

CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY IN THE POST-COVID WORLD: DYNAMICS OF PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE GROWING DESIRE FOR HOPE

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I. INTRODUCTION

The mission of the church to go outside its walls and make disciples is desperately needed in the world today. According to a recent *World Happiness Report*, the general public is the most unhappy it has been in fifty years. Yet the mission to actively engage non-Christians with the gospel of hope is also facing scorn by some within the church demanding change. In the wake of scandals of abuse and misuse of power, in the backwash of celebrity pastors and absurd hypocrisy, and in the fallout of sociological manipulation and unabashed business methodology, the voice of correction within the church is unmistakable: pastors need to take it down a notch. Pastors need to pump the brakes. Pastors need to take their eyes off the masses and on to the select few who walk in the doors of their churches. The admonition of Scot McKnight typifies this attitude, “*TOV* summons pastors—get a good grip on this—to pastor the people they have, not the people they don’t have. Growth, in all its aspects, is the work of the Holy Spirit, not the work of the pastor, the leaders, or the church.”² Pastors who go beyond this have become “too big for their britches”³ and likely have immoral and selfish motives. The argument of this essay is to say this sort of broad correction to the current sins of the church may in fact be a misdiagnosis of what the core issues are, and, if pastors indeed “take it down a notch” by taking their eyes off the broader community in the process, it squanders our moment in history to offer unshakeable hope to a fracturing culture of despair. The positive side of this essay will be to explore personal and

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² Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called TOV: Forming a Goodness Culture that Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2020), 219. Of course, the Holy Spirit uses pastors, leaders, and churches to reach the lost. The disconnect between the responsibility of the church and the role of the Holy Spirit is one reason why the evangelical church needs a revived vision of the church’s mission.

³ McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 198.

corporate dynamics of transformation and deep spiritual change that have historically accompanied authentic Christian conversion. It is here, with the prospect of deep fundamental change offered by Christian conversion, that the desires for change currently felt by non-Christians in the broader culture and embattled Christians within the church overlap.

II. NARCISSISM, JUSTICE, AND TRUTH-AS-POWER IN CULTURE

My two conversation partners in part one will be Irish political theorist Richard Seymour and American NT scholar and evangelical cultural commentator Scot McKnight, already quoted above. In his work, *The Twittering Machine*, Richard Seymour claims that the current alignment of social media, technology, politics, and entertainment have formed an almost invincible force in broader culture that he calls “The Twittering Machine.”⁴ This “Machine”⁵ has created a context and platform that produces certain predictable and recognizable results. These results are twofold: foster social friction/drama and profit off that societal friction.

The Machine has created a digital interpersonal connection in which the average person can “disseminate falsehoods, for random bullies to swarm on targets and for anonymized misinformation to spread lightning-quick. Above all, however, the Twittering Machine has *collectivized* the problem in a new way.”⁶ We are all connected in a way that bypasses traditional gatekeepers and creates new dimensions of social reality. Seymour continues, “the mediation of social reality through an image is no longer organized by large, centralized bureaucracies. Instead, it has devolved to advertising, entertainment and, of course, the social industry.”⁷ Because of this “hyperconnection” and its detachment from historic, external verifiers of information, and its new propagators of advertising, the Machine itself pushes toward creating its own content, which is driven by drama (i.e. social division). This drama creates interdependent but opposed forces of celebrity and anti-celebrity. The tension between these opposite energies creates a powerful addictive force that draws people into an almost Hegelian pattern of thesis/antithesis/synthesis.

I believe Seymore’s framework of addiction, celebrity, and the troll response to the celebrity provides an insightful sociological grid for discerning dynamics that are at play in the church’s moral crisis. While particular

⁴ Richard Seymour, *The Twittering Machine* (London: Verso, 2020).

⁵ In the remainder of this essay, I will use the term “Machine” to refer to the collective impact of social media, technology, politics, and entertainment. Similar to Seymour’s Twittering Machine is what researchers at Barna call “digital Babylon.” They describe it this way, “We at Barna have adopted a phrase to describe our accelerated, complex culture that is marked by phenomenal access, profound alienation, and a crisis of authority: digital Babylon . . . through screens’ ubiquitous presence, Babylon’s pride, power, prestige, and pleasure colonize our hearts and minds.” David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 24.

⁶ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 34.

