⁴⁰⁰ He encourages us to avoid the two primary temptations that Christ-followers are faced with: a) to blend church and culture together as happened in Western Europe for a millennium; or b) to relegate their Christian experience to a private sector that has no bearing on “the ideology that rules the public life of nations.”⁴⁰¹ A crucial part of our experience of full life in Jesus is to be the “signs and agents of God’s justice in *all human affairs*. An evangelism that invites men and women to accept the name of Christ but fails to call them to this real encounter must be rejected as false.”⁴⁰² We see in these thoughts from Padilla and

³⁹⁹C. Rene Padilla, “Introduction: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission,” 19-49 of *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission*, ed. Tetsunao Yamamori and C. Rene Padilla (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, 2004), 21-30; emphasis added.

⁴⁰⁰Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 124.

⁴⁰¹*Ibid.*, 124-125.

⁴⁰²*Ibid.*, 133; emphasis added.

Newbegin how closely linked this theme is with the first theme that was considered (that our experience of life must remain tied to our relationship with and commitment to God who is the source and giver of life).

Jim Wallis contributes to this discussion too. The reader may recall that one of Claus Westermann's points regarding his distinction between deliverance and blessing is that God works *within* history and the processes of history. In a comparable manner, Wallis accentuates the need to ground our understanding of Christian conversion in history.⁴⁰³ He argues that far too few Christians fathom the connection between their Christ-following and important real-life and real-time issues such as poverty, war, peace, creation care, abortion, capital punishment, and pandemics. With a theological stress on the radical new age that has been initiated in Jesus, he notes that we must comprehend that all dimensions of our personal and public lives are subject to the "sweeping change" that Jesus brings.⁴⁰⁴ Conversion, therefore, "means to surrender ourselves to God in *every sphere of human existence*: the personal and social, the spiritual and economic, the psychological and political."⁴⁰⁵ Nothing is to remain outside God's purview.

One of the impressive and intriguing features of John Wesley's life and theology is how interested he was in a wide range of issues and topics. In addition to his focus on embodying Christ's love through ministries in prisons, factories, coal mines, etc., he also was involved in a great number of what some would call "secular" pursuits. Snyder refers to this as the "comprehensiveness" of "the Wesleyan lens." He writes that "in his day,

⁴⁰³Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, x-13.

⁴⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 8; emphasis added.

very little escaped John Wesley's notice – from the 'improvement' of the land in the Scottish Highlands, to the working conditions of the coal miners, to the workings of the Spirit in a child's life, to new discoveries about the circulation of the blood. And he reflected biblically and theologically on everything."⁴⁰⁶ It is Wesley's biblical and theological reflection on everything that should be highlighted for the current discussion. If our experience of full life in Jesus is going to truly impact and involve all spheres or dimensions of our lives, both personally and publically, then we must avoid the temptation to limit our biblical and theological reflection only to the "sacred" dimensions of our lives. Every dimension of our lives merits such reflection (plus action and application), because Jesus' intention is to transform and/or impact every dimension of people's individual lives as well as every dimension of their corporate, public, cultural, political, economic lives.⁴⁰⁷ The dilemma with which to struggle, therefore, is how evangelistic theory and practice can find a way to help avoid situations in which persons make an initial decision to follow Christ based on a lack of understanding of, appreciation for, and commitment to, the all-dimensions impact that following Jesus is intended to have in our lives.

⁴⁰⁶Howard Snyder, *Yes in Christ*, 16.

⁴⁰⁷This issue is addressed indirectly by Albert Outler in his material on "Plundering the Egyptians." Outler suggests that just as the Hebrew people plundered the Egyptians before leaving their land, so too Christians must "plunder" (make use of) insights from the cultural treasures of their time to help contextualize the gospel. This is based on writings by Origen, and is essential for evangelical theologians. Outler believes that Wesley practiced theology this way, but he was careful in how he did it. He strongly believed in learning from a wide range of fields and encouraged his lay preachers to do the same. However, this was based upon a foundation of very deep Bible knowledge, which is essential for discerning what is appropriate to "plunder" and what is not. Our deep Bible knowledge reminds us to offer the good news of salvation that comes only through Christ, while our deep cultural knowledge helps us offer this good news in a way that people can understand and embrace. Albert C. Outler, *Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996), 75-87. I am trying to make an even stronger point, however, than contextualization of the gospel message in cultural forms that people can understand and embrace. I am suggesting that the culture *itself* is to be transformed (I believe Outler agrees with this point, but that he did not state it quite so directly, or at least not in this particular chapter).

God Desires Holistic Flourishing for Us

This emphasis may already be clear to the reader based on what has been shared to this point, but it is worth a confirmation (or reconfirmation) of its significance. I submit that God desires holistic flourishing for all of God's creation, including human beings. God's intent is that we experience life that is full and vital, not life that is half-empty and filled with constant struggles. As has been said before, this does not mean that life will be free of suffering or problems, but the general experience of life in Jesus, even in the midst of suffering and problems, is intended to be that of holistic flourishing. God's creation was (and is) *good*, and the life God intends for us in Jesus is good too. To reinforce this affirmation a bit more we will take a brief sojourn into Germain Grisez' conception of "integral communal fulfillment." A Catholic theologian, Grisez argues against Thomas Aquinas' assertion that the "true ultimate end" of human beings is found only in God, as attained by the beatific vision. He suggests, rather, that the true ultimate end of human beings (toward which we should direct our lives) is "integral communal fulfillment in God's kingdom, which will be a marvelous communion of divine Persons, human persons, and other created persons." This integral communal fulfillment will include the beatific vision, but it will also include "every human member of the kingdom" being "*richly fulfilled...in respect to all the fundamental humanly goods.*"⁴⁰⁸

Especially germane to the present discussion is Grisez' insistence that "our ultimate end must include our own *well-being and flourishing*," and his subsequent claim

⁴⁰⁸German Grisez. "The True Ultimate End of Human Beings: The Kingdom, Not God Alone," *Theological Studies* 69 (2008), 58-59; emphasis added.

that this concept of well-being must include “the fundamental goods of human beings.”⁴⁰⁹ These “goods” include life, health, bodily integrity, skillful work, play, and harmony (with God, others, and self).⁴¹⁰ Grisez echoes the relational, sharing nature of God’s intentions, so that our well-being is directly linked to our efforts toward the well-being of others. He writes that “persons and groups making choices can and should always play their part in the vast community of persons by making their contributions to integral communal well-being and flourishing, and they always can and should avoid intentionally impeding or detracting from integral communal fulfillment.”⁴¹¹ Of special import is his assumption that a life of well-being and flourishing is not an idealized vision that is beyond us. To the contrary, through the gifts of divine revelation, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, God “enables those who believe in Jesus to cooperate with Him by discerning and carrying out God’s plan for their lives.”⁴¹² In accord with Grisez, therefore, a full and vital life of holistic flourishing is not only God’s intention for us; through Jesus it is God’s possibility for us.

Life as God intends includes a Biblically Appropriate Experience of
Joy, Delight, or Happiness

We have already seen that this was a strong emphasis of Barth’s view concerning the life God intends for us, and that our joy, delight, or happiness is strongly rooted in our gratitude to God for the gift of life. Biblically, there is no questioning the strong link

⁴⁰⁹German Grisez, “The True Ultimate End of Human Beings,” 54.

⁴¹⁰Ibid.

⁴¹¹Ibid., 57.

⁴¹²Ibid., 57-58.

between joy and the lives we live in Jesus. In the New Testament this begins even before Jesus' birth, as seen in the angel's proclamation to the shepherds ("Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people"), and it continues throughout the New Testament.⁴¹³ In John 15 Jesus says "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."⁴¹⁴ In Romans 14 Paul writes that "the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."⁴¹⁵ In Galatians 5:22 we learn that joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and in 1 Peter we read Peter's confirmation to the Christians of the diaspora that "though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory."⁴¹⁶ The Old Testament also refers often to joy. The Psalmist declares to the Lord that "you make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy."⁴¹⁷ Isaiah prophesies that "the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."⁴¹⁸ Importantly, this is not a joy that we only experience during the good times in our lives. Barth and others affirm that the fact that Jesus suffered a painful death on the cross, along with other Biblical teaching, teaches us that joy is dependent more on our relationship with and trust in God than on our circumstances at any particular time. Thus it is that

⁴¹³Luke 2:10, ESV.

⁴¹⁴John 15:11, ESV.

⁴¹⁵Romans 14:17, ESV.

⁴¹⁶1 Peter 1:8, ESV.

⁴¹⁷Psalm 16:11, ESV.

⁴¹⁸Isaiah 51:11, ESV.

Habakkuk can say: “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.”⁴¹⁹

Joy, happiness, and delight are portrayed in the Bible as expected elements of life when lived with and in God. This was a deep-seated belief of John Wesley too. Some people find it hard to discern this Wesleyan emphasis in the midst of his talk about duty and discipline, but Albert Outler suggests that the Christian disciplines which Wesley advocated had as their goal the blessedness and happiness of the Christ-follower. He proposes that Wesley focused on Christian duty and discipline in order to help persons avoid seeking happiness in places where it could not be found. It is only in and with God that we can be truly blessed and happy, so when we discipline ourselves to seek God and God’s ways instead of placing our hope for happiness on other things, we find that we move much closer to that blessed state. Outler writes: “Take a closer look at Wesley and a surprising fact emerges. This man was a *eudaemonist*, convinced and consistent all his life. All his emphases on duty and discipline are auxiliary to his main concern for human *happiness* (blessedness, etc.). He believed that all our truly human aspirations are oriented toward *happiness*. The human tragedy, therefore, is that persons seek happiness (as they *must*) but in false values that leave them unhappy, in earthly quests that leave them frustrated if unattained or unsatisfied even when attained.”⁴²⁰ Happiness for Wesley, therefore, was an integral dimension of God’s intentions for all people.

⁴¹⁹Habakkuk 3:17-18, ESV.

⁴²⁰Albert Outler, *Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 128.

John Schneider's work is of particular assistance in an examination of the role of joy, delight, and happiness in Christian living. Working from a strong appreciation of the narrative school of biblical interpretation, he suggests that we must have a fuller comprehension of the "cosmic vision of delight" that is portrayed in the book of Genesis. This cosmic vision of delight means not only that to experience joy, delight, and happiness in our Christian lives is *good*, but even more importantly, that it is *paradigmatic*. It describes for us what God's intention is for all people, and "it is therefore the frame of reference for the sort of vision that Christians ought to have for humanity in the here and now."⁴²¹ For Schneider this perspective is strongly confirmed by close observation of Jesus in the gospels. There are two portrayals of Jesus in the gospel narratives. One is a "radical Jesus" who requires a severance of previous relationships and virtual poverty. The other, however, is the "Lord of Delight" who celebrates life so passionately that the religious authorities were offended and shocked. In this portrayal, Jesus "brought the warmth of new life – freedom, camaraderie, peace, good cheer, and a mood of joyous celebration."⁴²² Timothy Keller shares a similar perspective. He likens the experience of salvation to a great experiential feast. We not only believe that Jesus loves us, but "we can come to sense the reality, the beauty, and the power of his love," and we learn that Jesus' love "can delight, galvanize, and console you." Keller refers to this as "festival joy."⁴²³ This topic will be treated again during the analysis of the field research data in Chapter Four, so no conclusions will be stated now,

⁴²¹John R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 41-45.

⁴²²*Ibid.*, 139-141.

⁴²³Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God*, 106-109.

except to say that evangelistic theory and practice must consider how to address the issue of joy, delight, or happiness. It is too prevalent in the biblical material and too important in theological reflection to simply ignore it in evangelism.

Life is God's Ultimate Goal

This theme has already been dealt with in the theoretical framework, where a distinction was made between life as the goal and the kingdom as one of the instruments or means to reach that goal. This topic was also treated in the Johannine section of Chapter Two, where the “so that” references in John’s gospel were highlighted in order to provide additional biblical warrant for seeing life as God’s ultimate goal. Additionally, we have seen earlier in this chapter that both Moltmann and Oden see life as the central outcome that God intends in Jesus. Sufficient evidence has been provided to confirm that life is at the very least a principal and requisite theme and goal, and that it should therefore be reflected in evangelistic theory and practice. Since this case has been adequately made, more time will not be invested in this issue now.

The Balance or Tension between Life-now and Life-then

This is another theme that has been dealt with previously, and two points in particular bear recalling. First is that the reason we experience tension between life-now and life-then is that we are living in the overlap between the present age and the age to come. We cannot (and should not) do away with the tension between these two ages. However, too many Christians mistakenly assume that the tension is between a *fully* powerful-and-present old age and a *partially* powerful-and-present age to come. The new

age (the age to come), however, has come in its fullness. We have *already* received the possibility of new life in Christ in *full* measure. The reason we sometimes do *not yet* experience the full measure of this new life is that we live in the overlap between the old age and the age to come; thus, the complete destruction of the old age has not yet taken place. It is *not* that we live in some *third* age in which the fullness of life is weaker than it will be in the age to come. Rather, it is that the old age continues to exert its influence and power. The second point has to do with the symbiotic relationship between life-now and life-then. In the Johannine section of Chapter Two, we saw D. Moody Smith's claim that "the possession or gift of eternal life in the believer's present existence is integrally related to the assurance of its permanence."⁴²⁴ Our trust that there is yet something even greater awaiting us after our physical death gives us a different lens through which to view our lives now. This in turn helps us experience a fuller life now because we have the faith perspective of the full blessings of the age to come. Barth shares this belief, as was indicated earlier in this chapter.

We should not, therefore, do away with the tension between life-now and life-then, but evangelistic theory and practice should more fully address the life-now side of this tension. This issue has been more than adequately treated throughout this project, but I nevertheless would like to introduce Dallas Willard's thoughts about it, for he has a viewpoint that speaks forcefully to the place this issue has in evangelism. He observes that the versions of the "gospel" that tend to be communicated concerning full life in Jesus are shaped in one of two ways. First is the focus on preparing for what will happen after we die, and the second is to get involved in improving social practices and

⁴²⁴D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, 149.

conditions. Willard agrees that both of these emphases are essential, but he likewise argues that “neither one touches the quick of individual existence or taps the depths of the reality of Christ . . . Does Jesus only enable me to ‘make the cut’ when I die? Or to know what to protest, or how to vote or agitate and organize? It is good to know that when I die all will be well, but *is there any good news for life?* If I had to choose, I would rather have a car that runs than good insurance on one that doesn’t. Can I not have both?”⁴²⁵ I submit that many non-believers in the United States are asking Willard’s question: “Is there any good news for life?” The answer is “Yes, there is very good news for life now,” and evangelistic theory and practice must make this a primary emphasis. As Willard says, “to be the light of life, and to deliver God’s life to women and men *where* they are and *as* they are, is the secret of the enduring relevance of Jesus. Suddenly they are flying right-side up, in a world that makes sense.”⁴²⁶ Offer them life, and offer it *now!*

Life as God intends cannot be Divorced from God’s Created Material World

This theme will be discussed in two parts. The first has to do with the role of creation care, and the second has to do with the materiality of the human experience of full life in Jesus.

⁴²⁵Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 12; emphasis added.

⁴²⁶*Ibid.*, 13; emphasis added.

*The Concept of Full Life and the Entire Creation*⁴²⁷

In *The Source of Life*, Moltmann writes about the “three waves” of the mission of the Holy Spirit. The first wave is the renewal of God’s people. The second is the renewal of all living things. The third is the renewal of the face of the earth. Moltmann reminds us that human beings were created out of the earth (by “earth” he means the land and the global system of atmosphere and biosphere). He argues that the earth should not be seen as distinct from and less sacred than human persons, but rather as a fellow member of God’s comprehensive created order that is being renewed in Jesus.⁴²⁸ The rise of industrialism is what began our erroneous thinking in this regard, and caused us to think of the earth simply as matter, and no longer as holy. He urges us, therefore, to respect the earth’s holiness once more. In the context of Revelation 21, which talks of a new heaven and a new earth, Moltmann proposes that “there is no eternal life without the kingdom of God, and no kingdom of God without the new earth.”⁴²⁹ Howard Snyder echoes Moltmann’s belief that God’s work of renewal is intended to include creation. And he does not see this as a work that is subsequent to God’s plan of salvation or secondary in importance. The healing of creation is part and parcel of God’s overall redemptive plan. “Scripture presents salvation as an immense divine plan for the redemption of all

⁴²⁷I have chosen not to include John Wesley’s thoughts in this section because though he valued God’s creation in many ways, he did not develop a thorough theology of creation care to which we can really point. Howard Snyder suggests this is due to at least two factors: 1) creation care was virtually a non-existent issue during Wesley’s time, and 2) Wesley inherited a Neo-Platonic perspective of seeing the created world in a way that devalued it. In spite of this, however, Snyder contends that, as Wesley grew older, he began to think along a “trajectory” toward creation care. For more on this, see Howard A. Snyder, *Yes in Christ*, 91-98.

⁴²⁸Jurgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 22-25.

⁴²⁹*Ibid.*, 25.

creation, ‘the restoration of all things’ (Acts 3:21). We read in Ephesians 1:10 that God has a plan (*oikonomia*) for the fullness of time to bring everything in heaven and earth together in reconciliation under the headship of Jesus Christ – *all things*, things in heaven and things on earth; things visible and invisible. The plan of redemption is as broad as the scope of creation and the depth of sin.”⁴³⁰

Matthew Sleeth also encourages a strong connection between creation care and Christian living.⁴³¹ He has done extensive work in surveying biblical references to parts of God’s creation, such as trees, branches, bushes, and vines. Based on this work, he demonstrates that the Bible is filled with references to God’s material creation, and notes that many of these references are intentionally linked with God’s purposes in the world. Consider trees, for example. A tree plays an important role in the early stages of the Bible (Genesis 3), and also in the last chapter of the Bible (Revelation 22, the tree of life). Moreover, the very centerpiece of Christian theology, the crucifixion, takes place on a tree. Additionally, we are reminded that trees are our source of oxygen, so that without them we literally would be unable to live.⁴³² Also important to Sleeth’s theology is the translation of the Hebrew in Genesis 2:15, which he suggests should read that we are to “protect and serve” the earth.⁴³³ It is the call to protect and serve the earth that helps him envision his life with Christ as including creation care. As with Moltmann, he believes

⁴³⁰Howard A. Snyder, “Salvation Means Creation Healed: Creation, Cross, Kingdom, and Mission,” *Asbury Journal* 62:1 (Spr 2007), 11.

⁴³¹Matthew Sleeth, “The Power of a Green God,” I17-I24 in *The Green Bible, NRSV* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2008), 117-124.

⁴³²*Ibid.*, 120-121.

⁴³³*Ibid.*, 122. This verse states that God placed “the man” in the garden of Eden “to protect and serve it” (according to Sleeth). For comparison purposes: the English Standard Version translates this phrase as “to work it and keep it,” whereas the King James Version and the American Standard Version translate it as “to dress it and keep it.” The Revised Standard Version says “to till it and keep it.”

that God's intent for restoration includes God's creation, and that we have an active role in that restoration. Therefore, rather than thinking of creation care as ancillary to full life in Jesus, he says that it "is at the very core" of our journey with Jesus.⁴³⁴

There is no question that creation care should be an integral part of our experience of full life in Jesus, but what part should it play in the theory and practice of evangelism? This is the pressing question. Mention was made in Chapter One that though evangelism cannot "deliver" everything that is involved in full life in Christ, it nevertheless should portray a complete picture of that full life in Christ on the front end, so that persons who choose to follow Christ will know what they are being asked to embrace. Following that suggestion, therefore, we would want to find a way to include creation care in at least some versions of the essential gospel message. A potential dilemma at this point, however, revolves around the fear that if we include literally everything that God intends and envisions in the full life God wants to give, we will be shaping a gospel message that is overly complex and burdensome. Is there a way to include creation care in evangelistic theory and practice that does not do this? Most likely there is, but I would like to wait until the concluding chapter before addressing this further, so that we can consider potential insights from the field research.

The Materiality of the Human Experience of Full Life in Jesus

David Kelsey accentuates this theme in the aforementioned material concerning the provisional nature of our lives as lived in the finite quotidian. This reminds us that the life Jesus intends is not a "spiritual experience" disconnected from who we are as "personal living bodies," nor is it detached from the finite and real world in which we

⁴³⁴Matthew Sleeth, "The Power of a Green God," 121.

live. Ray Anderson also addresses this issue in his section on “creatureliness as natural life,” in which he reminds us that our personhood is tied to our physical existence. To further address this topic, we return to John Schneider’s cosmic vision of delight. Schneider proposes that not only is it vital to grasp the paradigmatic value of Genesis’ cosmic vision of delight, but equally important is the understanding that God’s vision of delight is a material one.⁴³⁵ As I pointed out in the theoretical framework, the creation story depicts life that is teeming, fertile, and abundant, and this is a perspective that Schneider shares. Yes, we are spiritual beings, but we are also material beings, rational beings, moral beings, and much more. Our bodies are part and parcel of who we are, and given God’s declaration of God’s physical creation as *very good*, Schneider suggests that rather than moving too quickly to thinking of physical and material pleasure and joy in terms of hedonistic excess, we should first think of them as expressions of “deep godliness and humanness.”⁴³⁶ There are certainly inappropriate excesses that must be avoided, but Schneider feels that we jump too quickly to that type of judgment. This causes us to miss the crucial point that we were created to enjoy our lives in and with God’s created material world. “Human delight is a precious expression of God’s glory, of human dignity, and of the goodness of life in this world. In its proper form it is a sacrament to God’s dominion over chaos and darkness.”⁴³⁷ Just as God delighted in God’s own creation, pronouncing it “good,” so too God delights in our delight.

⁴³⁵John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 43.

⁴³⁶*Ibid.*, 58.

⁴³⁷*Ibid.*, 58-61.

Schneider provides us with a good segue into a topic which warrants discussion due to the U.S. American context of this project and the influence of the prosperity gospel there: How does financial wealth factor in to our experience of full life in Jesus? Schneider contends that the materiality of God's cosmic vision of delight includes the enjoyment of financial wealth.⁴³⁸ Christian teaching through the centuries regarding wealth has tended to be negative, but Schneider argues that a narrative interpretation of Scripture that includes a sharp grasp of the historical and cultural contexts from which most of the anti-wealth biblical passages have arisen will help us see that it is not primarily wealth in and of itself that God opposes, but rather the acquisition of wealth through oppression of others. This is particularly true of the Old Testament prophetic tradition. Schneider claims that we must recognize that the prophets did not speak against wealth per se, but spoke rather against the king and the ruling classes who had achieved wealth at the expense of the people for whose economic welfare they were responsible. The historical and cultural context of the prophetic tradition is nothing like the situation in which most ordinary Western Christians find themselves today.⁴³⁹ Therefore, to apply the prophetic judgment to them that was directed against the kings and ruling classes during the time of the prophets "is perilously unfair."⁴⁴⁰

Far from being evil, therefore, Schneider views material prosperity as an essential dimension of God's cosmic vision of delight. He writes that "it is a fundamental biblical theme that material prosperity (rightly understood) is the condition that God envisions for

⁴³⁸John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 154-160.

⁴³⁹Ibid., 91-98.

⁴⁴⁰Ibid., 97. Let us bear in mind here the references I made in the Theoretical Framework in Chapter One to the role of kings in the Ancient Near East to provide a secure and just environment for the enjoyment of prosperous well-being.

all human beings when he creates the world. It describes the condition that God has in view for human beings in eternity. And it describes the condition that God (circumstances being right) desires for human beings now.”⁴⁴¹ Schneider points to Mercedes-Benz automobiles as an example. These cars are carefully designed and finely crafted, and their creators and builders must certainly reap immense fulfillment and pleasure from them, as do those who buy and drive them. Why should we assume that owning such a vehicle is inappropriate for those who follow Jesus? Schneider contends that other than simple resentment, there is no reason to think of this kind of material pleasure as unhealthy materialism. To the contrary, “why not instead wish that everyone could enjoy life at those levels?” He agrees that there is a temptation to corrupt the God-intended desire for us to enjoy material things, but this does not preclude the possibility of enjoying material things in the right way.⁴⁴²

Schneider’s view is tempered by scholars such as Ron Sider and Justo Gonzalez. Gonzalez suggests that Christian teaching throughout the centuries, though divergent at particular points, has consistently argued that: a) the accumulation of wealth is inappropriate; b) failing to provide financial assistance to someone when one has the ability to do so is sinful; c) we should distinguish between the necessary and the superfluous, keeping only enough wealth to provide our needs and sharing the rest with others; d) private property exists because of our fallen condition (we must recognize God as the ultimate owner); and e) the intended use of wealth is the common good.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴¹John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 3.

⁴⁴²*Ibid.*, 37-39.

⁴⁴³Justo Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1990), 225-229.

Gonzalez' interpretation of pertinent New Testament passages leads him to emphasize economic koinonia as an essential dimension of the Christian community, which includes a total sharing among community members, both spiritual and material. This vision of economic koinonia is not based solely on the "all things in common" passages in the book of Acts. Reference is also made to Paul's stress on the Corinthian offering to benefit the Jerusalem church, in which case "it is the contrast between the need in Jerusalem and the abundance in Corinth that must be overcome by the offering." Moreover, support for this view is found in 1 John 3:17-18, where John writes that if we see a fellow Christian in need and have resources to help, yet choose not to do so, God's love is not in us.⁴⁴⁴

Ron Sider spotlights the role of the poor in the Biblical portrayal, noting that in the Old Testament God often acts on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Furthermore, Jesus invested a lot of time with the marginalized (lepers, despised women, hated tax collectors), "and he warned his followers in the strongest possible words that those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners will experience eternal damnation (Matt 25:31-46)."⁴⁴⁵ In addition to his strong emphasis on the poor and the biblical mandate to care for them, Sider advocates economic fellowship and economic justice. As with Gonzalez, the koinonia of the early church is accentuated. In Sider's view, the Jerusalem church evidenced a "sweeping liability for and availability to each other," so that those persons unable to provide for their own needs would be taken care of by fellow believers. From the example of the early church, we can glean two important insights: "First, God wants all people to have the productive resources to be able to earn a

⁴⁴⁴Justo Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth*, 79-87.

⁴⁴⁵Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* (W Publishing Group, no place given, 1997), 41-47.

decent living and be dignified members of their community” and “Second, God wants the rest of us to provide a generous share of the necessities of life to those who cannot work.”⁴⁴⁶ The “community of the redeemed,” should feature relationships that are redeemed, including personal, social, and economic relationships.

Schneider applauds Sider’s book overall as “a monument to good Christian social ethics,” but he also feels that his argument is weak at two points. First is Sider’s blanket application of the Old Testament prophetic message concerning economic evil *then* to Western Christians *now*. Schneider’s hermeneutical case regarding this issue has already been outlined. The second place of weakness relates to Sider’s claim that Christians with superfluous resources should give to those in need, and that failure to do so “is as important to faith and life as anything.” Schneider contends that if Sider truly believes that economic sharing is essential to our being Christian, he should provide greater clarity regarding the standards or criteria by which we may discern what is necessary and what is superfluous. Instead of clarity, however, his writings leave an ambiguous portrayal.⁴⁴⁷ “Sufficiency” seems to be the image that Sider and others finally recommend as the standard for discerning what is necessary and what is superfluous, and this is based in large part on Proverbs 30:8-9 (give me neither poverty nor riches). Schneider argues, however, that the creation and exodus narratives reveal that the exceeding of “arbitrary limits of ‘sufficiency’ or ‘necessity’” is not the biblical standard for discerning whether a person has spiritual or moral integrity.”⁴⁴⁸ This perspective places far too much stress on

⁴⁴⁶Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 75-87.

⁴⁴⁷John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 92-103.

⁴⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 102-103.

one passage from the book of Proverbs. To the contrary, Schneider writes that “what makes affluence a cosmic good is just that it creates freedom for human beings and, in that light, that it makes possible the proper dominion, dignity, and delight which otherwise would be impossible.”⁴⁴⁹

Grounded in his commitment to affluence as a cosmic good, Schneider proposes that the distinction that merits our attention is not between an appropriate enjoyment of wealth versus an extreme wealth that is thereby inappropriate. The more helpful contrast is “between extreme indulgence on the one hand and true delight on the other.”⁴⁵⁰ To support his view, he cites two allusions in Amos 6:4-7.⁴⁵¹ The first is the reference to King David. David was a man who enjoyed fine wines and good food; he danced and sang and played. David was “an archetype of delight, not evil.” The second allusion is found in Amos’ statement that the nation’s leaders were not “grieved over the ruin of Joseph.” This allusion reveals that the primary dilemma with the behavior of the leaders was not that they were eating and drinking, but that they were doing so in the midst of suffering all around them, and, moreover, they were oblivious to that suffering. “For the prophet, it is a matter of finding one’s true humanity. It is a matter of becoming a mature person with a vision from the Lord and a heart for people, especially the poor and powerless. The rich must be liberated not from riches but from the selfish mind and heart of the serpent.... We must strive toward the light of the exodus vision and recover the spirituality of redemptive power, which turns our delight into love.”⁴⁵² The issue at stake,

⁴⁴⁹John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 103.

⁴⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 104.

⁴⁵¹*Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁵²*Ibid.*, 106.

therefore, was that the leaders had lost touch with brokenness and were focused only upon themselves.

How might one assess these varying perspectives regarding the place of wealth in Christian living, and what implications are at stake for the theory and practice of evangelism? Schneider's depiction of the cosmic vision of delight as an accurate portrayal of God's original intention in creation and God's intention for us now is to be affirmed. This honors the goodness of God's creation and the joy which we experience when we are in right relationship with God and others. It is also true that some measure of abundant provision is included in this cosmic vision. Given the stark differences between the historical, cultural, and economic settings from which the Bible emerged and the historical, cultural, and economic setting of the USA today, it would be extremely difficult to be precise concerning what that "some measure of abundant provision" should be, but there is no question that Scripture reveals multiple portrayals of abundant provision for those who are in right relationship with God. How much money is enough? How much money is too much? Scholars like Gonzalez and Sider help us understand that we cannot aptly address those questions without considering our responsibility to share our wealth with those in economic need. Schneider agrees, but he comes at it from the perspective of "finding our true humanity," whereas Gonzalez and Sider address it from the perspective of the holistic koinonia that the community of the redeemed should embrace. There is value in each perspective. One might say that Schneider's perspective more fully honors an anthropological view (what does it mean to be human as God intends?) whereas the perspective of Gonzalez and Sider more fully honors an ecclesiological view (what does it mean to be the redeemed people of God?).

The root of this issue lies in whether or not we are primarily focused on ourselves or on God and others. If our primary focus is on God, and we with integrity regularly seek God's guidance and wisdom concerning how to serve God and others, the Holy Spirit will direct our financial life. If the primary focus is on self, though, then we will far too easily fall into the trap of selfish accumulation and hoarding, and will have no regard for the economic plight of others. As we remain focused on God and others, it is both possible *and* appropriate to experience "abundant provision," but it is also crucial to remember that God's intention is that everyone experience full life in Jesus, which means that as God provides abundant provision for us, we want to use those resources to be channels of God's abundant provision for others. The use of "abundant provision" as the descriptor of choice avoids the use of "affluence" and the use of "prosperity." "Affluence" may carry a built-in stigma for some persons, and "abundant" corresponds nicely with John 10:10. Concerning "prosperity," it is too closely linked with the prosperity gospel.

There are two primary concerns with respect to the prosperity gospel. The first is that it too easily feeds the always-present human tendency toward selfishness, especially in the predominant U.S. American "version" of the prosperity gospel that emphasizes our "first-class nature" as "the King's Kids."⁴⁵³ The comments concerning self-focus versus God-focus in the previous paragraph speak to this concern. The second concern with the prosperity gospel is a hermeneutical one. The majority of writers and preachers who advocate the prosperity gospel claim 3 John 1:2 as their foundational scriptural warrant. The King James Version is the translation most often used, and it says, "Beloved, I wish

⁴⁵³The reader is reminded of the reference made in Chapter One to Gordon Fee's description of the prosperity gospel.

above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” The proponents of the prosperity gospel take the word “prosper” and make a universal application of that word to all Christians for all times. This is hermeneutically fallacious at two points. First, the Greek word is more accurately translated “go well with you,” and second, this is part of a standard greeting that was used in written salutations in that day and time. Essentially, then, the message was, “Dear Beloved, I hope all is well with you and that you are experiencing good health.” To apply this as a universal affirmation that God wills all God’s children to prosper financially is most inappropriate from a hermeneutical standpoint.⁴⁵⁴

The dilemma in critiquing the prosperity gospel is that it is difficult to distinguish between appropriate provision and inappropriate prosperity. In part the answer comes from Schneider’s claim that we must be freed from selfishness and allow the power of redemption to turn our delight into love. This point of view is echoed in the claim of Sider and Gonzalez that in the final analysis the purpose of wealth is the common good of the Christian community. Love for others is the common element here. If our hearts break for the things which break God’s heart; if we have compassion for the people and causes for which God has compassion; if we share the self-emptying mind of Christ as Paul describes in Philippians 2; then we will be sensitive to the needs of others and will count it a joy and privilege to generously share our resources with others. In so doing, we will help them experience abundant provision, and we will experience the gracious gift of partnering with God as an instrument of God’s provision in their lives. Evangelistically, therefore, it is appropriate to invite persons to an experience of full life in Jesus, and it is

⁴⁵⁴Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health & Wealth Gospels*, 4.

further appropriate to communicate that this full life will include abundant material provision for their own lives along with the joyous opportunity to partner with God in providing for others.⁴⁵⁵

This concludes our exploration of theological insights regarding the biblical theme of life. We turn now to an analysis of the field research data, after which I will reflect on the insights from all three streams of research (biblical, theological, and field interviews) in order to discern the most important evangelistic implications of a strong focus upon the biblical theme of life.

⁴⁵⁵I recognize that some persons may be specifically called to a life of poverty, but in the U.S. American context of my project, that would be more the exception than the rule.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS OF FIELD RESEARCH IN RELATION TO PERTINENT THEMES

In this chapter, I will analyze the responses to selected questions that were posed in interviews with 153 persons.⁴⁵⁶ I engaged in individual interviews with 111 of these people, with the remaining forty-two being interviewed in small groups.⁴⁵⁷ This research took place in eight churches, six of which are United Methodist, one of which would be most accurately classified as evangelical Anglican, and one of which is a community church with a former evangelical United Methodist serving as pastor. As I explained in Chapter One, these churches were selected based primarily on what Thom Rainer refers to as a “conversion ratio” (membership/annual conversions). Rainer suggests that an “effective evangelistic church” will have a ratio of less than 20:1, plus a minimum of twenty-six conversions per year.⁴⁵⁸ Because I wanted to include some new churches in my research, I chose not to utilize the twenty-six conversions per year yardstick in the selection process, since some new churches begin relatively small and require a few years to gain sufficient momentum to reach that number. An additional factor I used in the selection process was the ratio of worship attendance to conversions, because worship attendance can serve as a good indicator of the current vitality of a congregation.

Except in the case of new churches that were planted in 2005 or later, the statistics provided by the churches were from the five-year period 2004-2008. During this time

⁴⁵⁶Twenty-one questions were posed, There is not enough space for a complete report on all the questions. I will deal with those which are most pertinent to the major themes of this project.

⁴⁵⁷The vast majority of my analysis will come from the individual interviews, since the dynamics of the small group sessions were such that it was very difficult to capture accurate data concerning their responses.

⁴⁵⁸Thom Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, 23.

frame all six of the United Methodist churches had a conversion ratio less than 20:1. In other words, these churches were consistently effective in their ability to help non-Christians choose to become Christ-followers. All of the United Methodist churches are located in the state of Georgia. The community church also had a conversion ratio less than 20:1 during the five-year period.⁴⁵⁹ The evangelical Anglican congregation is located in South Carolina. Though this church did not fall within the 20:1 conversion ratio range that Rainer recommends, I chose to include it in my research because the trajectory of the conversion ratio over the five-year period was moving strongly in that direction. The conversion ratio in 2005 was 56:1, whereas in 2008 it was 20:1. Moreover, utilizing the ratio between average worship attendance and annual conversions, it moved from a ratio of 33:1 in 2005 to a ratio of 11:1 in 2008.

As was evidenced in Chapter Two when I shared insights from responses to the question “Why did you decide to follow Jesus?,” there is much insight to be gained from an analysis of the research data.⁴⁶⁰ I will proceed throughout this chapter with similar analyses of research questions that are pertinent to some of the primary themes that have emerged throughout this project, as well as themes that rose to the forefront as I worked through the data.⁴⁶¹ The following themes (in order of appearance) will be addressed: 1)

⁴⁵⁹This is the church whose pastor is a former United Methodist. He never served as a UMC pastor, but was the son of a UMC pastor in the Florida Conference. This church is located in Illinois.

⁴⁶⁰In that particular case, we learned that seventy-five of the 113 responses (66%) made reference to some benefit, cause, or consequence that following Jesus would have in this life, while only eight of the responses (7%) made reference to a benefit, cause, or consequence that following Jesus would have in the life to come.

⁴⁶¹There were a total of twenty-one questions that were asked among the four groups of respondents (Recent Converts [RCs], Key Influential Leaders [KILs], Evangelistically Gifted Leaders [EGLs], and Staff). Most of the Key Influential Leaders were interviewed in small group sessions rather than individually. Since I am focusing more strongly on data from individual interviews, the reader will observe that many of the questions include little or no data from the KILs. I will analyze data related to *some* of the primary themes that have emerged throughout this project. This is because not all the themes were

this-life versus next-life references; 2) relational versus individual dynamics in the Christ-following journey; 3) the relationship between our relationship with God and our experience of God-intended life; 4) the role of emotional well-being in responses from recent converts; 5) the belief that the life God intends for us should impact all dimensions of our lives; 6) the role of joy, delight, or happiness; and 7) the consistency with which believers conceptualize the Christ-following journey in relation to how they relate with non-believers. Five of these themes (1, 2, 3, 5, and 6) were selected because they arose as themes of interest in previous chapters and were themes that were “accessible” in the research data. An additional theme, the role of emotional well-being among recent converts, surfaced during the process of analyzing the research data. The same may be said of the final theme regarding the consistency with which believers conceptualize the Christ-following life and how they relate with non-believers. Moreover, this theme was mentioned in my original research claims and questions as one of interest to me.

Tension or Continuum Regarding This-Life References and Next-Life References

One of the questions posed was as follows: *In the gospel of John, there are a lot of verses about life—in your experience and understanding, what does “life in Christ” mean?* Thirty-eight EGLs (Evangelistically Gifted Leaders) responded to this question, along with sixteen KILs (Key Influential Leaders), thirty-one RCs (Recent Converts), and twenty-six Staff. These 111 respondents offered a total of 285 responses. A thorough reading of the interview transcripts (I typed the responses in real time as they were given)

addressed in the research questions. In some cases this was because the theme had not arisen prior to the time the interviews were done, and in other cases it was simply due to time constraints in the interview process, which limited how many questions could be asked.

allowed me to group the responses into fourteen different categories. If a similar response was given a minimum of three times (representing 1 percent), then I assigned that response its own category. The response summary is portrayed in Table 4.1. As may be observed in the table, 10 percent of the responses related to eternal life, which equals a ratio of nine this-life references to every one next-life reference.

Table 4.1. Responses to the Question on the Meaning of *Life in Christ* (N=285)

Category	n	%
Emotional Well-Being	70	25
Fullness, Abundance	50	18
Other	31	11
Eternal Life	29	10
Loving/Serving Others	16	6
Relationship with or Intimacy with God	15	5
Purpose/Meaning/Significance	14	5
Christ-likeness, Fruit	15	5
Guidance, Wisdom, Direction	11	4
Big Change/Redemption	11	4
Discipleship, Walk with Jesus	12	4
God with Us, not Alone	3	1
Forgiveness	4	1
Loved, Accepted	4	1

Similar results emerge from an exploration of the responses given to another question: *sometimes we refer to the “gospel” as “the good news.” In your experience and/or understanding, what are some of the “good” dimensions of “the good news”?* Ninety-three people responded to this question (KILs were not asked this question), with a total of 222 responses given. During my evaluation of these responses, I assigned separate categories to questions receiving a minimum of four responses (rather than three,

as with the prior question). Eighteen categories emerged during this analysis, as portrayed in Table 4.2. We see in the table that references to eternity ranked in a tie for third place with two other categories of responses, and that the percentage of total responses was eight. One might also consider including other categories in this percentage, however, such as “Salvation/Jesus’ Sacrifice,” “Forgiveness,” and “Hope,” since we might infer that these responses either emerge *from* a strong appreciation of eternal life or they point *toward* eternal life. I did not include them in the eternal life category because these responses did not include specific references to eternal life and I did not want to assume more than the respondents intended. However, to be fair to the eternal life end of the this-life and next-life continuum, if we include these categories for the moment, the total percentage of next-life references is twenty-one. This would make the next-life references the largest single category, but would still indicate that 79 percent of the respondents envision the good dimensions of the good news in this-life terms, while 21 percent envision them in next-life terms (the ratio being 3.8 to 1).

Table 4.2. Responses to Participants' Understanding of the *Good Dimensions of the Good News* (N=222)

Category	n	%
Other	36	16
Guidance/How to Live/Better Life	22	10
Eternity	19	8
Bible/the Four Gospels	19	8
Love/Compassion (of God)	19	8
Freedom	12	5
Peace/Comfort/Contentment/Reassurance	12	5
Transform/Heal/Renew/Restore/Deliver	11	5
Never Alone/God Always with Us	10	5
Grace/Mercy	10	5
Salvation/Jesus' Sacrifice	10	5
Forgiveness	9	4
Hope	8	4
Plan/Meaning/Purpose	7	3
Don't have to be perfect/Acceptance	5	2
Relationship with God	5	2
Help in Tough Times	4	2
What's Not Good?/Everything!	4	2

Another interview question that sheds light on this issue is: *Do you feel like you decided to follow Christ based more on the benefits or consequences that this decision would have on your life now or based more on the benefits or consequences that this decision would have on your life after death?* One hundred three persons responded to this question. Fifty-four percent of them said they decided to follow Christ based more on the benefits or consequences that this decision would have on their life now. Twenty-five percent answered that they made this decision more with life after death in mind, and 13 percent indicated that both life-now and life-after-death factors influenced their decision

(8 percent responded in ways that could not be clearly evaluated for inclusion in one of the three prior categories). If we allow the 13 percent who responded with “both” to be included in each of the other two categories, we see that 67 percent of the respondents experienced this-life influences in their Christ-following decision while 38 percent were motivated by next-life influences. This equals a ratio of 1.76 to 1.

A final question that merits consideration in this section is: *Imagine that you are talking with a non-Christian friend about Jesus, and your friend has arrived at a point of interest concerning the Christian life. If your friend asks you, “Why should I become a Christian?” how would you respond?* Ninety-eight persons responded to this question, giving a total of 247 responses that may be grouped into sixteen categories. The results are portrayed in Table 4.3. As the table indicates, only seven percent of the responses made direct reference to eternal life (included in this category were any responses that mentioned “eternal life,” “life after death,” “live forever with God,” etc.). We might choose to broaden this category by including “forgiveness,” for some respondents who mentioned forgiveness may have had in mind the heavenly benefit that forgiveness implies. We could also consider including “freedom” for the same reason, though this might be a bit more of a stretch. Even if we include these categories, this would only raise the percentage of next-life references to thirteen, which means that 87 percent of the responses pertain to life here and now. This represents a ratio of 6.7 to 1. To stretch the point even more, let us assume that the “emotional well-being” category implies a relationship to the next life. For example, a person may experience peace in this life because they feel that things are “settled” concerning the next life. Even if we include this category (the largest single category) in the next-life responses, only 30 percent of the

total responses would be related to the next life, while 70 percent would be related to this life. This represents a ratio of 2.3 to 1. In other words, more than twice as many of the interviewees would offer this-life oriented responses rather than next-life oriented responses to the query of their non-Christian friends as to why they should become a Christian.

Table 4.3. Responses to Being Asked Why I Should Become a Christian (N=247)

Category	n	%
Emotional Well-Being	42	17
Change/Improve your Life	36	15
Other	28	11
Purpose, Meaning, Fulfillment	22	9
Eternal life	18	7
Relationship with God	15	6
Changed my Life, My Story	14	6
Guidance/Wisdom	13	5
Why Not?	11	4
Love/Acceptance	10	4
Forgiveness	8	3
Freedom	8	3
Depends on person (contextualize)	7	3
Invite to Church, Check it out	6	2
Never Alone	5	2
Christian Community	4	2

The comprehensive results of these four questions are portrayed in Table 4.4. We discover that the average ratio of this-life references to next-life references among these four questions is 4.2 to 1. In relation to these four questions, over four times as many respondents leaned toward this-life answers as toward next-life answers.