⁷ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 37.

issues in the church might feel unique to the church,⁸ *how* issues are framed are not. Referring to social media giants, Seymour says,

They are agnostic about what users post because their trade is in attention—an abstract commodity—not content. With two billion people ceaselessly churning out content, the platform is so designed as to automatically convert the stuff of everyday life into economically valuable informatics. Content stimulates users to produce more content in a virtuous, or vicious, circle.⁹

In other words, the particulars of the issues are irrelevant, what is relevant is that the controversy and stimulation it creates fosters dependence on the platform itself. *Christianity Today*'s wildly popular podcast, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill" (*TRFMH*) can certainly testify to this. On this show, the particulars of Mars Hill issues are discussed, but the framework of the show, both the causes of the problem (narcissism, see below) and the proposed solutions to it (reorganizing structures to decentralize power), fits eerily well into the pre-existing cultural narrative, which, according to Seymour, is fostered by the Machine.

What is increasingly clear as I reflect on the effect of the Machine is that three of its more unique "calling cards" overlap in a striking way with three of the biggest complaints about the church: celebrity/narcissistic pastors, cries for justice in response to those leaders, and the quest for power in the form of truth-telling. The connection between these three related issues can be summarized like this: a culture of celebrity produces an inevitable sort of narcissism which is severely self-orientated *and* creates a "trolling" anti-celebrity backlash, self-oriented in its own way, that aims to bring these self-appointed celebrities to justice. The tension between these two poles is the quest for power under the banner of truth-telling. Who we believe is telling the truth is who has the power to effect change.

The first domino in this chain reaction is the prospect of fame and personal addiction to the dopamine hits that being "liked" produces in the Machine. *TRFMH* describes Mark Driscoll's rise to fame and documents a dramatic shift and deterioration of his personality. If we use Seymour's framework, this shift is to be at least partially explained by the massively addictive reality of being on the front end of the social media complex and the constantly high volume of dopamine hits Driscoll obviously received in this season of the church. Seymour describes the addiction this way,

There is something spellbinding about what other people are attending to: this is the "viral" aspect of fame. By "making the web more social," as Mark Zuckerberg boasted, the platforms have converted ordinary social interactions into potential celebrity pseudo-events: quantifiable, and easily reproduced pieces of

⁸ For example, the particularly damaging impact of ungodly pastors, unchecked by weak elder boards.

⁹ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 90.

information, or memes. On the addiction machine, celebrity is reduced to the barest mechanism of *orchestrating attention*.¹⁰

When “ordinary social” events are given the opportunity to be bigger than what they normally would be, it is very tempting to opt in for the “potential celebrity pseudo-event.” When regular church work, unsung and often overlooked, suddenly has the chance to receive attention (for God’s glory, of course), then the dynamics of church work itself might change.

Given the unique “up-front” role of pastors in church settings, it is easy to see how the itch for more attention can be fostered in a culture of celebrity making. McKnight warns that “Celebrity pastors want every Sunday to be a buzz event”¹¹ and that “big screens on the pastor in service”¹² are likely signs that narcissism is not far behind. McKnight continues, “That’s what every celebrity pastor wants: ‘mass recognition.’ The aim is fame, glory, and the main stage.”¹³ Of course the temptation to pride in the pulpit is not a recent phenomenon. John Bunyan wrote of its dangers in his *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* published in 1666. Yet, given the cultural framework of the Machine and the acceleration and pathway to narcissism, something about it does feel new. Hence, once a pastor is addicted it creates a “new narcissism,” an “elaborate hall of mirrors in which we can’t stop looking at ourselves.”¹⁴

Reflecting on this broader new narcissism Seymour states, “A feed filled with topless mirror shots, gym photos, new hair, and so on, might be seen as a peculiar form of idolatry. But it is less a tribute to the user than to the power that the machine has over the user.”¹⁵ In other words, the Machine itself is used to foster this narcissism but in a way that creates momentum for backlash, an equally addictive counterpart that fans into flame an intensifying drama in the name of justice. The Machine created a double-addiction: addiction of the narcissist to himself and addiction of viewers to the narcissist.

The reaction against new narcissism comes with the feel of a grassroots justice campaign, but its function within the Machine is that of a troll. As Seymour says, “Trolls are the anti-celebrities. They are the propagandists of human failure.”¹⁶ These campaigns of righteousness work to dismantle the celebrity narcissist. It is filled by a desire to cut them down to size. Seymour explains,

Complaints about narcissism are almost always, as Kristin Dombek writes, about the “selfishness of others.” It is always other people whose too-hot selfies, too-glamorous dinners, too-happy relationship photographs, too-charming holiday snaps, evince

¹⁰ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 94.