Table 4.4. Comparison of This-Life References to Next-Life References

Question	This-Life (%)	Next-Life (%)	Ratio
What does “life in Christ” mean?	90	10	9 to 1
What is “good” about “the good news”?	78	22	3.8 to 1
Christ-following decision based on this-life or next-life benefits/consequences?	67	38 ⁴⁶²	1.8 to 1
Why become a Christian?	70	30	2.3 to 1
Average Ratio of All Four Questions			4.2 to 1

When we probe the responses in relation to the different groups of respondents we gain additional insight. For example, in the responses to “Why should I become a Christian?,” within the “eternal life” category, RCs gave 11 percent of the responses, yet they represented 32 percent of the total respondents. Conversely, EGL’s gave 67 percent of the eternal life responses, though they only represented 41 percent of the respondents. Staff responses were almost equal to staff percentage of total respondents. In the responses to the “good news” question, 63 percent of the eternity references were made by EGLs, but the EGLs only constituted 39 percent of the ninety-three respondents. Conversely, the RCs represented 33 percent of the ninety-three respondents, but they only provided 16 percent of the references to eternity. The Staff grouping was more evenly distributed, comprising 28 percent of the ninety-three respondents and giving 21 percent of the eternity references. In terms of ratios, therefore, we see that the EGLs more strongly emphasized the next-life dimensions of the good news than did the Staff or the RCs, and that the RCs more strongly emphasized the this-life dimensions thereof. This tendency is also seen in Chapter Two, in the analysis of the question, “Why did you decide to follow Jesus?,” but it is not as strongly portrayed there. In those responses, RCs

⁴⁶²The reader is reminded that to be fair to both sides of the continuum, I chose to allow the “both” category of responses to be added to each side of the continuum. This is why the two percentages total more than 100.

made up 33 percent of the total respondents and they offered 44 percent of the references to eternal life.

Taken all together, we see there is a tendency for RCs to place higher value on this-life dimensions of Christ-following than next-life dimensions, when compared to EGLs and KILs, but this tendency does not appear with the same strength in all the questions. My tentative interpretation of the inconsistent strength of this tendency is that it merits consideration in evangelistic theory and practice, but should not so strongly override the next-life dimensions of the good news to the point that we ignore those. On the other hand, we must remember that we are currently discussing the breakdown within the various groups of persons concerning the *single* category of eternal life responses, and this category has represented 38 percent or less of responses to the questions we have currently analyzed. Though we should not overvalue the trend of recent converts to provide fewer eternal life responses (in terms of ratio) to the research questions, neither should we forget that generally speaking we have detected a strong emphasis on this-life references among all respondents taken as a whole (an average ratio of 4.2 to 1). Perhaps our analysis of subsequent questions will amplify our understanding along these lines.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶³In this paragraph I have not included the within-groupings analysis of the question concerning whether or not the interviewee felt they chose to follow Christ based more on the consequences or benefits in this life or the life to come. The reason is that the results are not as clear. Of the 56 respondents who answered "this life," RCs accounted for only 25 percent of those responses though they constituted 30 percent of the total number of respondents, whereas RCs accounted for 54 percent of the respondents who answered "both." It is difficult to determine, in this case, whether the breakdown within groupings of this particular question either mildly affirms or mildly negates the trend that was observed in the within-groupings analysis of the other questions considered in this section at this point. I lean toward considering it to be a neutral net effect.

Relational versus Individual Dynamics in the Journey of Following Jesus

Another recurring theme in this project is how relational interactions fit into the journey of following Jesus. Christian living is intended to include relationships with God, others persons, and all of God's creation. The role of relating to God's creation had not yet strongly surfaced in the early stages of my project when I designed the interview questions, so there is no significant data regarding that dimension of Christ-following. However, there is significant data regarding the role of relating with God and other human beings. The first question to deal with here is: *Would you characterize Christ-following as a private affair between an individual person and Jesus, a social affair that includes other people, or something else?* Of the 114 respondents, 73 percent said "both," 11 percent said "private," and 16 percent said "social." Combining the "both" responses and the "social" responses, we learn that 89 percent of the interviewees feel that Christ-following involves other people. This constitutes a ratio of 8.1 to 1. Another question pertinent to this theme is: *Who or what was influential in your initial decision to follow Christ?* Table 4.5 illustrates the breakdown of the 150 responses. If we exclude the "God" category and the "Other" category, we discern that 80% of the responses indicate that another person was influential in the respondents' initial decision to follow Christ. Moreover, of the 25 responses within the "Other" category, six of those involved another person (e.g. guest speaker, high school teacher, parents of a friend). If we include these six, the total moves to 85 percent and a ratio of 5.7 to 1. The average ratio of this question and the previous question is 6.9 to 1. The responses to these two questions clearly demonstrate that the interviewees place a high value on the role of relationships with

other people in their journey toward making a Christ-following decision, as well as in their consequent life of Christ-following after that initial decision.⁴⁶⁴

Table 4.5. Responses to Influences in Your Initial Decision to Follow Christ (N=150)

Category	n	%
Parent	33	22
Pastor/Youth Leader/SS Teacher	33	22
Other	25	17
Other Family	21	14
Christian Community	13	9
Friend	11	7
Spouse	10	7
God	4	3

The Relationship of Our Experiencing God-Intended Life to Our Relationship with God

Our previous Old Testament and Johannine investigation clearly suggested that the life that is experienced through following Christ is rooted in our relationship with God. It is not that we worship and serve a non-personal entity called “life” and hence receive life. Rather it is that we worship and serve God who is the source of life and through our worshipping and serving relationship with God we receive and experience life. To what extent did this theme appear in the field research data? In terms of direct references to this theme, it did not arise in large percentages during the interviews.

Regarding the question concerning the good dimensions of the good news, five of the

⁴⁶⁴One caveat I would make is that I am curious as to how the phrasing of the second question influenced the responses. I designed the question to ask both “who” and/or “what” was influential in the initial Christ-following decision, but I began with the “who.” I wonder if the responses might have been any different had I reversed the order of the “who” and the “what.” I believe the people-related answers to the question as I phrased it were so prevalent that the essential point concerning the involvement of relationships in the Christ-following journey still holds, but perhaps the percentages would have been different.

ninety-three respondents made direct reference to “relationship with God.” This represents a little over 5 percent of the respondents. However, in terms of overall responses, it only represents 2 percent (five of 222 responses). A slightly stronger pattern emerged in replies to the question regarding “what does life in Christ mean.” Fifteen of the 111 interviewees responded to this question in terms of relationship with (or intimacy with) God, which represents 13.5 percent. In terms of total responses, the figure is fifteen of 285, or 5 percent. A third interview question relevant to this discussion is: “What, in your opinion, is the essential Christian message?” Twelve of ninety-eight people included “relationship with God” in their response, which represents 12 percent. In terms of the 162 overall responses, the percentage is 7.4 percent. This theme recurred a bit more strongly when persons were queried concerning what their response would be to a non-Christian friend who asked them why they should become a Christian. Fifteen of the ninety-three respondents mentioned relationship with God, which constitutes 15 percent of total respondents and 6 percent of total responses (247). See Table 4.6 for a summary of percentages of total respondents and responses to these four questions. This table shows that an average of 11 percent of the respondents mentioned relationship with God, which represents an average of 5 percent of total responses to the questions.

Table 4.6. Respondents Compared to Percentage of Responses Regarding Relationship with God Among the Four Questions (N=Relationship with God²)

Question	% of Respondents	% of Responses
Good Dimensions of Good News	5	2
Life in Christ	13	5
Essential Christian Message	12	7
Why Become a Christian	15	6
Average among the Four Questions	11	5

It is also interesting to note the way this theme was distributed among the various groupings of respondents. Regarding the four questions represented in Table 4.6, RCs mentioned relationship with God far less frequently than did the other groupings. Viewing these four questions together, we learn that forty-seven relationship-with-God responses were given, but only three of those were given by RC's. This represents 6 percent of the responses, while on average RCs constituted 31 percent of the total respondents. Conversely, the Staff grouping was responsible for 49 percent of the relationship-with-God responses, though those persons only totaled 27 percent of the interviewees. The EGL responses were much more evenly distributed in terms of their percentage of responses as relates to their representation among the groupings. They gave 40 percent of the relationship-with-God responses and constituted 39 percent of the total respondents.⁴⁶⁵

Categories of Responses that Recent Converts Emphasize

In Chapter Two I argued that we should strive for an organic synthesis between relating with God and receiving God's other tangible blessings. What, therefore, are some categories of responses concerning God's other tangible blessings that are prevalent among Recent Converts?⁴⁶⁶ I analyzed the same four questions that we have been most

⁴⁶⁵KILs were only asked one of these four questions, so I am not including them in the comparisons being made here.

⁴⁶⁶I am especially interested in the perspective of recent converts at this point because one of the important dimensions of evangelistic theory and practice is the need to attend to questions and issues which non-Christians are actually addressing, rather than those which Christians *think* they are (or *should* be) addressing. It is this notion that prompts Donald McGavran to advocate field research to help Christians discover what *actually* helps persons choose to become Christ-followers, rather than falling back on practices that we *think will* work or *ought* to work because they worked for us or because we like them. He refers to *effective* evangelism. Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 54-66; 192. It is more likely that recent converts

recently considering (as represented in Table 4.6) to identify which categories of responses ranked highest among Recent Converts. Concerning the question of how they would respond to a friend who asked them why they should become a Christian, 42 percent of the recent converts (thirteen of thirty-one) suggested emotional well-being and 32 percent (ten of thirty-one) suggested that it would improve or change their life.⁴⁶⁷ Regarding the good dimensions of the good news question, nine of the thirty-one RCs (29 percent) answered that the Bible (or the four gospels) was one of the good dimensions of the good news. The next most frequent response was guidance (normally phrased as guidance for living, or guidance for how to live better). Five persons (16 percent) gave this answer. When queried about what life in Christ means, the two largest response categories were emotional well-being (58 percent) and fullness/abundance (35 percent). The next largest was eternal life at 29 percent. Regarding the fourth question, “What is the essential Christian message?,” the response category of “love” was by far the largest, receiving a total of fourteen responses (45 percent). The next largest RC response to this question was to believe or accept Jesus (or God), with six responses (19 percent). Taking the top two response categories from each of the four questions, the results are displayed in Table 4.7. The table indicates that the category of emotional well-being seems to be an important one for recent converts in regard to these four questions. It is the leading category for two of the four questions, and was tied for third with another one. It seems like a natural fit to think about emotional well-being along with the response category of

will share perspectives more similar to non-Christians than EGLs, KILs, or Staff, simply because in most cases the recent converts were non-believers more recently in the past than the EGLs, KILs, or Staff. McGavran suggests that “recent converts are a rich source of insight” (*Understanding Church Growth*, 11).

⁴⁶⁷The emotional well-being category included the following specific responses: joy, peace, hope, strength, comfort, encouragement, overcome fears, feels good, support, have a soothing calm, contentment, and anchor.

love, which leads the way in relation to the question regarding the essential gospel message.

Table 4.7. Top Two Categories of Responses from Recent Converts

Question	Highest Response Rate from Recent Converts	Second Highest Response Rate from Recent Converts
Why Become a Christian?	Emotional Well-Being (42%)	Improve or Change Your Life (32%)
Good Dimensions of Good News	Bible (or the four gospels) (29%)	Guidance for Living (16%)
Life in Christ	Emotional Well-Being (58%)	Fullness or Abundance (35%)
Essential Gospel Message	Love (45%)	Believe or Accept Jesus (19%)

The responses to a different interview question indicate a possible link between relationship with God and emotional well-being. Interviewees were asked what Jesus means in John 10:10 when He says “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (ESV). The largest response category was emotional well-being and the second largest was relationship with God. Emotional well-being received sixty-four of 251 responses (25 percent), and relationship with God received forty-four of 251 responses (18 percent). As one reads through the interview notes, it becomes obvious that some respondents made a direct connection between emotional well-being and relating with God. For example, one person spoke about the joy and peace they experience as they submit to God and God’s way. Another interviewee talked about the joy they receive as they experience God and live “in that sweet spot of his purpose.” A third respondent referred to the peace and contentment that became real to them once they learned to develop an intimacy with God. The significance of this link between emotional well-

being and relationship with God is not clear from the data, so I will simply report that link and not attempt to interpret its meaning.

The Life God Intends is to Impact Every Dimension of Our Lives

Another theme that arose in the second and third chapters is that the life God intends for us in Christ is to impact every dimension of our lives. To help us investigate this theme from the perspective of the field research data, we now turn to the question: *What difference has Jesus made in your life?* Sixty-seven persons were asked this question, with a total of 140 responses given.⁴⁶⁸ Of those 140 responses, once again the leading response category was emotional well-being, with forty-two responses, equaling 30 percent. The second largest category was one which I titled “Everything/New/Changed,” with twenty-two responses, constituting 16 percent. These responses included such comments as “everything changed,” “He made all the difference,” and “I’m a new person.” The third category, having to do with guidance, wisdom, and/or a new perspective, had eighteen responses, constituting 13 percent. Three additional categories were tied at 9 percent (having thirteen, twelve, and twelve responses, respectively). They were: a) made me more loving, caring, and/or generous; b) meaning/purpose/fulfillment; and c) Jesus helped me trust God’s plan, provision, and/or protection.

It was obvious as I listened to these responses that many interviewees had experienced pervasive changes in their lives as a result of following Jesus. One person said “180-degree turnaround; my mindset, how I view life, how I approach life; being

⁴⁶⁸The reader will observe that most questions were asked of more than sixty-seven persons. This question was asked of fewer persons than the other questions because it was added to the list of questions after interviews had been completed with the first two churches.

real versus unreal; having true peace and joy and love versus faking it; it's just tremendous; I would not be where I am today without him for sure."⁴⁶⁹ Another respondent spoke of "demonstrative changes in my life: I'm more patient, more tolerant, more compassionate, and many people notice this. My wife says 'I got a new husband!'"⁴⁷⁰ Another person offered these words—"Jesus has saved my marriage, he healed my son from Tourette's, he has helped me forgive my father for his sexual abuse...he gives me direction all day long, and shields me with his armor."⁴⁷¹ Another recent convert declared that "I feel whole, I am complete now....My family sees a very different person now...they are trying to get used to the new 'Jane.' He has turned my life completely around."⁴⁷² One staff member suggested that "every aspect of my life has been changed."⁴⁷³ Another interviewee said that "he's changed everything and what he hasn't changed he still needs to."⁴⁷⁴

Not all respondents gave answers that were so pervasive, as indicated by the fact that only twenty-two of the 140 responses fell into the Everything/New/Changed category, but the spirit of pervasiveness was present in many of the interviewees, even though they did not all utilize that type of terminology. From this perspective, one might possibly say that many of the respondents believe that the life in Christ which they are experiencing has indeed touched all spheres or dimensions of their lives. But is that really

⁴⁶⁹Interview with author, Effingham, IL, July 14, 2010. All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

⁴⁷⁰Interview with author, Mt. Pleasant, SC, June 10, 2010.

⁴⁷¹Interview with author, Mt. Pleasant, SC, June 9, 2010.

⁴⁷²Interview with author, McDonough, GA, May 11, 2010.

⁴⁷³Interview with author, Effingham, IL, July 13, 2010.

⁴⁷⁴Interview with author, Effingham, IL, July 13, 2010.

true? I remind the reader of the distinction made in Chapter Three concerning this point. I observed there that some Christians understand that the Christ-following life is intended to be relational and therefore should not be overly privatized. However, the impact of following Christ still remains limited to them and a small portion of their relational network. Jesus has given them a whole new outlook, an entirely different way of viewing and experiencing their daily existence, but they have not allowed that change to impact them at the deep worldview level. Is any light shed on this issue from the field research data?

Due to the nature of my primary research interests, the kinds of questions that might have elicited more enlightening information concerning these issues were not included. This would be a very interesting topic for future research. Nevertheless, perhaps we can glean some tentative insight from the questions which were asked. My first comment would be to note that 9 percent of the responses to “What Difference Has Jesus Made in Your Life?” specifically referred to Jesus helping the interviewees become more loving and caring of others, more generous to help people in various circumstances. This is not a huge percentage by any means, but it does illustrate that some of the respondents were aware of this change that following Christ had made in their lives, and were aware of it strongly enough to be able to name it. We see a similar dynamic in the answers to the question regarding what life in Christ means. Six percent of the responses to that question involved loving or serving others, and 5 percent referred to being Christ-like (utilizing descriptors such as selfless, kind, good, patience, and humble). In the question about the essential Christian message, fourteen of the 162 responses referred to loving others, which constitutes 9 percent. In response to the question regarding what

Jesus meant by abundant life in John 10:10, 11 percent (twenty-seven of 251) of the responses fell into the “serving, related to others” category. Viewing these questions as a whole, we see that 9-10 percent of the responses were linked in some way to a focus on helping, loving, or serving others. It is impossible to tell whether or not this focus on others had made its way outside the smaller relational networks of the respondents to impact their views and actions concerning larger issues.

Moreover, this means that approximately 90 percent of the responses did not mention any focus on others.⁴⁷⁵ This tentatively suggests that the majority of respondents had not reached a point in their Christ-following journey where the pervasive changes they felt they had experienced (and were continuing to experience) had impacted them at a deep worldview level to the point that it influenced their thoughts or actions regarding larger issues of politics, economics, justice, creation care, etc. A question that bears contemplation is whether this issue of all dimensions of our lives being involved in the life which God intends for us should be addressed in the ministry of discipleship, the ministry of evangelism, or some combination of both. I lean toward suggesting that it should be at least tentatively addressed in evangelism, and then more fully addressed in discipleship. This, however, poses a dilemma. If we attempt to highlight all the issues that are important in the Christ-following journey within the ministry of evangelism, how do we distinguish between evangelism and discipleship? Moreover, if we include all the

⁴⁷⁵In Chapter One I made brief reference to Robert Bellah’s suggestion that the sacredness of individual conscience was brought to the USA in the seventeenth century by the early settlers who were members of sectarian religious groups, and that this emphasis on individual conscience eventually developed into the strong individualistic tendency that is present in U.S. American culture today. Bellah goes on to note that this individualistic tendency, if left unchecked by some form of commitment to the social or common good, will eventually turn in on itself, especially given the power of the free enterprise market. He writes that “without the legal and ethical culture of public morality a market economy turns into Mafia gangsterism,” and encourages us to be aware of our responsibility to work for the common good even in the midst of our individualistic focus. Robert Bellah, *Is There a Common American Culture?*, 622-624.

important issues in evangelism, then might we run the risk of overwhelming the non-Christian with a message that is far too complex and will appear to be overly burdensome, rather than liberating and life-giving?

Joy, Delight, or Happiness

An additional theme I wish to investigate is that of the joy, delight, or happiness that God intends for us in following Jesus. We recall from the previous chapter that Karl Barth raised this issue as one of vital importance, and John Schneider proposed that the cosmic vision of delight portrayed in Genesis is a paradigmatic vision of what God intends for God's creation, including people. To begin, we will examine the responses to this question: *Is there any sense in which you are more alive now than before you became a Christ-follower?* This question was one of those posed to some of the KIL small groups in addition to the individual interviewees, so there were 125 persons who responded to this question, giving a total of 229 responses. The leading category was "emotional well-being," with forty-seven responses, making up 20 percent. The next category was "other," with a total of thirty-three responses, for 14 percent. Responses were also included in this category that did not appear in sufficient number (five or more) to warrant a category of their own. Twenty-nine responses (13 percent) fell into a category titled Brand New/More Alive/Life is Good, which I used to designate responses which indicated that everything about their life felt better or had been completely changed or was more alive or energized. The next category involved relationships with, or care for, other persons. This category totaled eighteen responses, constituting 8 percent. Particularly germane to the issue at hand was the fifth category, Happy/Excited/Laughter,

in which interviewees specifically mentioned the words happy, happiness, excited, excitement, laugh, or laughter. There were fifteen responses in this category, which represents 7 percent. Also with fifteen responses was the Purpose/Fulfillment category.

Concerning our query into the prevalence of joy, delight, or happiness, we see that thus far 7 percent of the responses fell directly into this category. It is worth noting, however, that the word “joy” was included in the emotional well-being category, in order to remain consistent with how I have been analyzing and categorizing responses throughout this chapter. If we pull the specific “joy” responses from the emotional well-being category and add them to the category concerning happiness, laughter, and/or excitement, the percentages change. Sixteen responses specifically referred to “joy” or “joyful.” Removing these sixteen responses from the emotional well-being category leaves a new total of thirty-one, which amounts to 14 percent. Adding the sixteen responses to the happy/excited/laughter category gives us a new total of thirty-one in that category as well, which also amounts to 14 percent. Table 4.8 portrays the statistical analysis viewed in this fashion.

Table 4.8. Responses of Participants' Feelings of Being More Alive in Christ (N=229)

Category	n	%
Other	33	14
Emotional Well-Being	31	14
Happy/Excited/Laughter/Joy	31	14
Brand new/More Alive/Life is Good	29	13
Relationships with or care for, Others	18	8
Purpose/Fulfillment	15	7
New Perspective/Sense of Direction	14	6
Guidance/Wisdom/Decision-making	13	6
God's presence, Never alone	13	6
God's Protection/Providence/Power/Plan/Love	13	6
Increased Gratitude	7	3
Yes!, unspecified	7	3
Linked to Eternity	5	2

We gain further insight as we consider previously analyzed questions. For example, included in the 251 responses to the question concerning what Jesus means by "abundant life" in John 10:10 are twenty-three specific references to joy and five references to happy, excited, or laughter. This total of twenty-eight represents 11 percent of the total responses. Nine interviewees mentioned joy and three others mentioned happiness when queried concerning what difference Jesus made in their lives, constituting 9 percent of the 140 responses. Regarding the good dimensions of the good news, five of 222 responses (2 percent) involved these words, and seven of 247 (3 percent) of these responses were given in relation to the question regarding why a non-Christian friend should become a Christian. One final question to consider is the meaning of "life in Christ." Seventeen of the 285 responses mentioned joy and six more mentioned happy, excited, or laughter. This total of twenty-three represents 8 percent. Combining

the responses to all five of these questions, we learn that 6.5 percent of the responses (seventy-five of 1,145) refer specifically to joy, happiness, excitement, or laughter. If we add in the thirty-one responses from the “is-there-any-sense-in-which-you-are-more-alive” question, the percentage increases to 7.7 (106 of 1,374).

However, this is not an equal comparison, because I have been working so far with the total number of *responses*, as distinct from *respondents*, so let us now explore this theme from that perspective. Using the same six interview questions as the base for our analysis, I examined the interview notes once again to identify how many individual *respondents* referred to joy, happiness, laughter, or excitement. The results are displayed in table 4.9. Utilizing the “Total” column as our first indicator, we see that the cumulative total of respondents for the six questions is 592. There were ninety-seven specific references made to joy, happiness, excitement, or laughter among the 592 respondents.⁴⁷⁶ This represents 16 percent. We learned earlier that 7.7 percent of the total *responses* to these six questions mentioned joy, happiness, excitement, or laughter, but we now see that when we consider individual *respondents*, the percentage almost doubles. We may safely say, therefore, that roughly one in five persons include some form of joy, delight, or happiness in how they conceptualize and/or experience the Christ-following life. This suggests that this theme may warrant at least modest consideration in evangelistic theory and practice.

⁴⁷⁶This is obvious, but to avoid misunderstanding please allow me to remind the reader that there are not 592 separate individuals represented here, because the same people responded to all six questions.

Table 4.9. Responses among Participants' Regarding the Mention of Joy, Delight, Happiness, or Excitement

Question	Total		
	N	n	%
More Alive Now?	125	26	21
Abundant Life	98	25	26
What Difference Jesus Made	67	11	16
Life in Christ	111	24	22
Good re. the Good News	93	3	3
Why Become a Christian?	98	8	8
Cumulative Totals	592	97	16

Consistency of Christians re Their Own Experience versus Their Evangelism Participation

I would now like to shift to an analysis of research questions taken as pairs, in order to evaluate how *consistent* the EGLs, RCs, and Staff are concerning their own experiences of the Christ-following life versus how they embody and communicate the Christ-following life with non-believers.⁴⁷⁷ I wish to query, for example, whether it might be possible that some people initially chose to follow Christ based on the benefits or consequences related to this life, but as they have experienced more time in the Christ-following journey they have begun to more fully emphasize the benefits or consequences of Christ-following related to life after death. Furthermore, has that growing emphasis influenced them to relate with non-Christians primarily in terms of next-life benefits or consequences as opposed to this-life benefits or consequences? Conversely, might some

⁴⁷⁷Because the majority of KILs were interviewed in small group settings, the interview notes do not lend themselves well to this type of comparison. One can discern from the notes how many KILs offered comments and what the comments were, but one cannot discern which individual person made which comment, which makes comparison of paired answers impossible.

Christians have chosen to follow Christ based on next-life issues, but they have experienced such a positive transformation in this life that their predominant relationship with non-believers focuses on this life? To begin this exploration, I reviewed the EGL, RC and Staff responses to the following pair of questions: *Do you feel like you decided to follow Christ based more on the benefits or consequences that this decision would have on your life now or based more on the benefits or consequences that this decision would have on your life after death?*; and *How would you respond if your non-Christian friend asked you why they should become a Christian?* Thirty-two (82 percent) of the EGLs gave consistent responses to these two questions, while seven (18 percent) gave inconsistent responses. Of the inconsistent responses, five of the respondents initially chose to follow Christ based on next-life benefits or consequences, but when explaining to a non-Christian friend why they should become a Christian they would emphasize this-life benefits or consequences. Two of the respondents were just the opposite, moving from a this-life emphasis to a next-life emphasis. The overall percentage among staff responses was almost identical. Twenty-one (81 percent) of the staff interviewees gave consistent responses and five (19 percent) offered inconsistent ones. The five inconsistent responses all shifted from a next-life focus to a focus on this life. Regarding the recent converts, twenty-seven (87 percent) of the RC responses were consistent and four (13 percent) were inconsistent, making this group the most consistent of the three. As with the Staff, all of the inconsistent RC responses changed in focus from the next life to this life.

Three quick comments are in order. First, the *lowest* rate of consistency is 81 percent, which indicates a remarkable consistency among the respondents concerning

their conceptualization of the Christ-following experience as relates to a primary this-life or next-life perspective. Second, the RCs were a bit more consistent than the EGLs and Staff, which may be due to the fact that they have been following Christ for a shorter period of time and thus have not had as much opportunity for a conceptual or experiential shift to take place. Third, among the inconsistent response pairs, fourteen of the sixteen shifted from an original next-life perspective to a this-life perspective.⁴⁷⁸ The good news in all of this is that among the interviewees there was no significant evidence of a shift being made from an original this-life perspective to a subsequent next-life perspective. This is good news in light of everything we have already discovered in this project regarding recent converts and the value they place on a this-life perspective. Moreover, I am curious as to how this 80 plus percent consistency relates to the fact that the interviews were being conducted with evangelistically effective congregations. A future research interest might be to investigate the relationship between consistency concerning this-life versus next-life emphases and whether or not a congregation is effective in helping non-Christians choose to follow Christ.

I now want to compare the responses to “Why Should I Become a Christian?” with those given to a second question to gauge the level of consistency between the responses. Regarding “Why should I become a Christian?,” ninety-eight persons responded to this question, giving a total of 247 responses that may be grouped into sixteen categories. The results are portrayed in Table 4.10.

⁴⁷⁸Without further research it would be difficult to ascertain the reason for this, but one possibility would be that as persons had more time to experience a Christ-following life they were able to encounter more of the benefits that such a life brings before death.

Table 4.10. Responses of Reasons for Becoming a Christian (N=247)

Category	n	%
Emotional Well-Being	42	17
Change/Improve your Life	36	15
Other ⁴⁷⁹	28	11
Purpose, Meaning, Fulfillment	22	9
Eternal life	18	7
Relationship with God	15	6
Changed my Life, My Story	14	6
Guidance/Wisdom	13	5
Why Not?	11	4
Love/Acceptance	10	4
Forgiveness	8	3
Freedom	8	3
Depends on person (contextualize)	7	3
Invite to Church, Check it out	6	2
Never Alone	5	2
Christian Community	4	2

The question I wish to compare this with is the following: *What do you believe are some of the things your non-Christian friends think about the most?* One hundred eight people responded to this question, giving 240 total responses. The results are found in Table 4.11. The first thing to point out is that money and finances is the leading category for the second question, but does not appear at all as a response category to the first question.⁴⁸⁰ Thirty-seven of the 240 responses refer to finances, which constitutes 15 percent. If we add in the two categories of “material stuff” and “job/careers,” this number

⁴⁷⁹The responses in the “Other” category are so varied in nature that it is impossible to extract distinct trends or specific response categories, so I will not refer to that category in the subsequent analysis.

⁴⁸⁰For the first question, a minimum of four similar responses was required to merit a separate response category. Two of the ninety-eight respondents (2 percent) suggested that “provision” was one of the reasons a non-Christian friend should become a Christian. These two responses are represented in the “Other” category.

increases to seventy-four of 240, for a percentage of 31. In other words, almost 1 one in three of the responses to this category refers to something related to finances (money is required to buy the “material stuff,” and for the average person a job is essential for providing that money), and yet this category is completely absent from the response categories pertaining to the first question. I do not suggest that it should necessarily appear among those responses, for it would be theologically inappropriate to suggest to a non-Christian that they should become a Christian so their money problems would be solved; at least this is probably how the majority of Christians would respond if asked that specific question. However, please allow me to play devil’s advocate for a moment. If following Jesus helps us set new priorities in our lives that are more fully aligned with God’s intentions, and if those new priorities include how we spend our money, is it not possible that many of our money problems *would* be solved as we lived according to those God-guided priorities? I have tried to make the case in this project that abundant financial provision (not necessarily prosperity) is included as one of the dimensions of the full life in Jesus that God intends for us. If this is the case, why should we not include financial health as one of the reasons a person should become a Christian, especially if that is an issue that many non-Christians think about? Yet, financial health was not mentioned often enough (a minimum of four times) to be classified as a response category for this question.

Table 4.11. Responses Concerning What Non-Christian Friends Think about the Most (N=240)

Category	n	%
Money/Finances	37	15
Other ⁴⁸¹	29	12
Material Stuff	19	8
Drugs/Alcohol/Sex	19	8
Job/Careers	18	8
Themselves	18	8
Reputation, Self-Image, Acceptance, Status	16	7
Christian-Related ⁴⁸²	16	7
Short-term Present	10	4
Children	9	4
Family	8	3
Fulfillment/Happiness/Satisfaction	8	3
Success/Power/Influence	7	3
Pleasure/Partying/Entertainment	7	3
Big Life Questions (meaning, purpose, identity, significance)	6	3
Other Relationships	5	2
Fears/Worry	5	2
Marriage	3	1

To delve a little deeper, we will consider the responses to this question: *Keeping in mind what you just told me that your non-Christian friends think and/or worry about, what in your own experience of following Christ might be something helpful to talk about with them that would help draw them toward choosing to become Christ-followers?* The responses to this question are portrayed in Table 4.12. As may be observed, ten of the

⁴⁸¹The responses in the “Other” category are so varied in nature that it is impossible to extract distinct trends or specific response categories, so I will not refer to that category in the subsequent analysis.

⁴⁸²Responses in this category referred to something specifically connected with God or the church. Examples include “how would a good God send a person to hell?”; “tithing is bad;” “organized religion is just made up;” “church is just a bunch of hypocrites;” and “why would God hurt my family?”

106 responses (9 percent) refer specifically to finances. Moreover, twenty-five of the responses refer to a general trust in God’s plan and/or provision and nine of those twenty-five responses made reference to finances. If we add those nine responses to the original ten, the percentage of financially-related responses moves from 9 to 18, representing a ratio of 4.5 to 1. Thus, we see that one in three of the Christians felt that their non-Christian friends think and/or worry about financial health, while one in four and a half of them offered that as a point of connection with them to discuss the possibility of following Christ.

Table 4.12. Responses for Advice to Non-Christian Friends Drawing on Your Own Experience (N=106)

Category	n	%
Other ⁴⁸³	31	29
General Trust in God’s Plan/Provision	25	23
General Match of Shared Experiences	12	11
Trusting God in Finances/Giving	10	9
My Example (not use words)	5	5
Following Jesus Makes a Difference	5	5
Following Jesus Takes Away Worry	5	5
Joy/Fulfillment in Serving Others	4	4
Don’t Know or Don’t Try	3	3
Eternity	3	3
Death or Illness of a Child	3	3

Comparing Responses to “Why Should I Become a Christian?” and “How Can I Become a Christian?”

Before drawing this chapter to a close, we will compare the responses between the two questions regarding “Why Should I Become a Christian?” and “How Can I Become a Christian?” in order to determine the level of consistency between them. The two questions are obviously different, so by “consistency” I do not refer to exact replication

⁴⁸³The responses in the “Other” category are so varied in nature that it is impossible to extract distinct trends or specific response categories, so I will not refer to that category in the subsequent analysis.

of themes. I refer instead to the fact that the responses to the two questions are not so significantly different as to create confusion for the non-Christian friend who posed the questions. In comparing the responses from each individual to these two questions, I have assigned a “C,” “I,” or “B” to each person. “C” represents consistency, “I” represents inconsistency, and “B” represents both. I chose to include the “B” assignment because some pairs of responses were consistent to a degree, but included enough inconsistency to potentially create confusion for the non-Christian friend. The assignment of C, I, or B is obviously a subjective judgment on my part, so I do not propose that strong proof for any particular trend will result from this exploration. However, we should at least discover a tentative valuation of the level of consistency on the part of the interviewees regarding these two questions, which in turn may suggest possible areas for future research.

After a thorough examination of the interview notes from these two questions, I have determined that ninety-six persons answered both questions and, therefore, qualify for this comparison. Forty (42 percent) of those persons were EGLs, twenty-nine (30 percent) were RCs, and twenty-seven (28 percent) were Staff. Of the ninety-six persons, sixty-six (69 percent) gave Consistent responses, eight (8 percent) gave Inconsistent responses, and twenty-two (23 percent) gave responses which I labeled as Both. We see, therefore, that two of every three persons (the 69 percent) gave clearly consistent responses, and one of every three offered responses (the 8 percent plus the 23 percent) that might cause possible confusion for their non-Christian friends. Among those one of every three, however, we see that only 27 percent of them (eight of thirty respondents in the “I” and “B” groups) gave strongly inconsistent responses. Overall, therefore, we may affirm that the majority of people responded to these two questions in ways that provided

sufficient consistency so as to not confuse their non-Christian friends. In an earlier section, I mentioned that a future research interest might be to investigate the relationship between effective versus ineffective evangelistic churches and the level of consistency those congregations have regarding this-life versus next-life conceptualizations of life in Christ. Similarly, this current discussion highlights the possibility of exploring the relationship between effective versus ineffective evangelistic churches and the level of consistency those congregations display concerning their responses to why and/or how a person should or could become a Christian.

Before leaving this theme, let us take a look at the within-groupings data. Seventy nine percent of the RCs received a “C” designation (Consistent), compared to 65 percent for the EGLs and 63 percent for the Staff. What accounts for this differential? The Inconsistent category percentages were fairly equally distributed, with the RCs at 10 percent, the EGLs at 8 percent, and the Staff at 7 percent. The primary difference is observed in the “B” (both) category. Thirty percent of the Staff (eight of twenty-seven) and 27 percent of the EGLs (eleven of forty) were assigned a “B” designation, whereas only 10 percent (three of twenty-nine) of the RCs received a “B” designation. How one might interpret these differences is an open question. One might suggest that RCs have fewer “B” ratings because they have been Christians for a shorter period of time and have not, therefore, been exposed to as many ways of conceptualizing the Christ-following life as the Staff and EGLs. It would be easier, therefore, for them to be consistent in their evangelistic communication because they do not have as much evangelistic imagery to choose from. On the other hand, one might propose that EGLs and Staff have a stronger tendency to fall back to “standard” evangelistic language concerning how to become a

Christian, so that they have a more difficult time than RCs in tailoring their evangelistic communication to particular situations. To phrase the issue differently: do the EGLs and Staff have more “B” rankings than the RCs because they have learned to be more flexible in their evangelistic communication, or because they have actually fallen into an inflexible pattern of using standard language no matter the situation? Rick Richardson suggests that many Christians have become bound by a mental script of how they think spiritual conversations are “supposed” to transpire, and this prevents them from: 1) following the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the conversation, and 2) being flexible enough in the conversation to be open and genuine.⁴⁸⁴ Might this idea of a mental script explain the higher number of “B” responses among the EGLs and Staff?

To help explore this question, I examined the “I” and “B” responses from all three groupings. At the risk of over-generalizing, I assumed that “standard” evangelistic language concerning how to become a Christian tends to flow along these lines:

“Recognize that you are a sinner in need of forgiveness and salvation. Confess your sins (individual sins plus your sinful nature) to God, repent, believe that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross has atoned for your sins, and accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior.”⁴⁸⁵ Reference is sometimes made to “the sinner’s prayer” or the “ABCs” (Admit you are a sinner, Believe in Jesus, and Confess your belief publicly). Utilizing this as a framework for the fall-back imagery often used in evangelism, I discovered that of the thirty “I” and “B” rankings among the ninety-six respondents, fully twenty-nine of them were given an “I” or a “B”

⁴⁸⁴Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, 66-67.

⁴⁸⁵This assumption of what comprises “standard evangelistic language concerning how to become a Christian” is based on personal observation during thirty years of pastoral ministry and evangelism training, plus 38 years of experience as a Christ-follower.

assignment because they used some form of this fall-back imagery in answering how their non-Christian friend could become a Christian, yet they had not mentioned *any* of that imagery in responding to the *previous* question concerning why they should become a Christian. The predominant fall-back imagery found among the twenty-nine respondents included references to forgiveness, accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, repentance of sins, and references either to the sinner's prayer or the ABCs.⁴⁸⁶ What this data means remains an open question.

Important Considerations for Evangelistic Theory and Practice

The investigation of the field research findings highlights several important areas for consideration in evangelistic theory and practice. First, in whatever way we may choose to include the possibility of new life in Christ in our evangelistic vision and ministry, we must include references to experiencing positive benefits in this life, if we want to resonate well with non-believers.⁴⁸⁷ Second, the research data prompts us to consider an emphasis upon the fact that Christians should be made aware of the profound influence they may have on people among their relational networks. This knowledge could increase individual motivation for evangelism, and it could also motivate congregational leaders to provide more opportunities for equipping congregational participants for the ministry of evangelism in their relational networks. Third, the strong

⁴⁸⁶I have focused on invitational language in this section because the research data was accessible in that manner, but this does not mean that evangelism is limited to verbal communication and invitation. As I mentioned at the conclusion of the second chapter, it must be viewed in a broad-based fashion, and I will address this issue more fully in the last chapter.

⁴⁸⁷In addition to resonating well with non-Christians, an inclusion of this-life impact in following Christ honors the holistic perspective of Christ-following that is seen in the Bible. We do not simply follow Jesus to gain entrance to heaven. We also follow Him to serve as instruments of His life-giving purposes for other persons and for creation.

prevalence of emotional well-being among responses from recent converts encourages us to deem emotional relevance as an important dimension of the Christ-following experience, to the extent that it should be included in ministries which will involve non-Christians.⁴⁸⁸ Fourth, financial health can serve as a solid connection point for relationship with some non-Christians. Therefore, the evangelistic community should struggle more fully with how to address this topic in a way that is theologically appropriate, honors the abundant provision that is biblically and theologically sound, yet does not bleed over into an inappropriate focus on an unbiblical prosperity gospel. Fifth, individual Christians and congregations should be encouraged to include the dimension of joy and happiness in their evangelistic visions and ministries, for this would strike a deep chord within some non-believers. This was not a major theme, but it was a sufficiently strong theme to indicate that some persons would be encouraged toward Christ by witnessing and hearing of the joyful delight that is a dimension of following Him.

Moving On

This concludes my analysis of the field research data. There is more information that can be mined in the future from the interview notes regarding a variety of topics. However, I have covered the pertinent themes from my project that were addressed by the interview questions, and highlighted important considerations for evangelistic theory

⁴⁸⁸George Hunter has attempted to awaken Christians to the prime importance of “emotional relevance” in reaching non-Christians. He believes that (at least in the West) we have been misled by the Enlightenment view that people are primarily rational beings. Conversely, Hunter proposes that “human beings are essentially *emotional* creatures who are sometimes capable of thinking!” Leaders of effective churches, therefore, know that choosing to follow Christ is a journey that involves our emotional well-being. Thus, “effective churches begin with people where they are; they consider people’s emotional agendas and their struggle for emotional freedom.” George Hunter III, *The Apostolic Congregation*, 31.

and practice that emerged from the data. I move now to the concluding chapter, where I will pull together the major themes from the first three chapters along with the insights gained from the field research, and propose some conclusions concerning the evangelistic implications of a strong focus upon the biblical theme of life.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BEGINNING COUNTOURS OF A LIFE-BASED EVANGELISTIC VISION

The Question that Started it all, and Where It has Taken Us

The genesis of this project was a simple yet vital question: “What are the implications for evangelism if one places a strong emphasis upon the biblical theme of life?” This question led to the premise that the biblical theme of life may be viewed as one of the primary themes of the Bible and, as such, provides a strong and helpful foundation for the theory and practice of evangelism. In Chapter One I gave support for this premise and discussed a range of related issues. One of these issues is that the concept of eternal life refers not only to chronological eternity but also to the quality of the life of the age-to-come in our current experience of full life in Jesus. Therefore evangelism should not be limited only to helping persons prepare for entry into heaven, but should also fully address how to communicate God’s intentions that all people experience a full life in Jesus prior to physical death on earth, and invite people into that full life.

A second issue is the question of how to relate the kingdom of God motif in the Synoptic gospels with the consequent proposal that an experience of full life was God’s original intention for us in creation, and therefore, is also God’s current goal for our life in Jesus Christ. Additional vital concepts, such as promise, covenant, and redemption, may be viewed as instruments or means to reach that goal. The concept of “kingdom” is a bit more difficult to conceive of as instrument or means, for it portrays more of a sense of the realm in which God’s full life is experienced rather than one of the instruments that

contributes to that full life. “Kingdom,” therefore, should perhaps be considered more as a parallel concept that provides a different symbolic reference for understanding God’s purposes for us. “Life” refers to God’s ultimate intentions for us, and “kingdom” refers to the fact that God is the creator and ruler of the “systemic entity” or “arena” in which life is generated and experienced. However, even if we acknowledge kingdom as a parallel concept, we must also recognize that the theme of life is biblically and theologically prior, and thus helps ground evangelism in God’s creation (both God’s original creation and God’s new creation in Christ). This creation emphasis is much more faithful to God’s original intention for humanity and all of creation than is the emphasis some evangelistic visions place on humanity’s Fall.

Howard Snyder observes how John Wesley’s focus on creation as the starting place for Christian theology helps ground theology and evangelism in the positive dimensions of persons being created in the image of God, rather than in the negative dimensions of sin and the Fall. Wesley does not ignore sin, but neither does he choose sin as the starting place. Snyder writes, “The Wesleyan lens starts with good news: A good God created good people in an ecologically balanced creation that God pronounced ‘very good.’ In the Wesleyan telling, the gospel story moves from the good news of creation in God’s image, to the bad news of sin and distortion, to the even better news of redemption and new creation through Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit.”⁴⁸⁹ This is the essential point I am making in relation to creation as the starting point for an evangelistic vision grounded in the biblical theme of life. We begin with God’s good and positive intentions. This provides a more appropriate biblical and theological foundation for theology and evangelism.

⁴⁸⁹Howard Snyder, *Yes in Christ*, 20.

In the second chapter I made a brief exploration into the field of biblical studies, focusing on the theme of life in the Old Testament and Johannine theology. The Old Testament section revealed a strong emphasis on God as the living God who invites us into an experience of full life through relationship with and obedience to God. This experience of full life also involves relationships with other people in community, not only as an intangible (or “spiritual”) experience, but also as a very tangible one. Life as God intends was envisioned in the Old Testament in terms of bountiful harvests, reproductive fertility, physical health, delight, security in the land, victory over enemies, and a long life of many years. In exilic and post-exilic times, the focus leaned far more heavily toward conceiving of life as relationship with God, with a postponement of tangible blessings to some future time. The priestly tradition attempted an organic synthesis of God’s tangible blessings with the supreme blessing of knowing God, but this synthesis was seldom successful. Two tensions or continuums emerged. One was this tension or continuum between conceiving of life in terms of God’s tangible blessings versus the blessing of knowing God. The other was a tension or continuum that involved the experience of God’s full-life intentions for us now versus some future time.