¹¹ McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 186.

¹² McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 188.

¹³ McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 188.

¹⁴ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 94.

¹⁵ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 98.

¹⁶ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 107.

narcissism. Narcissism in this sense is, as Wilde said of wickedness, “a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.”¹⁷

Thus when trolling aspects of the Machine’s culture decides that a person is “too big for his britches,” they act to execute justice quickly on the narcissistic leader. Reflecting on ways to counteract the seeds of narcissism, McKnight suggests a striking way forward: “In the circle of *TOV*, a service culture forms at such a deep level that anything smacking of celebrity gets a quick smackdown.”¹⁸ To me what is striking about this language is the “fight fire with fire” aggression of it. Anything that *smacks* of celebrity gets a *smackdown* from the justice warriors. Is this language of smackdown prophetic, in line with the Hebrew prophets speaking oracles to godless kings, as McKnight suggests? Or is the threat of “smackdown” more in line with current broader trends of justice trolls?

In the midst of the battle between these forces is the question of power. Taking power back, accusation of too much power, and misuses of power. The fight over who should have it is closely related to the quest to be believed. The credibility of the very institutions that verify truth itself hangs in the balance over which side to choose. Institutions are the fodder in the middle of the fight between celebrity and troll. Who is telling the truth? Whose narrative will be believed and thus win the day? In his chapter “We Are All Liars,” Seymour says that this tension is really a “crisis of knowing.”¹⁹ In the marketplace of facts, “what is true” is a contested question. Seymour continues,

Disagreement about “basic facts” is a condition of a functioning democracy. A fact is just a measurement, and there is always some legitimate disagreement over the relevance of the measurement, the tools used to make it, the authority of the people doing the measuring, and so on. There are no facts without values, so only in a police state can there be a factual consensus.²⁰

Because truth is highly contextual, located within time and space and in the container of innumerable variables, and because the Machine rips content from that context, it creates a space in which misinformation, lies, and misrepresentation become commonplace. It is the Tower of Babble, endless talk with confusion and fighting as its fruits. Thus plays for power come in strong as a result.

These characteristics overlap in a significant way in the current complaints about toxic church culture. Misuse of authority by entrepreneurial leaders, narcissism, and celebrity-cults highlight this broader cultural phenomenon. I believe it is important to connect these trends to the current issues in the church. It appears our crisis is the evangelical cultural

¹⁷ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 94.

¹⁸ McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 200.

¹⁹ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 149.

²⁰ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 144.

subset of this wider cultural phenomenon that can be seen played out in universities, corporations, and governments throughout the world where the Machine is the dominant cultural mediator. It is important to connect these two because the correctives for these issues might not be fixing something theologically or even structurally inherent within the church, but rather the correct diagnosis of a sickness, ubiquitous within culture, that is making its effects felt within the local church. For example, McKnight gives several potential fixes: pastors must share the pulpit more,²¹ pastors must reject broadly accepted principles of leadership,²² churches need to quit highlighting people who serve,²³ and churches need to shift attention away from preaching to prevent toxic culture.²⁴ Yet, if the problems are framed *and exacerbated* by the broader cultural narrative, the fix to those problems is likely *not* going to be found in the answers shaped by the same cultural narrative.

Some (not all) of the problems seen today in the church are the fruit of the uncritical adoption of the technologies used by the Machine and the powerful influence the Machine has on the church. What I see in the church currently is an uncritical reaction to the problems these technologies created, using the very framework provided by that same culture.²⁵ The result of this is that churches make decisions that destabilize their structure and weaken their mission, all in the name of justice.

III. REFOCUSING ON THE MISSION

What is needed in the church, and what is yearned for more broadly in the culture, is a true alternative to the celebrity-troll-power narrative. Seymour himself suggests a surprising way forward that ironically also aligns with McKnight's earlier work as a scholar.²⁶ Seymour writes,

To break an addiction, the neuroscientist Marc Lewis has argued, is a unique act of reinvention. It requires a creative leap. The addict gives up meth not by going cold turkey or taking pharmaceutical substitute, but by breaking the compulsory force of habit. It is not a matter of a single 'crossroads' decision, like a vote or a purchase in which everything immediately resolves into clarity. It is a process of becoming different. For the individual addict, that might mean

²¹ McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 199.

²² McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 208–9.

²³ McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 197.

²⁴ McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 212.

²⁵ "There remains the stubborn and alarming fact that more contact with the social industry platforms corresponds to more misery, more self-harm, more suicide. Which raises urgent questions about how these platforms are conditioning us." Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 90.