The investigation of John’s theology of life revealed the same two dynamics. Regarding the life-now versus life-then dynamic there is a modest consensus among scholars that John’s gospel includes more of a life-now emphasis than do the Synoptic gospels. Regarding the “knowing God” versus “God’s other tangible gifts” dynamic, a great deal of stress is placed on knowing God. This may be best expressed as believing in, knowing, obeying, and abiding in, Jesus. At the same time, however, John vividly portrays persons being healed, fed, and forgiven by Jesus. Therefore, though we should

not downplay the vital importance of knowing God as the central experience of the life which Jesus came to bring, neither should we downplay the other tangible gifts that Jesus grants to His followers, such as health, provision, joy, peace, purpose, human relationships, and much more. To utilize the sheep and shepherding imagery of John chapter ten, the sheep indeed must know the shepherd's voice, but they are also daily led by the shepherd from the sheepfold out into abundant pasture.

The presence of both human and divine involvement in the experience of full life is an additional continuum that emerges from John's gospel. John portrays a strong element of both. It is clear that God initiates the possibility of full life in Jesus and extends the invitation thereto, but it is also clear that human beings play a role not only in accepting that invitation but also in the communication and extension thereof. In terms of evangelism, this suggests that evangelism begins with God, but God also intends, invites, and desires that God's people be active participants in the evangelization process. A final continuum or tension that is raised in John's gospel is one between the individual and communal (or relational) dimensions of the full life that is involved in the Christ-following journey. There is no question that John wishes to emphasize that individuals are called and invited to believe, know, obey, and abide in Jesus, and in so doing receive full life. At the same time, however, John strongly emphasizes the unity of believers and Jesus' insistence that they love one another.

The investigation of John's theology of life also helped reveal the interrelated nature of the incarnation and the cross in John's gospel. Combining the differing perspectives of Gail R. O'Day and Craig Koester, one can see that John's gospel presents a portrayal of the pre-incarnational Jesus who was God (and was with God); the

incarnational Jesus who came to earth in fullness to help us know Him; the wise and powerful Jesus who taught, healed, raised, and fed; the compassionate Jesus who died to demonstrate the depth of God's love; and the resurrected and exalted Jesus who gives us the Holy Spirit to guide us in how to continue abiding in Him (Jesus), and in so doing experience full and vital life. This inclusion of the varying dimensions of Jesus' life provides a solid theological and biblical foundation for life-based evangelism. We are invited to a full life in Jesus, and that full life is directly linked to the fullness of who Jesus is and was, as well as what He experienced in our stead and on our behalf. This implies that the ministry of evangelism must be envisioned comprehensively. I will explore this theme more fully at a later point in this chapter.

The third chapter described an investigation of selected theologians concerning the life theme and related issues. From this investigation, eight themes emerged as consistently important: 1) our experience of life must remain tied to our relationship with and commitment to God who is the source and giver of life; 2) life as God intends is relational and communal; 3) God intends that the life He gives through Jesus and the Spirit will impact all dimensions of life (such as personal, familial, communal, relational, social, economic, political, and cultural); 4) God desires holistic flourishing for us; 5) the life of holistic flourishing God intends will include a biblically appropriate understanding and experience of joy, delight, or happiness; 6) life is God's ultimate goal for God's creation and God's creatures; 7) the balance or tension between life-now and life-then; and 8) life as God intends cannot be divorced from God's created material world.

In Chapter Four I engaged in an analysis of the field research data that was collected from interviews with 153 persons in eight congregations. These persons came

from four groupings of people: staff, evangelistically gifted leaders, key influential leaders, and recent converts. Most of my analysis focused on responses from the 111 persons whom I interviewed individually (the other forty-two persons were interviewed in small group settings). I began my analysis by focusing on central themes that arose in the second and third chapters, and then expanded it to include additional themes that either occurred with frequency in the interview responses or that related specifically to the original four clusters of research questions and claims in the first chapter. Based on this analysis, I discerned five important areas for consideration in evangelistic theory and practice. First is the need for evangelistic vision and ministry to include the possibility of experiencing positive benefits in this life, if we want to resonate well with non-believers. Second, Christians should be made aware of the profound influence they may have on people in their relational networks. Third, emotional relevance is an important dimension of the Christ-following experience, and should therefore be included in ministries which will involve non-Christians. Fourth, the evangelistic community should struggle more fully with how to address the theme of financial health in a way that is theologically appropriate, honors the abundant provision that is biblically and theologically sound, yet does not bleed over into an inappropriate focus on an unbiblical prosperity gospel. Fifth, individual Christians and congregations should be encouraged to include the dimension of joy and happiness in their evangelistic visions and ministries.

Original Research Claims and Questions

This brief summary of insights and issues that surfaced during this research project illustrates the diverse nature of a life-based evangelistic vision. To avoid undue

redundancy, each insight or issue will not be re-visited. However, it would be helpful to return to the original four clusters of research questions and claims that were presented in the first chapter, and discuss how the insights and issues that have emerged during this project relate to those questions and claims. This will assist in highlighting the most important implications of life-based evangelism. The first cluster relates to the gospel. The second has to do with the biblical theme of life (focusing on insights from biblical studies). The third involves the relationship between the biblical theme of life, the kingdom of God, and eternal life. The fourth entails the relational dimensions of full life in Christ. What, therefore, has this research project revealed regarding these clusters of claims and questions? In responding to this query we will begin with the second cluster (the biblical theme of life), because it lays the foundation for the other three.

The Biblical Theme of Life

Life as originally intended by God before the Fall of humanity, and as now intended by God in Jesus Christ, is envisioned as a full, vibrant, joyous experience of living in relationship with God (in Christ), with other people, and with all of creation. We learned from our study of the Old Testament and the gospel of John that our experience of full life must be rooted in our acknowledgement of and relationship with God as Creator and Sovereign, and that any attempt to experience life outside that acknowledgement and relationship will fall far short of God's intentions for us. As we affirm and live out our commitment to and relationship with God, we also relate with other people and with God's creation, offering mutual support and sharing. This lays the groundwork for a life of holistic flourishing that we experience spiritually, relationally,

physically, environmentally, emotionally, provisionally (finances, basic needs, etc.), socially, and politically. The life God intends and envisions is to impact every sphere of our existence, so that nothing in our life is left untouched by the God whom we worship, serve, and relate with. A particular emphasis in the Old Testament is that life in God involves the material world, so that there is no false dichotomy construed between what is “material” and what is “spiritual.” Bountiful harvests, reproductive fertility, security in the land, physical health, life long-lived, and success in all endeavors: these are dimensions of the “good life” that the Hebrew people envisioned as they worshipped, served, and obeyed God.

As we move into the gospel of John we learn that this life is only made possible through Jesus, and Jesus must be understood at this point holistically. Life is made possible through His incarnation, birth, life, death, resurrection, and exaltation.⁴⁹⁰ We must not, for example, attempt to “go around” the cross but through it. Likewise, we must “go through” the Incarnation, understanding that not only in Jesus’ death do we experience life, but we also experience life because He Who is God became Life for us on earth. Thus, we do not avoid the cross, but neither do we emphasize the cross to the point that we eliminate the vital importance of everything else that surrounds the Jesus “event.” It is not sufficient, for example, to say that we have appropriated the benefits of atonement for our salvation or forgiveness, if we neglect the teachings of Jesus to be agents of peace, justice, and love. Conversely, the full life that God intends will not be experienced if we focus on being said agents of peace, justice, and love, without an accompanying emphasis upon Jesus’ death and resurrection and the role they play in our

⁴⁹⁰In like manner, Thomas Oden refers to the gospel as “the good news of God’s own coming, the *cumulative* event of the sending, coming, living, dying, and continuing life of this incomparable One.” Thomas Oden, *The Word of Life*, 11; emphasis added.

forgiveness and healing (salvation, restoration, and rescue). Full life comes, therefore, when we trust in (completely give ourselves to) Jesus and follow Him, obeying His commands and guidelines for how to live. Additionally, we are intended to experience a strong measure of full, vibrant life here on earth before we die, and we will experience an even fuller, more final measure of that life in God's presence after death. This current "strong measure" of full life will include provision, purpose, joy, peace, justice, worship, service, and much more. It is envisioned as a restoration of the original experience of full, vibrant life that God intended in creation.

To summarize the most important dimensions of what this project has revealed concerning the biblical theme of life: *Life as God intends us to experience it in Jesus is a holistic, relational flourishing of people, relational networks, communities, and God's creation. It is rooted in a full-bodied trust in and following of Jesus (this includes knowing, obeying, and abiding in Him), which brings us forgiveness and initiates a life of wholeness (redemption) and reconciliation (with God, ourselves, and others). This life is characterized by peace, justice, love, purpose, and provision in all dimensions of existence.* This statement serves well in addressing the original research questions concerning the biblical theme of life. The two early claims regarding this theme have been well substantiated. The first claim was that the biblical theme of life is an appropriate and helpful lens through which to view Scripture, and the second was that a strong emphasis on this theme will provide a viable and useful theological basis for evangelism.

An Initial Life-Based Description of the Gospel

How does a strong focus on the biblical theme of life inform our understanding and communication of the gospel? What is the good news that we embody and share with non-Christians? What are we inviting them to embrace, or take up, or do? In the context of what has been learned concerning the biblical theme of life, the good news may be viewed as follows: *Through a full-bodied trust in and following of Jesus, we receive forgiveness and are initiated into a life of wholeness (redemption) and reconciliation. This life is best described as a holistic and relational flourishing of people, relational networks, communities, and God's creation; and this flourishing will be characterized by joy, peace, justice, love, purpose, and provision, in all dimensions of life.* This description of the gospel is based on the description of life that was delineated in the previous section, the majority of which was based upon the insights gained from the research in biblical studies and theology. However, these insights regarding the cluster of gospel-related questions may be deepened by referring back to the insights that emerged in the analysis of field research data.

Deepening the Initial Life-Based Gospel Understanding: Emotional Well-Being

The reader will observe that “joy,” “peace,” and “love” are included in the aforementioned life-based gospel description. We recall that in embodying and communicating the good news with non-Christians, the field research indicates that we should be aware of the importance of emotional well-being. This may mean, for example, that when we talk about “holistic flourishing,” some people will resonate most strongly with the dimensions of holistic flourishing that relate to their experience (or lack thereof)

of peace, joy, comfort, strength, assurance, security, etc. This suggests that emotional well-being should be a dimension of the gospel we are consistently exemplifying and are ready to verbally share whenever the Holy Spirit leads us in that direction. To maintain consistency in our evangelism, we would also therefore want to envision how to extend an invitation to follow Jesus that is based on emotional well-being. For example, one might say: “I have found in my life that I discover more consistent joy when I follow Jesus’ leadership in my life and try to be the person and partner He designed me to be. Would you like to experience more consistent joy as well? Then I invite you to choose today to follow Him and partner with Him in His life-giving mission in the world.” Or one might say, “I’ve had a lot more peace over the past several months, and it seems to go back to a decision I made to trust God with respect to my children. I still fret occasionally when I hear of difficult situations they are facing, but whenever I remind myself that I have chosen to entrust them to God’s care, a deep peace settles over me. Perhaps you would like to try trusting God’s care for your children as well, and see if you might gain a greater level of peace.”

These are just two examples of ways one might make a verbal connection between emotional well-being and an invitation to begin a life of following Jesus. Moreover, as we learned in Chapter Four, the awareness of emotional relevance should not be limited to individual opportunities to invite persons to follow Christ, but should also be an integral part of congregational ministries in general. A life-based evangelism ministry, for example, could urge congregations to create environments of love and acceptance in the communal spaces where the congregation most often gathers. It could help foster relational groupings that provide a sense of security and belonging. It could

strive to influence the worship leadership team to include moments of joy and celebration in the worship services. It could encourage pastors to preach sermon series on emotional issues and link the biblical truths concerning those issues to the full life that God intends for us. These are just a few examples of ways that a life-based evangelism ministry could promote emotional relevance in a congregation's overall ministry.

Deepening the Initial Life-Based Gospel Understanding: Financial Health

A second broadening of the life-based gospel conceptualization that the field research suggests relates to financial health.⁴⁹¹ One in three of the interviewees believed that their non-Christian friends think or worry about financial health. As stated previously, it is not suggested that limitless prosperity be considered part of the good news concerning full life in Christ, but abundant provision is an appropriate image to include in the message we embody and share. I do not propose this as a non-negotiable element that must be included every time we talk about full life in Christ. However, the research clearly indicates that it should be one of the dimensions of full life in Christ which believers are aware of and willing to share as the Spirit guides them. It would be entirely fitting, for example, for a Christ-follower to say to a non-believing friend: "Yes, I understand. I used to worry a lot about money too, and I still do every once in a while. But about two years ago I discovered that when I follow Jesus' priorities for how to manage the resources He provides me with, my financial health improved dramatically. I truly cannot explain it, because I make the same salary today as then, but somehow following Jesus' guidelines for finances has made a difference. Would you like to try following His financial guidelines for a few months and see what happens?"

⁴⁹¹This is why "provision" is included in the aforementioned life-based gospel description.

Obviously, the invitation being extended here is not to repent, ask for forgiveness, accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, receive Jesus in your heart, or any of the other standard invitations that we are accustomed to. In the context of the financial health dimension of the gospel, however, it is a perfectly appropriate invitation to get someone started on the road toward following Jesus. Moreover, the willingness to extend this kind of invitation honors the fact that just as following Christ is a lifelong journey, so too is the decision to follow Christ experienced by many people as a process, a series of varying decisions that eventually leads to a more specifically cognizant decision to follow Jesus.⁴⁹² We recall Paul Hiebert's suggestion that Christ-following be understood more in terms of relational and fuzzy sets than intrinsic and well-formed sets. Rather than seeking, therefore, to discern who is "in" and who is "out," the role of evangelism is to help persons move toward (in the direction of) following Jesus and grow in their commitment to and relationship with Him.⁴⁹³

Deepening the Initial Life-Based Gospel Understanding: Being Loosed from One Mental Script

An additional insight from the field research that impacts a life-based gospel understanding is that some Christians continue to be bound by the "old and standard"

⁴⁹²The notion of "process" or "series of experiences" or "stages" has been well-documented in anthropological, missiological, and evangelistic literature. Lewis Rambo, for example, argues for a seven-stage model of the conversion process: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences (Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993, 16-18). Alan Tippett proposes a five-stage schematic for understanding total group movements to Christianity: awareness, realization, decision, encounter, and incorporation (Alan R. Tippett, "The Cultural Anthropology of Conversion," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard, Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1992, 192-205). Rick Richardson likens the conversion process to marriage, so that it "is best seen as a larger relational process with milestone events along the way" (Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, 132-133).

⁴⁹³Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 292

mental script that includes references to images such as salvation, forgiveness, repentance, ABCs, and the Sinner's Prayer. This helps us at two points. First, it reminds us that developing an evangelistic vision based on the biblical theme of life provides us with different images we can access in the ministry of evangelism. For example, we could invite persons to "live life as God intends" rather than "accept Christ as your Lord and Savior;" or we could encourage people to "partner with Jesus in bringing full life to others" instead of asking them to "use your spiritual gifts to build up the church and minister to the world;" or we could suggest that "Jesus came into the world to bring full life" rather than "Jesus came into the world to save sinners." A life-based understanding of evangelism adds to the options available to us in our inventory of images.

The second point to emphasize here comes from the opposite perspective. Just as we do not want to be limited to one primary mental script, we also want to avoid suggesting that life-based images become the new script that binds us. A strong case can be made for considering the life theme as a primary theme of the Bible, but the intent is *not* to discard all other evangelistic visions and replace them with a life-based vision. Instead the goal is to argue strongly and cogently enough for the life theme so that it would be *allowed its place* among other evangelistic portrayals and *add to* the evangelistic possibilities available to us. The gospel is multi-faceted. People and cultural contexts are multi-faceted too. Therefore, we will be much better served by an expansion of evangelistic theology, imagery, and language, as opposed to a simple discarding of the old for replacement with the new. In certain contexts with certain people it is appropriate to speak primarily of Jesus as Lord and Savior who forgives our sins and calls us to a life of discipleship and ministry. In other contexts, with other people, it is more helpful to

speaking primarily of the possibility of experiencing full life on earth as God originally intended, and invite persons to begin that journey.

The Relationship between Life, the Kingdom of God, and Eternal Life

This topic has been addressed at various points throughout this project, so these comments will be brief. In terms of implications for evangelistic theory and practice, two perspectives in particular are pertinent. The first is that “life” expresses God’s intention for God’s creation, while the “kingdom of God” may be viewed as a parallel concept that expresses the “arena” in which life is experienced. Even though “kingdom” may be viewed as a parallel concept, “life” remains theologically and biblically prior to kingdom because of its close connection with the creation narratives. With this life-based perspective, therefore, evangelism is more directly grounded in the creation narratives, and this is the best biblical and theological starting place. In addition, this perspective better serves evangelism in the current U.S. American context. Inviting people to enjoy a fuller experience of life makes more linguistic and cultural sense than inviting them to become a part of God’s kingdom. This is not to say that we cannot attempt to re-interpret and give new meaning to kingdom imagery for the current U.S. American context. This, however, is not the purpose of this project, for two reasons. First, other scholars have already done this or are in the process of doing it.⁴⁹⁴ Second, the life theme is theologically and biblically prior to the kingdom theme and thus better serves as the

⁴⁹⁴James Choung, for example, refers to the kingdom of God as “the place where what happened was what God wanted to happen” so that during our life on earth as we believe in, love, and serve Jesus, “we usher in heaven and its mercy and justice wherever we walk.” James Choung, *True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 130; 148.

theological and biblical foundation for evangelism.⁴⁹⁵ Embodying and communicating the possibility of full life in Jesus with non-believers and helping them embrace that full life makes sense, therefore, biblically, theologically, and evangelistically.

The second perspective that is especially pertinent is that the use of “eternal” as a descriptor of the life that God makes possible through Jesus involves life-now dimensions as well as life-then dimensions. This has been discussed at length, so three brief remarks will suffice at this point. First, the field research data clearly indicates the benefit of including the possibility of full life *now* in evangelistic theory and practice. The reader may recall that the ratio of life-now references to life-then references in the research data was four to one. Moreover, the recurrence of life-now references is even more prevalent for recent converts. This data leads us to acknowledge that life-now dimensions of the good news must be given equal importance in the ministry of evangelism.

The second point is that the quality of the life that is being offered now is that of the age to come. Jesus has ushered in a caliber of living that is unparalleled. Transformation is experienced when we follow Jesus and embrace the life He offers. Forgiveness is available. Justice is presupposed. Healing is given. Peace is present. This age-to-come quality of living is evidenced in the biblical narratives, envisioned in the theological material, and observed in the field research. John’s vision of Jesus “making all things new” (Revelation 21:6) will come finally and fully to fruition at some future time, but the *quality* of that newness can be experienced in partial measure even now.

The third remark concerning life-now is that this dimension of the Christ-following journey should not be stressed to the point that the life-then dimension is

⁴⁹⁵Without question this viewpoint is seen by some to be at odds with the Synoptic gospels, but it is not at odds with the rest of the biblical narrative, and therefore remains faithful to the Bible as a whole.

completely forgotten. Just as we seek an organic synthesis of the blessing of knowing God with the other tangible blessings that God grants in Christ, so too do we seek an organic synthesis of life-now and life-then. We experience an unparalleled caliber of living now due to the age-to-come quality of the life which Jesus brings. However, we also experience an extraordinary caliber of living now because of our faith in the promise of an even fuller experience of God's intentions in the future. With the same breath, therefore, it is appropriate to argue for a stronger life-now dimension in the ministry of evangelism in order to connect well with non-believers, while yet also lobbying for us not to forget the reality of the new heavens and the new earth that are envisioned at some future time.⁴⁹⁶

The Relational Dimensions of Full Life in Christ

An early claim that was made regarding this dimension of full life in Christ is that full life in Christ cannot be experienced, expressed, or shared outside the scope of relationships, nor at the expense of other persons. This claim has been solidly substantiated by the biblical studies material, the theology chapter, and the field research data. The ensuing comments, therefore, will be limited to two vital issues: 1) the relational dimension of Christ-following is integral to evangelism and not an "add-on;" and 2) how this dimension impacts evangelism training.

⁴⁹⁶Barth speaks to this issue in terms of the provisional nature of our life now. He suggests that "the whole of life is provisional," and "can be lived only in expectation of eternal life." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/4, 384-385.

The Relational Dimension of Full Life in Christ is Integral Thereto

In the U.S. American context, where the independent, individualistic mindset exercises such strong influence, it is important to confirm that the relational dimension of following Christ should not be considered as something which we add on to our understandings at some future point in our Christ-following journey, but rather is essential and integral from the very beginning of that journey. This confirmation is necessary because in spite of the many voices in U.S. American Christianity that have clamored for a fuller integration of the relational and interdependent nature of Christ-following, there is yet a strong tendency to think in privatized, individualistic, isolationist ways. Previously, mention was made of Hiebert's work with set theory, and his view that U.S. Americans tend to think in terms of intrinsic sets rather than relational sets. Even more pertinent to the point at hand is his argument from the other side of that coin. In addition to his view that U.S. Americans lean toward intrinsic set thinking, he further notes that the Hebraic way of thinking that undergirds the Bible is just the opposite. He writes that "the idea of the . . . autonomous individual is absent in Hebrew thought and biblical teachings," which means that "biblically, relatedness and community are at the *heart* of the gospel because they are of the *essence* of God himself."⁴⁹⁷ In a similar vein, Lalsangkima Pachuau proposes that it is impossible to even conceive of selfhood apart from relationships, for the self is "a relational being by its very nature," so that "whether identity is conceived as 'given' or as 'constructed', it is a relational entity."⁴⁹⁸ Relationality is part and parcel of who the Triune God is, and as persons created in God's

⁴⁹⁷Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 287; emphasis added.

⁴⁹⁸Lalsangkima Pachuau, "Ethnic Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation," *Mission Studies* 26 (2009): 55-56.

image, it is also part and parcel of who we are, or at least of who we are intended to be. This suggests that living in relationship with God, others, and God's creation, is an intrinsic dimension of the full life that God intends and makes possible through Jesus. This further suggests that the relational dimension of the Christ-following life must be included in evangelistic ministry.