²⁶ Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

undergoing intensive psychotherapy, learning a new art or skill, or religious conversion.²⁷

Seymour, who is not an evangelical in any way that I can tell, is suggesting that a vision of a deep religious conversion is what is needed in the world to counteract the destructive influence of the Machine. He continues, “Recovering addicts don’t simply get back what they have lost: they tend to develop entirely new and more sophisticated capacities. New ways of being in the world.”²⁸ Again, he asks hopefully, “What if, in deliberate abdication of our smartphones, we strolled in the park with nothing but a notepad and a nice pen? What if we sat in a church and closed our eyes?”²⁹

What is needed is a deeper understanding of conversion itself and a renewal of the *continual* conversion of pastors as leaders in the church. A totally fresh alternative to the Machine is advocating for a renewed, wholesale, unapologetic call for radical conversion to Jesus. Themes of repentance, forgiveness, restoration, and transformation are more true to the church’s historic mission than the celebrity-troll-power narrative by which many in the church are trapped today. It also provides a pathway of authentic hope and real change rather than modeling to the world unforgiveness and withering judgment for “offenders.” Conversion, itself a long ignored evangelical pillar, may well provide a depth of change that many are longing to experience. The combination of personal-identity-quest disillusionment, COVID related heartache, and mental health breakdown has created a kind of crisis that people may in fact be looking for the kind of profound transformation Jesus calls people to and that his church has been entrusted to foster.

It may seem counterintuitive to foster an outward orientation to non-Christian, non-church goers when there are so many problems in the church itself. What McKnight is advocating seems to track with the logic that the church needs to sort itself out first before any concerted effort to outreach. Yet, is the solution in the church really improved methods, better management systems, and more stringent accountability structures? All of those can be easily manipulated and corrupted as quickly as their previous structures were. Rather, a solution is found in the core message evangelicals deliver to outsiders: a message of rebirth, an invitation to experience New Creation, not just a reorganization. It also tracks with Jesus’s pattern of calling disciples, while they are *still* a mess, into his mission. Jesus refocused their attention off themselves (Matt 16:24) and onto the coming kingdom of God (Matt 6:33). I suggest that freedom from the self is actually what the wider culture longs for (while not using that language of course). Furthermore, freedom from the self provides a sense of hope and renewal needed with embattled church leadership.

Gavin Wakefield’s brief but excellent work on conversion shows a growing number of people have no contact with churches. This distance

²⁷ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 212.

²⁸ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 212.

²⁹ Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 216.

between non-Christians and the church is consistent with broader trends in the post-Christian West and is an important reminder for pastors caught-up in *church world*. Most people in our communities have zero interaction with our churches. Because of this Wakefield writes that “it would be short-sighted to go only to the ‘lapsed.’” He suggests furthermore that, “churches which put their emphasis on recovering former churchgoers may need to look more widely.”³⁰ While it may seem as if *everyone* thinks badly about the church, the reality is that most people do not think about the church at all. Moreover, because of the ever-expanding gap between what people think Christianity is versus what Christianity actually is, conversations about the gospel are surprisingly fruitful. In an extensive interview with thousands of Christians who converted after the age of sixteen, it was found that the second major factor (after “friends” for women and “spouse” for men) in them coming to Christ was a relationship with a minister who shared the gospel with them.³¹ For better or worse, God uses pastors to help people come to Christ. A renewed effort in this direction may also bring disoriented pastors back to an invigorated relationship with Christ.

So how do pastors foster an evangelistic push towards non-Christians while not relying on tricks of social manipulation? I think Tim Keller’s vision of the “fruitful” ministry—as opposed to just “faithful” or “successful”—is a useful rubric.³² I see two moves pastors can make to this end of a fruitful ministry. First, a renewed confidence that Christian conversion is actually good for people. It is not something to be embarrassed about but speaks to a need people have in culture. Research shows that people who convert to Christianity, “see themselves happier after the conversion.” But the happiness factor has an important caveat: if conversion is marked by “selfish reasons” they may not experience any marked increase in happiness. However, “people who make their faith an interior experience, and those who are willing to face questions through it tend to be healthier.”³³ Not only do versions of “diet Christianity” or self-oriented Christianity not work, they also decrease joy and are more likely to not stick. But genuine, life-giving conversion is an eternal gift of joy that starts giving right away.

A second move towards fruitful ministry is a renewed emphasis on the meaning and practice of baptism as an expression of saving faith. For a multitude of reasons, children today are focused on forming their identity non-stop. For example, helping middle and high schoolers create and form their personal identity is a *primary* goal in Denver Public Schools, which is where my three sons attend. Through curriculum taught in all their classes (including mathematics!) they are being told to make their own identity. Identity creation—not identity discovery—is the expectation. Interestingly,

³⁰ Gavin Wakefield, *Conversion Today* (Cambridge: Grove, 2006), 23.

³¹ For women (Christian friend 24%, minister 17%) and for men (spouse 22%, minister 16%). Wakefield, *Conversion Today*, 22.

³² Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

³³ Wakefield, *Conversion Today*, 18.

the message of the gospel and the dramatic expression in baptism is set up to address this expectation. Because our culture pushes people to create and maintain distinct identity markers, baptism offers a fresh and yet historically rooted option for an identity in Christ jam-packed with meaning.³⁴ I have been surprised to discover that many people on the fringes of the church community are jumping at the chance for baptism. Baptism is a new identity, death of the old self and birth of the new. Conversion as expressed through baptism offers a fresh, radical alternative to the tired and anxiety producing cultural expectation of creating your own identity.

A renewed orientation to conversion also requires a deeper appreciation of conversion itself. While I do not have space to expand on all the theological contours of conversion here, it is worth being reminded of its characteristics. In the NT, the terms such as *metanoia* (repentance) and *epistrepho* (turn/convert) are used together to express the theologically-charged Hebrew term *shuv* (to turn/to repent). These words are used to indicate wholesale change in an individual life or community. One's mind is changed, one's heart is transformed, and one's life direction is altered. The nature of conversion, the message of repentance, and self-denial require fundamental displacement of the self and submission to the will and direction to God and his Word. As Stanley Jones states in his classic work on conversion, "The center of conversion is the conversion of the will,"³⁵ or as he says later, "conversion converts *everything*."³⁶ Conversion is a radical reorientation of the self around God and his desires for the individual. In his work on conversion, Michael Lawrence makes the point that conversion is not becoming *nice*; it is becoming *new*.³⁷

The process in which change happens can appear suddenly (the road to Damascus) or over time (the road to Emmaus). The work by Richard Peace argues that conversion in the NT, while showing varying rates of time in the process, tends to have three distinct phases: insight (in which the person understands the world differently based on the content of the message), turning (doing and thinking differently), and transformation (dealing with the internal and external consequences of the change).³⁸ Beverly Gaventa sees three types of conversion in the NT. There is *alternation* in which conversion follows rather than disrupts already established convictions. It is a culmination of previous beliefs and life experiences. Second, there is a *pendulum-like swing* sort of conversion. This is when the convert has thoroughly rejected a previous worldview or religious system in favor

³⁴ "Conversion requires a change in religious worldview and identity . . . a rupture with a former identity and the ubiquitous utilization of the converted's new identity in all areas of life." Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 140–41.

³⁵ E. Stanley Jones, *Conversion* (Nashville: Abingdon Classics, 1959), 198.

³⁶ Jones, *Conversion*, 198.

³⁷ Michael Lawrence, *Conversion: How God Creates a People* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 17.

³⁸ Richard Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

of a newly chosen religious system. Finally there is *transformation*. This type of conversion is when an individual's past is not rejected but rather reinterpreted in light of the new religious experience. An example in church history of this transformative kind of conversion can be seen in Martin Luther's famous conversion story. His conversion while reading Scripture caused him to reinterpret his past using his new spiritual framework.³⁹

The sociologist Lewis Rambo has put together a classic model of conversion showing seven stages that are involved in most conversion experiences.⁴⁰ This model is very helpful for us to better understand the dynamics at play in conversion. The first stage is *context*. "Context" is the overall environment in which change takes place, including the large-scale culture. Everything we discussed so far about the Twittering Machine fits in the context. It is the geo-political reality that people live in and all the technologies that mediate cultural realities. What is most important about this stage is that a major shift in context makes the self more likely to be changeable. When there is a breakdown of societal and institutional credibility, it creates a sensation of a loss of home. When change is too rapid and extreme to be absorbed by systems of meaning (such as family, religion, education, government), then it creates significant dissonance between those system's expectations and how people actually feel. This loss is called historical dislocation and it makes people open to significant personal and spiritual change.

The second stage in Rambo's model is *crisis*. This is where the church's opportunity lies. So many people are in crisis! Crisis usually precedes conversion: it is the rupture in life of some kind and makes people understand they cannot do life in the way they have done it before.⁴¹ Because the context is unstable, more and more people are in crisis.