We hear echoes here of Yoder, Harink, Stone, and others. The reader may recall, for example, that Stone argues against the type of evangelism that seeks first to convince persons to accept a personal relationship with Christ and then *subsequently* encourages them to participate in the social and public embodiment of Christ's peaceable reign. He maintains that participation in the social and public embodiment of Christ's peaceable reign through God's people (the church) is part and parcel *of* conversion, not subsequent to it.⁴⁹⁹ It would be helpful to nuance Stone's perspective just a bit. It is true that the relational dimension of the Christ-following life is intrinsic thereto, and not subsequent to it. However, in response to Stone's declaration that the relational dimension of the Christ-following life is offered *as* salvation, it would be more accurate to say that it is offered as an integral *part of* salvation. This confirms that the relational dimension is part of the essential core of the Christ-following life and must not be neglected, but it also confirms that it does not make up the whole of that life. Relationships are crucial and central, but relationships involve individuals, and individuals are invited to make personal decisions regarding the full life that Jesus offers. Given the U.S. American context of this project, it is true that the relational dimensions of the Christ-following journey should be strongly emphasized. However, this emphasis should not be so strong that evangelism is

⁴⁹⁹Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 10-17.

conceived of solely in terms of helping persons choose to participate in relationships with other believers to the neglect of helping them choose to believe, know, obey, and abide in Jesus.⁵⁰⁰ As with many other themes throughout this project, an attitude of both/and serves us better than an attitude of either/or.

The Relational Dimension of Full Life in Christ and its Impact on Evangelism Training

When we understand that the relational dimension of full life in Christ is integral thereto, this impacts evangelism training in at least two ways. First, it influences how the evangelistic vision is conceptualized and communicated. The relational dimension is included as basic to the evangelistic vision rather than as an extraneous add-on at a later point in the evangelizing or discipling process. Right relationships with other people and with God's creation are intrinsic to right relationship with God. This is why the description of the gospel that was given earlier in this chapter referred to the Christ-following life as "a holistic, *relational* flourishing of persons, *relational networks*, *communities*, and God's creation." The intention is not to imply that other evangelistic visions fail to include the relational dimensions of Christ-following, for some of them do. We have already observed, for example, that Scott Jones grounds his evangelistic vision in loving God and loving neighbor. Brian McLaren conceives of the process of evangelism as "part of the ongoing movement of spiritual friendship begun by Jesus Christ," so that we see it "as relational dance rather than conceptual conquest."⁵⁰¹ James

⁵⁰⁰David Bosch writes that "principalities and powers, governments and nations cannot come to faith – only individuals can." David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 416.

⁵⁰¹Brian D McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 160-162.

Choung refers to a vision of a just world “where there are right relationships all around.”⁵⁰² Rick Richardson views evangelism in terms of a “model of conversations with spiritual friends” that “delights in the relationship itself and rejoices over every spiritual conversation.”⁵⁰³

The intention here is not to suggest that the relational dimensions of Christ-following which rise to the fore in a life-based evangelistic vision are completely missing from other evangelistic visions. The intention, rather, is simply yet forcefully to contend that these relational dimensions must be included in the conceptualization, embodiment, and communication of the gospel message if we are to be faithful to God’s full-life intentions for us in Jesus Christ. Thus, for example, when we engage in evangelism training, one of the “barometer questions” that we must use is whether or not the methods of verbal gospel sharing that we teach Christ-followers to use include the relational dimensions of the Christ-following life.⁵⁰⁴ Does the Roman Road reflect these relational dimensions? Does the Bridge method reflect them? How about the use of various colors on a bracelet? Again, let me emphasize that I am not proposing that all other evangelistic visions be discarded in favor of a life-based vision. I rather am proposing that in addition to other methods of gospel sharing, life-based methods that include the relational dimensions must also be offered. James Choung’s gospel vision demonstrates how the relational dimensions could be included in gospel sharing. He speaks of four aspects of

⁵⁰²James Choung, *True Story*, 59.

⁵⁰³Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, 3.

⁵⁰⁴I am using gospel-sharing methods as *one* example of how to apply the essential point concerning the relational dimensions of a life-based vision of evangelism. This does not mean, however, that life-based evangelism is limited to verbal or pictorial communication of the gospel message. It is more comprehensive than that, as I have stated earlier. This issue will be addressed in a subsequent section.

the essential biblical story: Designed for Good, Damaged by Evil, Restored for Better, and Sent Together to Heal.⁵⁰⁵ His continual focus on relationships, combined with the fact that we are sent *together* to heal, provides a good example of what is being encouraged here. The evangelistic community must do more of this type of gospel conceptualization, and we moreover should include life-based references in these conceptualizations rather than limiting most of our references to “salvation,” “kingdom,” “restoration,” and the like.

The relational dimensions of the Christ-following life also impact who we engage in evangelism training. Many training models are designed to equip interested individuals in how to develop relationships with people in their relational networks and then seek appropriate opportunities to share gospel communication and invitation. These models are to be strongly applauded. Not only do they take seriously the fact that God desires human participation in the evangelizing process, but they also honor the role of relationships in that process. At the same time, though, the tendency with these models is to focus on how *individuals* can develop relationships with other individuals for evangelizing purposes. The relational dimensions of Christ-following also encourage us to seek better methods and more frequent opportunities for engaging in evangelism training with relational *groupings* of believers.

Sunday school classes, home groups, congregational-based recreational groups, short-term study groups, families, and informal networks of believers: let us discern ways to help these relational networks of believers learn how to embody and communicate the full-life-in-relationship that God intends and makes possible in Jesus Christ. They are already experiencing the blessing of relationship within their groupings, so it is natural

⁵⁰⁵James Choung, *True Story*, 166.

that we equip them to allow the Holy Spirit to use those relational blessings to draw non-believers toward a decision to follow Jesus. Please note that what is envisioned here is not “membership recruitment” in order to grow a Sunday school class, but inclusion of the ministry of evangelism within already-existent groups of persons who are experiencing the unparalleled caliber of life that comes through relationship with Jesus and Jesus’ followers. As Rick Richardson writes, “God is far more committed to raising up witnessing *communities* than to raising up witnessing *individuals*.”⁵⁰⁶ To a certain degree this way of thinking has been present in intercultural and missiological literature for some time now, with such authors as Kraft, Tippett, Loewen, Donovan, Warnshuis, and Pickett.⁵⁰⁷ In that literature, however, the normal focus is on how to best encourage group-oriented societies to choose a Christ-following life. In the U.S. American context, the current discussion must focus more on how to honor and evangelistically utilize the relational dimensions of the Christ-following life in a setting where individualistic orientations still prevail. Thus, though the idea of “group conversions” is not new to evangelism, we have much to learn regarding the use of relational groupings in the ministry of evangelism in the U.S. American context.

This concludes the most pertinent comments related to the four clusters of original research questions and claims. With these comments, plus the summary description of the research journey provided earlier in this chapter, most of the important evangelistic implications of a strong focus on the biblical theme of life have been covered in depth. Two issues, however, are of sufficient importance in the U.S. American context to merit

⁵⁰⁶Rich Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, 27.

⁵⁰⁷For an informative discussion of literature related to group-oriented conversion, see Charles H. Kraft, “Conversion in Group Settings,” in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard, (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1992), 259-275.

additional attention: a) the relationship of creation care to evangelism; and b) the relationship of evangelism to the “all-dimensions” aspect of the Christ-following life.

Creation Care

This issue was treated briefly in the third chapter, with references to Jurgen Moltmann, Howard Snyder, and Matthew Sleeth, each of whom conceives of creation care as a core element in the overall narrative of God’s intentions in Jesus Christ. The key question at that point in the project was whether or not it is possible to include creation care as an integral facet of the gospel message without that message becoming overly complex. Judgment was withheld to allow for possible insights that might have emerged from the field research, but the preliminary conjecture was that it is indeed possible to include creation care in the gospel message without overcomplicating that message. The field research data did not yield any significant insight into this issue. However, a brief exploration of Calvin DeWitt’s work adds strong support for considering creation care to be an integral part of the biblical story.

DeWitt argues for a return to the biblical perspective that human beings are a part of creation and should not consider themselves as somehow separate from it. He writes that “human beings are part and parcel of God’s created order, are God’s creatures, embedded in creation.”⁵⁰⁸ With this foundational understanding, he proceeds to describe three principles that emerge from the Bible. The first is the earth-keeping principle, which refers to our role to “keep and sustain our Lord’s creation.” The second is the fruitfulness principle, which depicts God’s intention that we are to enjoy creation’s

⁵⁰⁸Calvin B. DeWitt, gen. ed., *The Just Stewardship of Land and Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Ecumenical Council, 1996), 22.

fruitfulness, but we are not to destroy it. The third is the Sabbath principle, which expresses the necessity for us to provide Sabbath rests for creation. These principles lay the groundwork for what DeWitt terms “God’s paradigm of intent,” in which he suggests that “the Promised Land with its steward people was the paradigm of intent for the relationship of God, land, and people.”⁵⁰⁹ This fits well with a life-based evangelistic vision. Not only does it link creation care with God’s original intentions in creation, but it also makes reference to the Promised Land (“a land flowing with milk and honey”), which elicits images of full, vibrant life.

With the strong support of scholars such as DeWitt, Sleeth, Moltmann, Barth, Snyder, and others, we can confidently affirm the preliminary conjecture and propose that creation care can be included in evangelistic communication without undue complexity or confusion. This is illustrated in the gospel description presented earlier in this chapter, where the life that is experienced through following Christ involves “a holistic and relational flourishing of people, relational networks, communities, and *God’s creation*.” This inclusion of God’s creation in the holistic and relational flourishing that is envisioned as part of the Christ-following life is sufficiently simple and straightforward so as to not unduly complicate the essential gospel message. Moreover, its inclusion opens the door for further exploration into this issue. Given the growing emphasis in the USA on “Going Green,” the inclusion of creation care is not only biblically and theologically faithful, but is also evangelistically wise, for it offers another potential connection point with non-believers.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁹Calvin B. DeWitt, gen. ed., *The Just Stewardship of Land and Creation*, 28-34.

⁵¹⁰An important caveat at this point: though “Going Green” has become a stronger focus in the USA in recent years, the commitment to creation care will nevertheless fight a constant uphill battle against the

Following Christ is to Impact Every Dimension of our Lives

The reader will recall that this issue was dealt with in the third chapter. Building on insights from Jurgen Moltmann, Paul Hiebert, Rene Padilla, Jim Wallis, Leslie Newbigin, and John Wesley, the suggestion was made that evangelistic theory and practice must discover how to prevent persons from making an initial decision to follow Jesus without understanding, appreciating, and committing themselves to the all-dimensions impact that God intends. This is a crucial consideration in any context, but it is especially important in the U.S. American context, where there is a temptation to limit the all-dimensions impact of the Christ-following journey to the individual believer and his or her closest circle of friends. Though this point has been cogently argued already, it would help if we add the thoughts of David Bosch at this juncture.

Bosch proposes that evangelism does indeed share good news of a blessed and gifted life to be experienced in Christ. This life, however, cannot be considered as a private treasure that has no positive impact in the lives of others. Thus, “it is not simply to *receive* life that people are called to be Christians, but rather to *give* life.”⁵¹¹ Germane to the current discussion is that this giving of life is not viewed nor intended by God to be limited to one-to-one transactions that have little or no impact in public and social spheres. This does not mean that in the midst of personal difficulties it is inappropriate to experience peace, joy, healing or comfort through the life that Jesus brings. Bosch

U.S. American cultural tendency to view nature and the environment as something which should be controlled by human beings rather than as something that human beings live in vital harmony with. Althen and Bennett suggest that this concept is tied to the U.S. American emphasis on the possibility of changing the future by taking action in the present. Based on their belief in the possibility of engendering change through planning and action, U.S. Americans assume “that their physical and social environments are subject to human domination or control” (Gary Althen and Janet Bennett, *American Ways*, 16).

⁵¹¹David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 414; emphasis added.

suggests that it does mean, however, that Jesus offers these positive personal experiences only within the context of “the lordship of Christ in *all realms of life*, an authoritative word of hope that the world as we know it will not always be the way it is.”⁵¹² Grounded in this understanding, then, Bosch contends that evangelism is a call to service: “God wills not only that we be rescued from hell and redeemed for heaven, but also that within us - and through our ministry in society around us – the ‘fullness of Christ’ be re-created, the image of God be restored in our lives and relationships.” In the final analysis, Bosch proposes that “evangelism, then, is calling people to mission.”⁵¹³ James Choung echoes this perspective when he writes of the early disciples in the gospel narratives: “From the very outset, Jesus invites them to join in his mission – to advance the kingdom he started. From the get-go, Jesus gives them a picture of what it means to serve people and to stop seeking their own self-gratification. He wanted them to look up from the selfishness of their own hearts and to start serving others with love and justice.”⁵¹⁴

This call to serve others with love and justice must be included as an integral component of the gospel message. It is too important to save this dimension of God’s intentions for subsequent introduction in the ministry of discipleship. This is especially true in the United States, where there is a strong temptation to privatize the blessings of following Jesus and compartmentalize His teachings in such a way that they impact personal piety but not social, cultural, economic, and political involvement. As Bosch notes: “Preachers steer clear of controversial social issues and concentrate on those

⁵¹²David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 417; emphasis added.

⁵¹³*Ibid.*, 417-418.

⁵¹⁴James Choung, *True Story*, 160.

personal sins of which most of their enthusiastic listeners are not guilty. However, what criterion decides that racism and structural injustice are social issues but pornography and abortion personal? Why is politics shunned and declared to fall outside of the competence of the evangelist, except when it favors the position of the privileged in society?"⁵¹⁵

These insights from Bosch, Choung, and many others lead to an improvement of the gospel description given earlier in this chapter. This earlier description suggests that the good news may be viewed as follows: *Through a full-bodied trust in and following of Jesus, we receive forgiveness and are initiated into a life of wholeness (redemption) and reconciliation. This life is best described as a holistic and relational flourishing of people, relational networks, communities, and God's creation; and this flourishing will be characterized by joy, peace, justice, love, purpose, and provision, in all dimensions of life.*

A better description is that the good news may be viewed as follows (additions are highlighted in bold font): *Through a full-bodied trust in and following of Jesus, we receive forgiveness and are initiated into a **personal and public** life of wholeness (redemption), reconciliation, and **service**. This life is best described as a holistic and relational flourishing of people, relational networks, communities, and God's creation, **as together we partner with Jesus in his life-giving mission to the world, serving as agents of joy, peace, social justice, political justice, economic justice, love, purpose, and provision, in all personal and public dimensions of life.***

Because this redacted gospel description is a more faithful representation of the biblical and theological vision of the full life that God intends and offers in Jesus Christ, we should also amend the description of full life that was suggested earlier. The amended

⁵¹⁵David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 417.

description reads as follows, with changes highlighted in bold: *Life as God intends us to experience it in Jesus is a holistic, relational flourishing of people, relational networks, communities, and God's creation. This life is rooted in a full-bodied trust in and following of Jesus (this includes knowing, obeying, and abiding in him), which brings us forgiveness and initiates a **personal and public** life of wholeness (redemption), reconciliation (with God, ourselves, and others), and service. **Together, we are to partner with Jesus in his life-giving mission to the world, serving as agents of joy, peace, social justice, political justice, economic justice, love, purpose, and provision, in all **personal and public** dimensions of life.***

Life-Based Evangelism Ministry Must Have a Broad Scope

The fact that this kind of life is possible through following Jesus is the good news that we share through a life-based ministry of evangelism. But what is meant by “share”? Simply put: *the foundation of a life-based ministry of evangelism is a comprehensive, broadly-based embodiment of a flourishing life-based Christian identity.* This embodiment will include words, but it will also include a portrayal of the varying dimensions of the full life in Christ that God intends for us. As Christ-followers who wish to participate in a life-based ministry of evangelism, therefore, we not only talk about the different dimensions of full life with non-believers, but we also portray those dimensions in our personal lives and in the corporate life of the congregation, so that they may see for themselves how full and vibrant life can be when people follow Jesus. This portrayal of the fullness of the Christ-following life was mentioned by several interviewees in response to the question “Who or what was influential in your initial decision to follow

Christ?" One interviewee referred to the role models he witnessed in his childhood church.⁵¹⁶ Another person mentioned seeing the impact of Jesus in other people's lives in his youth group.⁵¹⁷ Yet another said that her husband "showed me you can be a follower of Christ and still laugh and have fun."⁵¹⁸ A fourth interviewee spoke of seeing the peace and joy in her brother's face when he chose to follow Jesus.⁵¹⁹ A fifth person referred to "seeing how my mom's life was compared to my other friends and my friends' parents, and I wanted my family to be on a better track than the track my mom's life was on."⁵²⁰ A sixth respondent talked about "the quality of lives of people who said they followed Jesus."⁵²¹ These examples confirm that the non-verbal, experiential portrayal of the life that God intends in Jesus is a powerful dimension of the ministry of evangelism. Orlando Costas refers to this as the call for Christians "to interpret Christ's saving work by actualizing in their everyday life the essential characteristics of salvation."⁵²²

This portrayal of the Christ-following life in non-verbal expressions does not, however, mean that verbal communication and invitation are unnecessary. They too are vital dimensions of a comprehensive ministry of evangelism. Language is one of the primary ways we communicate as human beings, and the use of language must therefore be utilized in the ministry of evangelism. As the Incarnate One, Jesus models this for us

⁵¹⁶Interview with author, Dacula, GA, June 13, 2010.

⁵¹⁷Interview with author, Duluth, GA, April 27, 2010.

⁵¹⁸Interview with author, Loganville, GA, April 26, 2010.

⁵¹⁹Interview with author, Augusta, GA, May 16, 2010.

⁵²⁰Interview with author, Loganville, GA, April 26, 2010.

⁵²¹Interview with author, Mt. Pleasant, SC, June 8, 2010.

⁵²²Orlando E. Costas, "Evangelism and the Gospel of Salvation," *International Review of Mission* 63, no. 249 (Ja 1974), 31.

quite forcefully. It is true that while on earth Jesus portrayed the life which He intends for us through laughter, sharing of relationships, acts of compassion, healings, miracles of provision, and more. He also, however, invested a great deal of time in preaching and teaching, sharing the message of full life in Him through the medium of verbal communication. An important consideration regarding this point is that we should not make use of language in the ministry of evangelism simply because language is a primary means of communication for human beings. In addition to that, I would point out that not only does language serve as a medium of communication, but it also influences our *conceptualizations*. Just as thoughts shape our words, so too do words shape our thoughts. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson contend, for example, that there are some metaphors we use in our U.S. American culture that not only *express* our conceptions of the world, but actually *shape* those conceptions.⁵²³ I would expand this notion to include not only metaphors but also primary images, and this is one of the reasons I have given many examples throughout this project concerning how to apply a life-based evangelistic vision to the verbal sharing of the gospel message. Without question the ministry of evangelism is not limited to verbal communication. On the other hand, though, since the consistent repetition of metaphors and images can shape our conceptions, it is also true that we will never fully embrace a ministry of life-based evangelism if we do not also embrace new ways of sharing verbal communication and invitation that are consistent therewith. We must walk the life-based walk, *and* we must talk the life-based talk.

The ministry of evangelism, therefore, seeks to: 1) embody (portray and verbally communicate) the flourishing life that God intends for us as we follow Jesus; and to 2)

⁵²³George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, with new afterword (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3-6.

invite, guide, lead, encourage, and/or direct non-believers toward choosing to follow Jesus and experiencing (and contributing to) that life for themselves and others. This life-based evangelistic ministry should be engaged in by individual Christians, relational groupings of Christians, organized congregations, and other Christian ministry groups.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE OF REAL-TIME INTERVIEW NOTES

This is an example of real-time interview notes that were typed during an actual interview during the field research phase of the dissertation. In order to preserve the integrity of the sample, errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar have not been corrected.

Introductory Paragraph

Thank you for your time today. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview. I am going to ask you a series of open-ended questions. I want you to answer each question in your own words. There is no such thing as a right or wrong answer. This research is designed to discover what you really think about certain issues, so please answer openly, honestly, and without any fear of judgment. Your name will not be used at any time during my research and writing. I will be reading each question exactly as it has been worded so that all the interview respondents will be answering the same questions. Depending on your answers, I may ask some follow-up questions. A follow-up question never means that you've given a wrong answer. In fact, it usually means just the opposite: that you have given such an interesting and potentially helpful answer that I want to be sure I understand it fully. To ensure that I record your answers accurately, I am going to type your answers as you talk, using my laptop. This will allow us to proceed through the interview more quickly than if I take notes by hand. However, if this feels like a distraction to you, please tell me immediately, and I will stop. If at any time during the interview, you are not clear about what I am asking you to do, please let me know. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

- Compared with other congregations, your church appears to be more effective than some other churches in reaching people who have little or no previous Christian background. What do you think are some of the key factors in your church's effectiveness in helping non-Christians choose to follow Christ?

our loving acceptance of everyone, everyone who comes through the doors – our passion to serve people, Carolyn is a great example, she has really imparted Jesus' "go, feed my sheep, care for my people" – a lot of us who came here were non-Christians, we had a lot of habits, hurts, and hangups; the invitation to come and be part of a family that loved you; I came in response to some postcards, walked through the door and got hugged and they haven't let go of me since.

- Could you please describe the process or series of events that led to your initial decision to follow Christ?

raised new age, so didn't have Christ in my heart, raised in believing in a supreme believing and that he was love, but we could get there rhtough our own works. lot of hurts, suffering, pain, went through addictions, God gave me a child when I needed someone in my life to love and know he would love me. when he was 24 he was arrested and sent to prison and this is when I received the postcards from Mosaic. I was so alone. My reason for working hard and being good (my son) was taken out of my hands. Came Christmas Eve of 2005 and felt such love and peace and acceptance from thepeople in church that I continued to come. Got into Celebrate Recovery, I was sober by then but hurting really bad, and Celebate Recovery was hosting The Passion movie by Mel Gibson for Easter. I'd never seen it before, but it made me realize what God gave us, His sacrifice for us, the love He has for us, and also His mother Mary, and the pain and the anguish she went through watching her son die for us. About a month later I got on my knees and said "Jesus I cannot do this by myself, please forgive me." He became my savior and it took a year (I'm also in Aglow, a strong ministry focusing on prayer and Spirit) and I was in a meeting and they laid hands on me and I've neve been the same (baptized in the Spirit).

- Sometimes we refer to the "gospel" as "the good news." In your experience and/or understanding, what are some of the "good" dimensions of "the good news"?

the most impoartnt thing is we are never alone, no matter what we are gong through, with the holy spirit, we have a power in us that we can call on the prince of peace no matter what's going on around us, and our fears, we can call on the power to get rid of those fears. and being raised in new age it was all up to our belief in positive thinking, it was all up to us what's going to happen in our life and how it's going to turn out. it's such a relief to know that the Lord can take anything and turn it around for good. He has a plan for me and the more I come to know him the more I know about Jesus dying for us, the more I know that it's the good news.

- Who or what was influential in your initial decision to follow Christ?

my brother and his wife. they had gotten saved about a year before my son got arrested and the peace and joy I saw in my brother's face and voice made me hungry. we would sit there and speak, discuss/argue, and he made me think a lot more. the main one was my son. getting arrested, he got in a bible study in county jail and I wanted to be able to talk with him and understand where he was coming from. he's been out of the halfway house a year and a half and is doing well. says he's saved but not actively following.

- Imagine that you are talking with a non-Christian friend about Jesus, and your friend has arrived at a point of interest concerning the Christian life. If your friend asks you, "Why should I become a Christian?" how would you respond?

I would imagine that if we're talking about becoming a Christian they are really searching because something is hurting them or going wrong in their life. I've been through a whole lot so my testimony can be adapted to particular people. But the peace

and the comfort and the power to overcome my fears by knowing Jesus Christ my Lord, I hope you see the difference in my life. I live my life now for the Lord because I want to. I find joy in the Lord, I find purpose in my life, it pulls me out of being so wrapped up in me, and I want to share it.

- If your friend asks you, “How can I become a Christian?” how would you respond?

ask Jesus, ask the Lord, to come into your life, tell him you can’t do it by yourself, that you want to surrender it to him. ask him to forgive you of your sins and follow his way. know that he died and rose and is alive, so that we can have eternal life.

- Would you characterize Christ-following as a private affair between an individual person and Jesus, a social affair that includes other people, or something else?

definitely the first two. you can’t follow Jesus and have a relationship with Jesus by not loving your neighbors. I used to be reclusive because of fears, but by following Jesus I realize that it’s people too. need to love them like He loved them.

- What, in your opinion, is the essential Christian message?

love god, love one another, find joy in walking in the Lord’s will, that is true peace on earth and joy, and all this I’m speaking from my experience, I would never try to lay those on someone if they didn’t want to hear them. would ask the Lord for guidance.

- Is there any sense in which you are more alive now than before you became a Christ-follower? Please describe.

much laughter. oh yeah. a depth in me that was never there before. a “knowing”, a truth, right now I feel so filled with the Holy Spirit, it makes everything more.

- What are some of the things that you believe your non-Christian friends think about the most?

where to get their next fix; what if they think I’m stupid; I’m so miserable and so alone, no one loves me; this pain is so intense I can’t go on; how can I make more money; who’s out there to get me.

- What are some of the things that you believe your non-Christian friends worry about the most?

same things; the change between thinking and worrying, worrying is when it gets ingrained, gets deeper down in you, and affects how you feel

- Keeping in mind what you just told me that your non-Christian friends think and/or worry about, what in your own experience of following Christ might be something

helpful to talk about with them that would help draw them toward choosing to become Christ-followers?

same things I said before: been there, done that. the difference in my life now by knowing Christ, by knowing His plan, that He loves me, that things will work out for God, I fill my heart with Christ and don't have to fill it now with "that man over there" or "that drink." If we put our trust in Him He's going to take care of our needs, and it can be really be hard when we're down there in those throes. That's why you need to be around friends who really know the Lord, that can lift us up, that we can trust with our worries and our secrets. We need to learn to know the Word, His promises are there, if we ask him to show us where to go next He will, through the word or a friend, or a postcard or a song on the radio.

- Why did you decide to follow Jesus?

he kept knocking. I spent 52 years without Him, and when I actually got it, opened the door, and God lifted that veil, the peace, the feeling of being loved.

- Do you believe your non-Christian friends think much at all about life-after-death? Please elaborate.

some do. lot of different ideas about what's going to happen after death. I was raised to believe in reincarnation, which doesn't put a whole lot of value on your life. It's back to you again. If you mess up this time you'll be back there next time and have to try to work it out again. I was always for heaven, though, that place where we would get to God, love, and peace. Some (like my husband) who believe that St. Peter is going to open the pearly gates and say "come on in." Some friends swear they are atheists and don't care about what happens after death.

- In the gospel of John, there are a lot of verses about life:
 - "For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will" (5:21, ESV)
 - "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly (10:10, ESV)

In your experience and understanding, what does "life in Christ" mean?

smile on my face; going out and feeding his sheep; loving your neighbors; example; such a genuine feeling in my heart now, that is life in Christ to me; it's about being about His business and not my business, my self.

- Does Jesus promise us a life free of problems? Please elaborate somewhat.

no way

- Does Jesus promise us financial wealth? Please elaborate.

no

- What, therefore, do you think Jesus means in John 10:10 when he says “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly”?

the joy; seek first the kingdom of god and he will give you heart’s desires; by following Jesus, by putting your focus on God’s kingdom, your whole perspective changes, and you get joy in doing what He wants you to do. He loves us, and if He needed to bless us with wealth to bring us back to Him, he would. If wants to put my son in prison in order to bring me back to Him, that’s what He’s gong to do. But He’s always right there with us.

- Do you feel like you decided to follow Christ based more on the benefits or consequences that this decision would have on your life now or based more on the benefits or consequences that this decision would have on your life after death?

this life. I don’t think a whole lot about the life to come. I’m not doing anything I’m doing for the rewards that are going to happen later. My focus is in the moment and right now where I’m walking with the Lord, and the difference between when I focus on myself and when I follow Him and leave self behind; the peace and the power and the joy that I’m receiving, that’s what I’m thinking about.

- What difference has Jesus made in your life?

laughter: he’s made me new; he has forgiven me for all the things that I felt shame, fear, condemnation. I still feel them, but they don’t hurt like they used to; don’t hold me back like they used to. when I get stressed and worried I can call on the prince of peace and get peace. when I’m hurting physically, I can focus on the cross and ask his forgiveness for focusing on my own pain and letting it stop me. the desire to show others what I have in my life, to give them love and not worry about being rejected for it.

- Is there anything you’d like to add about anything that we’ve talked about?

Imagine, heaven on earth, with our Lord, our Savior, every knee bowing, no more pain, no more sorrow. Don’t ever want to go back to where I was.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE OF COMPILATION OF ALL RESPONSES TO A SINGLE QUESTION

This is a sample of a file in which all responses to a single question were compiled for use during the analysis phase. This type of file was developed for each question that was included in the analysis phase as represented in Chapter Four of the dissertation.

Compilation of ALL—

“Is there any sense in which you are more alive now than before you became a Christ-follower? Please describe.”

Effingham, EGL: when you’re living in that freedom it’s so much clearer the peace that you have;

Effingham, EGL: oh absolutely: I’m going through a bit of a weary time right now, but yes, especially right after my salvation experience, felt like a brand-new person; sometimes we get in our own busyness of ministry and get weary and dry. when I see a new person come to Christ I re-live that excitement again. we need to be seeing more of that.

Effingham, EGL: definitel. in my mind first and foremost. before, the thoughts I had and the thoughts I have now are completely changed. I never realized that I had the power to control my thoughts and have them line up with God’s word. that’s huge. much more alive with a purpose for my life. I always struggled with that in high school and college, what is my prupose, there’s got to be something more. used to tear my mind up. there’s gotta be something more, emptiness inside, drove my crazy. Jesus was most defintiley the answer I was looking for. then once you have that purpose in you everyting about you becomes more alive. before I had to fake it. after becoming a Christian it was a natural flow that came out of me.

Effingham, EGL: oh, yes! so much. I’ve always gone to church. I haven’t always lived it. there have been times where I went through the process. I pretended. I didn’t know I was pretending but New Hope helped me see that in hindsight. You see here what growth you need to do. you have to have an attitude of following where He needs you, and trusting Him in that. having that helps you live our life happier and more fulfilled.

Effingham, EGL: absolutely. I’m more alive to the nature around me, to the feelings and emotions of others. when you become a follower of Christ your focus turns from self to others. gives you such an awareness of pain, joy, brings you alive.

Effingham, EGL: I think because it was so long ago I don't remember; but there's definitely more of a peace in my own life, and I think there wouldn't be if I didn't have Christ; just knowing that whatever happens, good or bad on this earth, the most important decision has been made, and eternity has been lined out.

Effingham, EGL: definitely, it's like, as I grow, the things in this world become less and less important, and the things of God, you start to really feel God's heart, you have this urgency to fulfill the purpose He has for your live, it's like a passion that keeps growing. very fulfilling.

Hamilton Mill, EGL: yes, I'm alive knowing what's ahead, and knowing who's watching, so my decision-making is different than it was before. God was watching out for me before I even knew it.

Hamilton Mill, EGL: at 13 you're so young, but oh yeah, I just continue to grow; not by leaps and bounds sometimes in my life, but I have continued to grow. Jesus loves me this I know was a song that I sang, now it's something I feel.

Hamilton Mill, EGL: yes. I've always been very gregarious, very extroverted. I did a lot in my high school years. my mom was one, we didn't have a lot of money, but love prevailed, and our home was always one that took in all the children of alcoholics when moms and dads were passed out on the floor, and divorcees. I have early memories of kids spending the night with us because they couldn't go home. with that, that gave me a sense of being alive. but then I come up tot hat experience at age 21 and the difference in feeling alive at that point. part of that was a realization of mercy and grace, they are so paramount. I tell people in my testimony, for so long up until that time I thought the only people who had a testimony was you had to be a hooker or on drugs or an alcoholic. a minister's wife taught me to simply stand and say "I love Jesus and Jesus loves me" and that that was a testimony. In a sense this was a new aliveness. In a sense of direction, too, renewed sense of direction, always knowing that I would do some kind of work within the church. began to think at that time it would be as a joy, but He's kept me as a lay person for some reason.

Hamilton Mill, EGL: I think that I have a better perspective on life. the paradigm that I've used to make decisions in life has certainly changed. there are other factors that I make sure are considered, whether it's where we go on vacation or how to spend money. having a Christian perspective certainly changes the paradigm.

Hamilton Mill, EGL: I think I find myself more aware now of Christ's presence and I guess through that I see myself as more alive

Hamilton Mill, EGL: I don't remember a time before I knew God.

Hamilton Mill, EGL: oh yeah, I'm happier. happier now than I've ever been. as you follow Christ things in your life just develop. friendships, relationships, I'm more open and outgoing, I know he's on my side.

Mosaic, EGL: oh yeah. the reason I feel I'm more alive is that now I feel there's purpose; I'm not going on auto-pilot, I'm actually following; I realize I have a daddy who is watching over me, loving me, protecting, encouraging, lighting my path. and I realize I have choices now too. I'm not just heading straight into a wall, but have a choice.

Mosaic, EGL: oh yes, definitely. I was very much before an introvert, I walked under depression and rejection, I performed like a robot, I had no relationships, the relationships in two marriages were robotic, I even gave my children to their dad because I was so emotionally dry, but God started me on my healing journey, has restored the relationship with me and my children, it's been a tough but beautiful journey.

New Beginnings, EGL: I became a Christ-follower 2 years ago when I began attending this church. absolutely I'm more alive now than before. even though my life is...I have issues, I owe the IRS back taxes, I have a daughter who became pregnant, and she and her husband are living with us. I have a sense of complete peace that I shouldn't have. it's just "crap." I have responsibilities, but for the first time I have a wide angle lens. I'm seeing the big picture for the first time. the wide angle lens is the foundation. take off the blinders and let yourself go. I want to be where God wants me to be, not where I want to be.

New Beginnings, EGL: absolutely. I am, relationships take time, the more that I built onto the relationship with Christ, I had more understanding, more peace, and the understanding is very critical for me. when I don't understand why things are happening it causes frustration and anger, but with understanding it's "okay I know why you did that, Lord." understanding is a critical part of being a Christian.

St. Andrews, EGL: Jennie: yes, there's a joy that comes, and a confidence that He is with you always, you're never alone, you don't have to worry about death or dying. You might worry about losing your mind or being ill, but there's a great comfort, a joyful comfort. George: it's a different life than the life you were occupied with before. Now my life is more of a zoe, more of a spiritual kind of life, the things I pursue, look forward to, enjoy, and involved with and interested in, are not being chased so that they can provide me with entertainment or prestige. It's a different life. a different paradigm entirely. your life is radically different.

St. Andrews, EGL: yes, in every sense. probably my life today as a father, as I watch and help these kids grow up and recognize what's going on in their lives and how God fits into each and every step, how that fits into being a husband. There's a different dimension now that my wife recognizes in our marriage. Also in business and every other conversation I tend to bring it back to faith and how it has impacted our lives. in every sense I'm more alive.

St. Andrews, EGL: Shellie: woo-hoo! oh yeah! life is good. each day you never arrive, each day is a new beginning. there is continued revelation. it never ends. not like a dance you go to and go home and go to work tomorrow. new every day.

Will: for me it's different because I became a believer at a young age, but in the last few years my relationship has gotten much deeper. until you enter a deep relationship it's never complete. this church embraces the power and fullness of the Spirit. previously I was pushing a car by myself instead of having gas in the car. power and presence.

St. Andrews, EGL: definitely. I never went back. I've only gotten hungrier and hungrier. I'm satisfied with my dissatisfaction. never enough (in a good way).

Sugarloaf, EGL: J: certainly caring more about other people and trying to reach them, I didn't have that years ago, regard for fellow human beings; both of us when we were in Arizona, our church friends were our friends and family, that's all we knew and all we did things with

L: sort of along the same lines – since I've been an adult especially, I've found that support and sister-hood in my women's bible study, the strength I gain from them. it's the highlight of my week.

Sugarloaf, EGL: yes. more alive in my heart versus externally. I was a pretty wild guy before I became a Christian. alcohol, drugs, etc. one thing that has helped me mature in my faith more than anything is that when I married my wife she was a very very conservative Christian, so that has helped me not have one foot in the world's circle and one foot in the Christian circle. she's really taught me in a lot of ways, let's take a step back, what's the Bible say in regards to "this." We probably tend to be a little overly cautious in that regard but I'd rather err on that side, and we talk to our kids a lot about that, and I'm sure they're too young now to understand it (6 and 8), but we're trying to take them slow, kids grow up too fast now. we homeschool them. I'm a pretty laid-back person, but I feel alive because I have a peace and contentment about myself.

Orchard, EGL: yes. absolutely. kind of life what I was saying earlier – I've allowed Christ to be a bigger part of my life than probably it was before. I can wake up every day and feel totally rejoicing and comfortable, knowing that Christ is with me every minute of the day. I say little prayers to myself five or six times a day. I often give encouragement to my kids based on christ's direction. my daughter was telling me one time that she was nervous about giving a speech at school, and I told her to ask Christ to walk inside her and be with her, and she did. Follow-up: what led to you allowing Christ to be a bigger part of your life? Witnessing to other people. Allowing the acceptance and understanding of why things are the way they are, and trying to put yourself more into those kinds of situations. We are all example of Christ and all have that capability and power, and if you understand that, you can use it that way, and you can hopefully influence those non-Christiansz.

Orchard, EGL: can't really remember how life was prior to becoming a Christ-follower. I've never not believed in god.

Orchard, EGL: J: Yes. I was struggling with addictions, our marriage, she was so far ahead of me, it was causing friction, I told her “I can’t follow you. our marriage was having troubles. it’s not like the switch is flipped. ou work on yourself. life has challenges that you work on together. the miracles that have occurred. such strength we’ve been given. without our faith, don’t know where we would be when Laura was born (special needs child)

M: Absolutely. The peace beyond all understanding. time and time again we’ve experienced it. I don’t know how people go through what we’ve gone through without faith.

Orchard, EGL: I think so (Janice). knowing how particular god made things for us, he’s amazing. it was taken for granted before. much more thankful. it’s also awe. it’s not hum every day. Larry: I appreciate life more. Janice: it’s so precious.

Orchard, EGL: every. every sense. I just have a profoundly huge reason to try to be Christ each day, and before I had no reason to be anything, in particular.

Orchard, EGL: absolutely – I used to remember thinking that Jesus is just for those lost and broken people who can’t do it on their own – I used to be “I am woman hear me roar” but what a joke. so much hope, I look at everything so differently now.

Orchard, EGL: oh absolutely. no question. I think about the years I went through in my life partying and what’s so funny is I always felt there was something missing – Sunday morning nursing a hangover, there was something missing but I didn’t know what it was. now you can get that same high by giving out roses in a parking lot. more secure in me. I’m okay with me. didn’t used to be okay with me. I could never be enough. I see young teens struggle with that. very sad. not hopeless, but sad.

Wesley Chapel, EGL: yes, because I don’t usually feel threatened, I have a sense of security and confidence in God’s protection

Wesley Chapel, EGL: I think I’m more alive now based on the fact that my faith is stronger, my belief is stronger, I know that whatever I have managed to accomplish, it was done through the help of Christ supporting me and carrying me when I couldn’t carry myself (footprints in the sand), I constantly have the tendency to think back to how far I’ve come and I know I didn’t get here by doing that by myself. I remind my 3 sons of this constantly, be thankful for what you have and what you have accomplished. life is not about how much money your make or the positions you hold, it is about more than that. Christ takes us by the hand.

Wesley Chapel, EGL: Oh, yes, yes. It has become a way of life. things don’t worry me like they used to. I look towards the future but I don’t dwell in it because I have a number of my friends who didn’t make it through the night. I’m trying to get my wife squared away, she’s a real home-body. I tell her that we are 65/66 and there are people our age in nursing homes. We should be taking advantage of our health, enjoying what God has placed upon us to enjoy while we can.

Wesley Chapel, EGL: funny you ask that, today I had to meet with a mentor at my job and he asked me how did I feel being that I'm under the leadership of a woman pastor, and I shared that I have grown more spiritually than ever before, I have grown so much and I'm proud of myself, I work with the youth here. so my aliveness has to do with a confidence I have in the Lord.

Wesley Chapel, EGL: yes, there is. I'm more at ease in living, more able to handle adverse situations, because I realize I'm not in this life by myself, there's a greater power/help in God, I can rely on him to help me in all types of situations and he has done that. more relaxed in daily living more at peace in myself. handle things in His strength. have the word in me, the Spirit in me. assurance of his track record. I remember back when, what he has done for others he will do for me. that makes me glad, strengthens me, etc. I enjoy the good times and I handle the bad times much better than before.

Wesley Chapel, EGL: absolutely. when I was a young person, I couldn't feel the transformation as much, but I have seen stark differences in my life and how god has manifested himself in my life, probably due to teachings during my young life, which helped me avoid certain choices, not wanting to let my parents down or let God down, I became more well-rounded, focused, and more cautious, a sense of consciousness, of the difference between what's sinful and what's not, and understanding the consequences are: if you want eternal life, you have to be Christ-like

Effingham, KIL:

- you have something you're living for, and something that to a point you would even die for; lose your life and you gain into to be more aware of who you are; when you are saved you are more aware of who you are in Christ, and to be more aware is to be more alive your understanding of who Christ is and how that permeates into all your relationship; you start looking at how you can give to your relationships instead of trying to take; you want to give, care, serve, help
- I got saved in 8th grade, but never really found my life, never knew what I wanted in life until I came here and started working with youth; until you lose yourself you don't find yourself more alive in the sense that you understand the awesomeness of God; as you get in a deeper relationship with God and understand His plan, which you see through creation and history, and that the Creator is giving, empowering, freely loving, you gain a fuller appreciation of this life and the natural beauties, the creation of all the relationships in the world
- bondage to the world isn't held over me anymore. idols of self, seeking after power and status; others lording that over me and me constantly desiring that. once that bondage was gone I was able to live as I was able to live
- it's pretty simple: you feel His hope and His joy, and you're going to be more alive than you were before

Mosaic, KIL: I've been a Christ-follower since the age of 12, so I don't relate to it as some others might, but I know it gives everything purpose and also makes everything in a sense okay. The struggle I have sometimes is that I feel I've learned to surrender to God's will so strongly that I may not have the appropriate adverse reaction in the face of certain situations. I feel more secure, totally unafraid of death; this makes all the difference; when my former wife died of course it was traumatic but I made it through and I don't have to wonder about her fate, etc. following Christ is extremely freeing. you are free of consequences, because what God expects of us, tells us to do and not do are the things that are good for us so if we live within that framework it doesn't become rules you must force yourself to follow but becomes a part of your nature.

Mosaic, KIL: oh my gosh! oh yeah! I was dead – I've been resurrected. – when I surrendered I became alive – when I accepted the Lord (through Billy Graham on tv), from that moment on I felt alive, had an immediate hunger for the word, went back to church, felt a transformation – there's a huge difference, I feel like

Mosaic, KIL: absolutely – the more I study and go deeper in the word the more I see we're in a spiritual battle and see that our work here on earth is to bring others into the relationship with Christ to overcome this battle of evil and grow our army – it's almost like, the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few, and our job is get more workers

Mosaic, KIL: absolutely. the difference between happiness and joy. between peace and chaos. used to pray for peace. I'm a very analytical person so I always wanted to know what the point of all this is. The natural world is too amazing, too brilliantly put together to not be for some purpose.

New Beginnings, KIL: 10 years ago I went through a spiritual awakening. before that material things were very important to me, and since then they are not as important, I've been relieved of that. I've always been in the church since a kid, so I don't remember when I wasn't a Christ-follower but do remember drifting away and being brought back in. another person literally felt dead, had no soul, when she accepted Jesus I felt alive, I was excited and hadn't been excited for as long as I could remember. had joy, felt like there was hope, good things, everything changed. we got a ditto to that. dad died when 10. grandmother when 6. all her four sisters had cancer. lot of pain. without God to rely on I would not have made it through all those things. there are spiritual down times. as Christians you understand that things are not always as exciting, but that's when God works on you to prepare you for what's next, what gets me excited in my Christian life is I see his plan for me, the next thing he wants me to do, etc. those are fun parts. some of it is just a slog. but having that sense of purpose is helpful and encouraging.

St. Andrews, KIL: yes. in every facet. experiencing joy, peace, happiness, as well as depth of pain, compassion, and suffering. before it was sort of like having tv with the basic channels, and all of a sudden I hooked into cable and realized there is so much more, colors are brighter, totally different.