The third stage is *quest* in which people seek to resolve their predicament. The church can easily create spaces for "questers" in their community. The only limit is the local church's imagination.

The fourth stage, *encounter*, occurs between the questing person (s) and the advocate of a new alternative. The focus here is not just the potential convert but also on the pastor, advocate, or missionary; their interplay is crucial in the process. Again the church could easily create space for this stage.

Fifth, *interaction* is the intensification of the contact in which the advocates and potential converts "negotiate" changes in thoughts, feelings and actions.

³⁹ Beverly Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 42–43.

⁴⁰ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁴¹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 17.

Sixth, *commitment* is a phase in which people decide to devote their lives to a new spiritual orientation. This state of turning is what Rambo calls the “fulcrum of the change process.”⁴²

Seventh, *consequences* involve ongoing aspects of further conversion or transformation. In Christian terms it is discipleship, growth, sanctification, or walking by the Spirit. I believe the church is uniquely equipped to own stages three through seven. If Rambo’s model is close to accurate, the church has a remarkable opportunity to see many come to Christ, and in the process the church might reorient itself back into God’s mission.

There is one final observation on conversion that is important for one to understand the relationship between the church’s moral crisis and its mission to the unbelieving world. The observation is that the lack of an emphasis on conversion is the fruit of the lack of the church’s understanding of the preeminence of Christ. Because of the lack of belief in the power and utter uniqueness of Jesus there is a corresponding disbelief in the power to change an individual, whether it be a disoriented church leader or your unbelieving next-door neighbor. This observation can be illustrated in the publication of two particular books. First, in John Stott’s final book, *The Radical Disciple*, he names several important aspects of meaningful engagement disciples of Jesus need to have with the world. The first and most important is this: that Christians respond to the spirit of secular culture by affirming, “the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ. . . . There is nobody like him. He has no rival and no successor.”⁴³ The key mark of discipleship is “nonconformity.”⁴⁴ He implores disciples with the words of Paul, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”⁴⁵ But the second book I want to highlight is one that was written to honor John Stott and his book *The Radical Disciple*. In this second book, *Living Radical Discipleship*, the various authors mention many aspects of Stott’s ministry and themes in *The Radical Disciple*, but nowhere is the actual heart of discipleship mentioned.⁴⁶ But what is mentioned are themes of global politics, social justice, and ecological imperatives. To be clear, all of these are critical and at least hinted at in Stott’s own work. However, what is notable in terms of current cultural shifts is that all of these are in line with a trending discernible pattern of this world, while what is conspicuously missing is the core conviction that all those themes must rest on the preeminence of Christ. I highlight this not to criticize the book *per se*, but to note that the trend away from the utter uniqueness of Christ is also a move away from the necessity of conversion to Christ.

⁴² Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 17.

⁴³ John Stott, *The Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 19–20.

⁴⁴ Stott, *The Radical Disciple*, 17.

⁴⁵ Stott, *The Radical Disciple*, 19.

⁴⁶ Laura S. Meitzner Yoder, ed., *Living Radical Discipleship* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2021).

IV. CONCLUSION

I began this essay by suggesting that the contours of the current ills of the church can be seen more clearly using Seymour's *The Twittering Machine* as a framework. The shame and embarrassment many Christians feel in the church due to its narcissistic pastors and misuses of power have pushed some to rethink or reject core structures that lay in the foundations of church institutions. While restructuring and rebuilding may be necessary for many churches to regain integrity and lost trust, it is also true that many of the proposed fixes miss the mark and may make things worse in the church. Moreover, Christian leaders ought to be suspicious of solutions that come from the same place that caused or, at the very least, amplified the problems in the first place.

Instead I have suggested that it is a better use of energy and resources to engage in mission and evangelism to our local communities. Key to this is a re-emphasis on conversion and the power of the gospel to authentically transform people. The power of the gospel to do this gives hope to a self-obsessed world that they can find freedom from the self in Christ. It also gives hope to self-obsessed Christians that they can once again deny themselves, pick up their crosses, and follow Jesus afresh.

It may seem as if the church is stuck in a mess of its own making. And it is true that Christ's Bride has many problems. However, it is also true that the church's message is still the most compelling message in the world today and one that the world desperately needs and even longs for. While it may be tempting to mute our message out of embarrassment caused by bad actors in the church, this is not the right path. Instead, the church ought to re-engage in its mission to the world. Doing this will help those who need hope and will redirect a church that has lost focus.