St. Andrews, KIL: this was at age 7 – but definitely. in my late 20s when I started getting a grip on the Holy Spirit and realized He lived inside of me and that He was real, definitely, absolutely. I’m more alive than when I first became a Christian.

St. Andrews, KIL: absolutely. I was an IBM executive, classic type-A personality, very driven, when I came to know the Lord my vision and perspective on the world totally changed, on what’s important, being able to prioritize. I can remember exactly where I was sitting when I had that moment when I said “I’ve been trying to make this way too hard, you just have to have faith.” My life changed at that moment. I’ve been a different person since then. Much more joyful. Life’s better as a Christian.

St. Andrews, KIL: oh gosh, just in every thing. I was dead and now am alive. I was always a churchgoer, always felt comfortable in church, loved going to church as a child and young adult. but never had anyone until the Jesus Movement talk about personal relationship with Christ. So when I really said I want to follow you Jesus and was 16, I receive the baptism of the Spirit right after that, all the difference in the world of my outlook, how I conducted myself, the trouble I stayed out of in college. I love to teach, I love Scripture. Became part of the prayer ministry in the 1990s. Being there, being guided by the Spirit, speaking into things in people’s lives that they never told me, has been the biggest faith builder of my life. I have a little bit of a prophetic gifting and would like to build on that, but haven’t had the ability to say Yes to that because of other stuff in my life.

Orchard, KIL: more sensitive to other people – hurt more and feel things emotionally more – the holy spirit makes me more sensitive, but I have to continue to be in the Word – “I want to be heart-broken by the things that break Gods heart” – when you become a Christian it gives you something different to live for, so generally you feel alive because you’re not living for yourself any more – I feel more at peace than I ever felt before, because I know god has his plan and I can turn my problems over to him – much less stress in m life – having jesus makes everything better, put things into perspective -

Orchard, KIL: yes. oh yeah. life is good – even the hard, miserable times have a sort of flavor of goodness and greatness in them – either crap tastes better – I thought I knew god and had comfort, but time and time again I’m amazed and overwhelmed at the awesome-ness of God, constantly learning more and feeling more – getting through tough times takes less time and feels less suffering-like with Christ – you notice the small miracles – there are no coincidences

Wesley Chapel, KIL: Lot of Yeses around the table – I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulder, I am forgiven, what I did in the past doesn’t matter, feel uplifted, I’m a child of God in spite of my transgression, a burst of “I’m okay,” “I’ll be okay” – energized – you have access to a perpetual joy that was not part of your existence prior, and that joy is coupled with an understanding of love where you express that more freely, are more related to other people than before – you know you have a refuge, someplace you can go when trouble comes your way, a covering that you didn’t have before – you express yourself openly and more often, now when the Spirit comes in everything is let

loose, whether it's joyful tears or "Halleluahs", a whole new ballgame – there's an infectiousness about the aliveness, the eagerness, etc. – an inner feeling that you don't mind expressing outwardly

Effingham, Recent Convert: oh yes, definitely. I can see it in pictures, from before I was a Christian, I can see my face, my reactions, even a smile, before, is so much different than now. You can definitely note the difference in the photos.

Effingham, Recent Convert: definitely – somebody asked me "When did you make the decision to follow Christ?" I've always followed Christ but to actually live for Him didn't really start until my son died. I always wondered what "on fire for God" meant, but I understood it better after that jail visit.

Hamilton Mill, Recent Convert: yes. I was not alive before. and now I am. that's not to say that I don't struggle with the same crap now as before. I do, but I'm not trudging up that hill alone, I have God's grace. I think people who trudge up the hill most of their lives, they get more grace from Christ. I'll never live on the downhill side.

Hamilton Mill, Recent Convert: oh yeah. there are times when it's harder, because doing the right thing isn't always easy, it's a different path but it's so rewarding. it's great. you can see people change and to watch that is awesome. I have a better sense of truth, of judgment, I have a better sense of who I am, don't have the pulling back and forth of insecurity any more.

Mosaic, Recent Convert: my motives for doing things are a lot different than they used to be. I was always self-centered and now I'm opening up more, trying to do things for the good of other people

Mosaic, Recent Convert: much laughter. oh yeah. a depth in me that was never there before. a "knowing", a truth, right now I feel so filled with the Holy Spirit, it makes everything more.

Mosaic, Recent Convert: yeah, I guess so, most times. sometimes I slip back into the darkness, you would say. I've always been an "I want it now" person. I feel that when I do die, I'm pretty comfortable about where I'm going. Death doesn't cause me to worry. When He decides it's time, I'm okay with it. Don't have fears about different things, such as death.

Mosaic, Recent Convert: yes. I look at things differently now. don't look at the end of days here as the end of my being. I try to spread that to other people so they realize that as well.

Mosaic, Recent Convert: hard to put into words – have a purpose now; there's a joy in striving to become a better Christian; I know that I'm gonna fall down every day and sometimes that upsets me when I fall over something small, but as a whole that's part of it, and you grow through that.

Mosaic, Recent Convert: oh yeah. I feel a lot more alive, more energy;; even when I struggle I know I can sit down and talk with God and ask for guidance. I can be driving to work and having a conversation.

Mosaic, Recent Convert: yes. see the world in a different positive view, have more energy, have always struggled with energy; a lot of energy from talking with Christ and making a connection with him through the bible

New Beginnings, Recent Convert: back in October I wasn't doing well. I was about ready to jump out the window. not many good days. now circumstances have come around that I'm kind of in the same place but I have that emptiness filled. I'm much more at ease with my situation now, with money and employment, etc. I don't seem as worried about it now because I have faith that I'm going to get through this, and I'm also not going through it alone. I have friends. I have faith that I'm not going to go down the hole.

New Beginnings, Recent Convert: without a doubt – have more strength, can stand up stronger knowing god is behind me and believes in me.. even though I'm not perfect, when I make mistakes it's nice to know I'm never alone. spiritually in general, my spirits are better, I have more of an appreciation of life, all of life, plants, humans, animals, more of a recognition.

New Beginnings, Recent Convert: I'm more alive in being that spiritually things happen for a reason. I think if you do things a certain way and believe a certain way then things will happen a certain way. what you put in is what you get out. I talk to myself more, I guess you would call that praying. I talk in my head, more now than ever before.

New Beginnings, Recent Convert: absolutely. I can't even explain it. I'll be in a situation I react totally different now than I would have a year ago. my wife notices it. it blows me away. the things I've learned – we always get answers to the questions we have, but they may not be the answers you're expecting or when you expect them. it's the unexpected answers that blow me away the most. peace and joy I never thought possible. perspective on life I wish I could share with others.

St. Andrews, Recent Convert: oh, thousand percent. I now have joy in my life. a man said to me once, "Jason, I don't know how to say this, but I see what you have, and the way you carry yourself, and I want that." "Well, brother, you too can have it." Since then, Joe joined my small group, and last Sunday he and his girlfriend came to church. They both went through horrible divorces and lost their faith, but since have found it. the awesome thing is that it's because of my wife Christi and I blessing them somehow, even though we didn't know it, and they saw something in us that they wanted. Reminds me of how I saw it in my family, and then a year later an almost-stranger said the same thing to me.

St. Andrews, Recent Convert: oh yeah. the compassion I feel, I cry at the drop of the hat now, the way I feel about people. I am an introvert, but now I just care so much about other people and what's happening to them.

St. Andrews, Recent Convert: Haley: my thinking is definitely more Christian-like. When I say something mean about someone I immediately think that I shouldn't have said it. Makes me want to be a better person.

Will: definitely more alive. more joy, find reasons to give thanks. thank God for simple things. thank Him for helping me have a nice day.

Orchard, Recent Convert: definitely. my life then and my life now is totally opposite. I was high all the time before, being the biggest different. the way I look at other people, the way I look at myself, and the way I raise my children, there's not any comparison. Follow-up: how is the way you look at yourself different? I'm bad about focusing on bad things about me, being hard on myself, and I just look at myself now as someone that is learning, just learning from my mistakes. I haven't totally forgiven myself for the things I've done, but I've come a long way. Just knowing that I'm okay in Jesus' eyes, makes it easier. I've got to let go of some of that.

Orchard, Recent Convert: L: yes. you look at things differently, you can see in certain situations where God is using you for his purposes. seeing things more clearly. sometimes unanswered prayers are an answer. God show me where you want to use me, what your purpose for me is. it's all for him.

J: it's easy to get caught up and twisted with what's going on the world today. events, negativity. to be a believer in Jesus you strive to be like him. you start to want to do more for his glory.

Orchard, Recent Convert: yes – of course – I can express myself a bit more, I can smile more, I can be involved, even though I'm still behind the scenes, I'm not here all the time, but definitely I've change and I've changed for the better, I love myself more, I'm proud of myself, I feel better about me.

Orchard, Recent Convert: yes. I do.

Orchard, Recent Convert: big yeses to that. shaking the head in big affirmatives. a lot happier now, I feel like I'm never alone, if I'm having trouble I know he's always there.

Orchard, Recent Convert: yes. much more. I'm a big people person. I was more so then, but now through Him I'm not timid to go to anyone or talk to anyone, because I really believe that's what He believes, you don't hold back, everyone is human and has feelings and they might need a world from us, that's how I reach out to others. my life was pretty basic before, but my faith is so much stronger, my husband and I can pray together, that's a big thing. I still don't pray out loud in front of groups.

Orchard, Recent Convert: no

Wesley Chapel, Recent Convert: oh definitely – at that time I would only come to church on mother's day or easter, but when sharma came the ministries opened up and I thought that if god can do that through her, then how can he use me to help other people? you have to go the extra mile and do all you can to help other people.

Wesley Chapel, Recent Convert: absolutely, because before making that decision I didn't really know anything. when I was invited to really join Christ, I was scared. I feel like that was the first major decision I had ever made, and it was like a big pathway the size of the highway opened up and I knew that if I stayed within the boundaries of that path I would be fine. I had a sense of "okay" here's what you need to do to become a man, and then later this is what you need to do to start a family, then to take care of friends, etc. Let me know that I was able to conscious decision that was accepted morally and socially. It helped me grow up in a godly way.

Wesley Chapel, Recent Convert: Oh yes. I just aimlessly walked through life. had a horrible childhood, never really cared about myself, but when the Lord took me in and accepted me I had a zeal that just came all over me.

Wesley Chapel, Recent Convert: W: Oh, yes. Before I wasn't as open about him. I'm a living testimony that once you let him into your life, the difference it makes. changed my whole aura. I do devotions now, talk with my daughters and my mother, lead bible study, everything has changed. everything has changed. my everything has changed. I now am able to pray.

H: I am not ashamed to speak about Christ at anytime. at first intimidation came when I wasn't as strong as I am, where certain situations I would not open my mouth to say Christ-like things. today I would speak to anyone about God.

Wesley Chapel, Recent Convert: yes, I'm more now in tune with my spiritual side and communicating with God than I was before – it's like almost now I can see the big picture, even though I may be going through something, I realize now that he is growing me to move me to the next level, whereas 10 years ago I was just kind of lost

Effingham, Staff Leader: eternal purpose

Effingham, Staff Leader: my life has completely changed, in every aspect possible. from a very early age there was a hunger for a God. there's a sense of fulfillment, contentment, joy, peace, there was an emptiness that was fulfilled. I experienced an emptiness and discontentment with life, and my life with Christ has changed everything. I can't imagine living without Christ, like almost thinking "What's the point?" If Christ wasn't real, I don't think I would even want to live. He is so much the center of my being and my purpose for living

Effingham, Staff Leader: Yes. there's a huge difference. the aloneness was left behind. expectancy, lack of anxiety, which is replaced by expectancy. "I don't know what's around the corner, but I'm not alone."

Hamilton Mill, Staff Leader: yes. I think so. for a long time I thought "man if I could just be content like Paul," and I am the most content I've ever been in my life, and the vast majority of that is my spiritual growth. you learn that things and stuff and all that don't really matter. that's not that makes me content.

Hamilton Mill, Staff Leader: yes, absolutely. what makes us unique as humans is that we are not only physical beings but spiritual beings. just as we need physical sustenance to keep us alive, we also need spiritual nourishment in order to be fully alive. if we don't have spiritual nourishment we are dying. even now, when I cut myself off from that, when I'm not praying and reading the scriptures regularly, not allowing god to nourish me, I feel less alive. my spirit struggles when I fast from the Word.

Mosaic, Staff Leader: absolutely. that would stem from the second time, the adult decision after the time away. As a child, I loved the Lord, but not sure I felt forgiven, etc. After I fell apart, it was so incredible that not only would God forgive me but He was still planning to use me. My first date with my husband, I was a heavy drinker and a smoker and a wild person, and my husband had decided that he had given up on finding the love of his life, just wanted to be with someone fun, so there was no sense with him that I was a religious person at all. On a first date he started talking about his early life, as did I, both of us with UMC childhoods. AT some point during this first date he looked at me and said "You would make a great pastor." My response was "Probably that was what God wanted for me but I ruined myself for that." We ended up arguing about whether you can ruin yourself in God's eyes. When I finally accepted the call I was by myself in my room and asked "Is this all you want from me"? and there's was the distinct call that He was the one who called me and was waiting for me to answer the call. I sense I might not get another chance. I said Yes. When my husband came into the room later, he said "I've waiting 10 years to hear you say that."

Mosaic, Staff Leader: Yes. It's a journey. I'm still trying to understand my own journey. You have a certain maturity level as a child (I was 9 when baptized). As an older teen/twenty-something I stepped away from that intimate relationship so in my late 20s there was a return, prodigal sort of thing – I knew that I was changed when I was 9, but as an adult it's been less like a re-birthing and more like the blossoming of a flower, sort of constant opening and deeper understanding

Mosaic, Staff Leader: oh absolutely. I love working with youth. There's nothing more powerful than a room full of kids that are being receptive to you sharing the gospel with them. do a message to them about anything, for example, then go home and look at Facebook and see them quoting you and/or Scriptures you used that day on their Facebook page. another example: we're in the process of involving several kids, raising them up as youth leaders to help us build the ministry. We had our first meeting with them a couple weeks ago and went over what we expected out of the, criteria, etc., gave them a couple days to think about it. All 8 of those kids, when I called them, said they were ready to say "Yes" the first afternoon.

New Beginnings, Staff Leader: oh yes. depths, the more you follow the more you realize how much more to go. the more you get the more that is available. the more you experience the more you realize the depths of his love and grace.. the best thing is the horrible times – last 6 months the hardest time in my life – ive seen god and heard god more in that time than ever before – I learned my sermons were true

New Beginnings, Staff Leader: yes. I'm alive to life around me, including the people, and a much fuller world view, and I guess more importantly, before I was a Christian I was 100% a hopeless individual. cynical and hopeless. now I'm not. Follow-up: how would you characterize the hope you now have? it is a hope that I'm not afraid to have and that I've proven over and over is reliable and does not disappoint. I need to be careful who I'm hoping in rather than what I'm hoping for. Jesus.

New Beginnings, Staff Leader: absolutely. I'm telling you, I actually had gone as far as planning, purchasing, I was going to drink Clorox (13 years old), had written the note and bought the Clorox. My dad beat my mother, I had 8 siblings, I felt lost, no hope, I felt dead. when I accepted Christ, I began to wake up smiling, began to see beyond those circumstances at home. I even found the strength to tell my father how much I resented that he wouldn't let us go to church, and told him I was going to church no matter what. breathed new life into me, gave me hope. I had even paid for counseling myself. trying to get help. nothing. but when she invited me to start going to church with her, what a difference.

New Beginnings, Staff Leader: I think each day it's a growing process every day. there are some ways that I changed immediately, but being a Christian is a process – not going to have a complete and total change with everything, god is constantly working with us, sanctification, purifying us, it's a process – after I accepted Christ had a difficult time in college, but even when I went through tough times I always had hope, knew Jesus cared for me, was watching over me

St. Andrews, Staff Leader: I don't think I was contagious in the African traditional religion. It was duty, ritual, tradition, ceremony. I could not evangelize based on that. There was not excitement. I'm excited now, having been found by Jesus Christ, embrace by Him, having a relationship with Him. I cannot wait to tell other people about Him. A regret I have as a pastor is that I don't tell enough people about my love relationship with the Lord, because I'm too consumed with church stuff. How can you not be excited,, knowing Jesus Christ? I want everybody to know him.

St. Andrews, Staff Leader: oh gosh, absolutely, there's no comparison, particularly when I prayed that prayer for full release of the Holy Spirit. I felt a sense of there's not other place I want to be. You're the only answer. I know I have found life. definitely. that's another thing about our church. people are attracted to people whom they see fully living, have a sense of joy and fullness of life. in all of life.

St. Andrews, Staff Leader: fundamentally I am alive, when I was dead. that awareness has grown over the years, recognizing the fall and what that has meant in me.

St. Andrews, Staff Leader: hugely. I think I knew nothing about the Spirit before coming to St. Andrews. Being empowered by the Spirit (Acts 1:8). Previously, I was like a good-looking car with no engine, but with the Spirit I now have power. The Kingdom is really at hand. An ordinary trip to the grocery store can be amazing if I'm open to God's work and obedient. I now look at how I can come alongside what God is doing.

Sugarloaf, Staff Leader: absolutely. I feel like now I have a mission, a goal in life, and that God is using me as the tool to do His work. I'm just the instrument. it's fulfilling, so fulfilling, and in children's ministry I don't get to see it a lot of time, it comes later, and that's the gift he's given me. to feel successful I don't have to see it now because I'll see it someday in heaven.

Sugarloaf, Staff Leader: oh yes. a Christian life is not without its ups and downs but when I look back on my pre-Christ-following life, it's as if that life is flat or black and white and this life is 3d and in living color, vivid and real

Sugarloaf, Staff Leader: yes. I went through, as a Christian, 16 years of addiction, so there were some dark days as a Christian. even before then, though, I came from a dysfunctional home, dad was an alcoholic and violent at home. I thought something was wrong with me. so from there to here at this point (20 years sober), at this point it's amazingly different. I know that no matter what, god is with me and is my friend, my companion, my god, my lord, I trust in him and I just know that I know that I know that it's going to be okay, and that's dramatically different place than thinking I was the worst thing that ever walked on the planet.

Sugarloaf, Staff Leader: hard for me to say, I was 14. I was always a good kid. so it didn't really change my morals. but if I had not chosen to follow Christ I would be at a very different place now.

Orchard, Staff Leader: every sense! face lit up! every sense! tears of joy. I get teary about just about everything, because I realize the beauty of everything and the importance of everything, little things become so important to me now because I know how important they are. for example, shredding credit cards or making a step to improve marriage. I see the glory of God. it's life with a purpose.

Orchard, Staff Leader: a greater spiritual depth. I always feel a little more alive when you know there has been genuine conversion in the life of someone. my family members are the greatest example of that. I would be most disheartened seeing how most lead pastors in America are. we've forgotten the gospel. Follow-up: what's the gospel that we've forgotten? the church has become more obsessed with elevating people beyond their current situation whereas the gospel is more about salvation not about elevating people beyond their current situation. we have forgotten about the salvation aspect of it.

Orchard, Staff Leader: B: it's hard to remember. there's a vibrancy of life as a Christ-follower, for example in appreciating creation. a vibrancy of relationships, deep laughter, trust, and appreciation for life that is rooted instead of chaotic and maybe even a.d.d.
J: yes. when an infant smiles they smile with their whole face. when Christians laugh they can laugh all the way down to their soul.

Wesley Chapel, Staff Leader: Yeah! I think for me, now that I am a Christ-follower, understand the gospel, my walk is totally different. Before I truly understood it, I didn't get it so much. But now I have that "faith swagger," I don't worry about stuff in my life, I

truly believe God is going to take care of me, as I follow Him, talk with Him daily, etc. When you believe this, have faith in it, have trust in it, you can walk a better walk in all aspects of your life. And I talk about him all the time. For example, I was working on a project in Dubai, and there was a language barrier, and in the midst of this video conference I said out loud, "Peace, be still!" and I and the guy on the other end of the video conference sat still with me, and 10 minutes later a translator walked into each of our offices. The Dubai guy asked about the "peace, be still" line and holding my hands in a prayerful position. Sometime you have to be able to take your faith into a room no matter what. people understand god's presence and they see that in you when you act accordingly.

Wesley Chapel, Staff Leader: yes, because through experience and my walk with Christ – we serve a God of possibilities

Wesley Chapel, Staff Leader: yes. in particular, when I had the revelation about being more than a sinner saved by grace, when that opened up in my mind and my heart it gave me a new courage and it expanded my faith; when I think about the internal challenges for me and that God's intent is for me to overcome those challenges, my character defects/flaws, this reiterates the power of God's love, because when you truly love someone you want to see them operating at that optimum level and that's what God wants from us, to be at our optimum level, this energizes me, to know that God's love for me and others is so rich and so deep that he wants to get in us internally and change us to our best selves

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE SUMMARY SHEET FROM RESPONSES TO A SPECIFIC QUESTION

Summary Stats – Is there any sense in which you are more alive now?

125 Respondents (EGL: 40, 32%; KIL: 25 (20%); RC: 33, (26%); STAFF: 27, 22%) -
229 Responses

	EGL	KIL	RC	STAFF	Total w/in category	% of 229
Emotional Well-Being	15 (32%)	15 (32%)	8 (17%)	9 (19%)	47	20
Other	6 (18%)	4 (12%)	14 (42%)	9 (27%)	33	14
Brand new/More Alive/Life is Good	11 (38%)	5 (17%)	4 (14%)	9 (31%)	29	13
Relationships w or care for, Others	5 (28%)	6 (33%)	5 (28%)	2 (11%)	18	8
Happy/Excited/Laughter	3 (20%)	4 (27%)	3 (20%)	5 (33%)	15	7
Purpose/Fulfillment	5 (33%)	4 (27%)	2 (13%)	4 (27%)	15	7
New Perspective/Sense of Direction	4 (29%)	5 (36%)	5 (36%)	0	14	6
Guidance/Wisdom/Decision-making	2 (15%)	4 (31%)	7 (54%)	0	13	6
God's presence, Never alone	7 (54%)	2 (15%)	2 (15%)	2 (15%)	13	6
God's Protection, Provision, Power, Plan, or Love	6 (46%)	2 (15%)	3 (23%)	2 (15%)	13	6
Increased Gratitude	2 (29%)	1 (14%)	2 (29%)	2 (29%)	7	3
Yes!, unspecified	1 (14%)	0	2 (29%)	4 (57%)	7	3
Linked to Eternity	3 (60%)	0	2 (40%)	0	5	2

