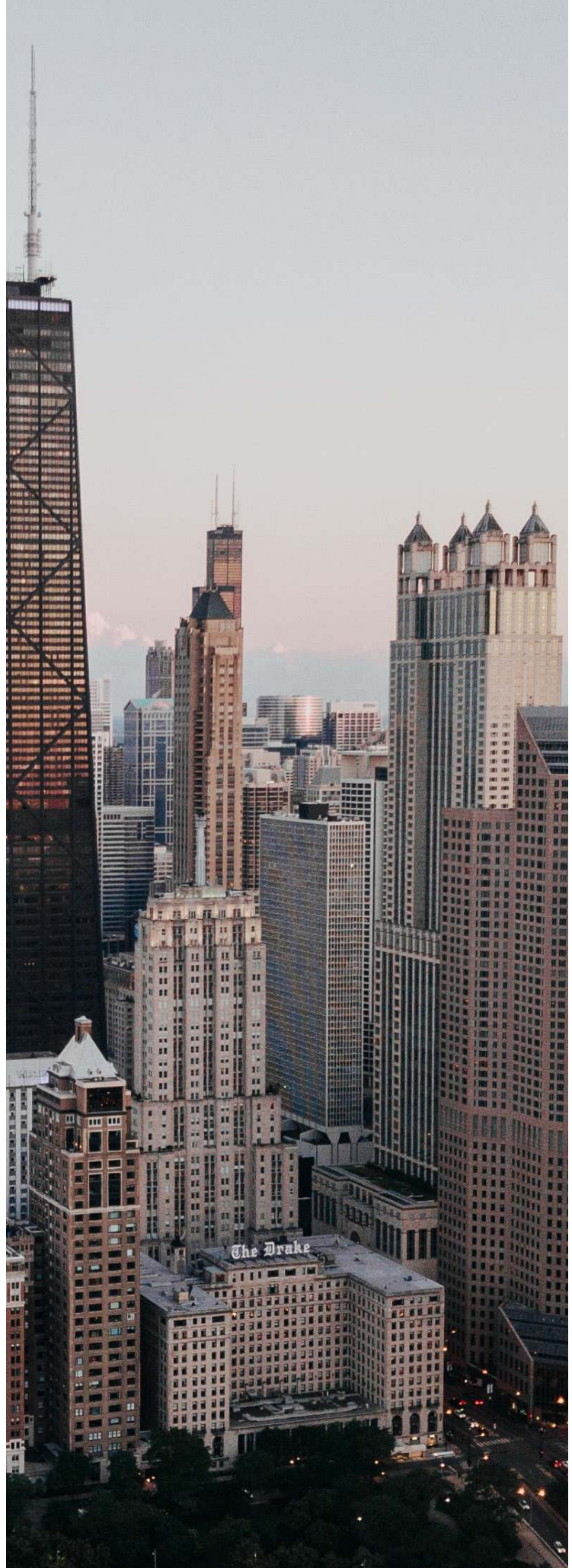


# How to Reach the West Again

BY TIMOTHY KELLER





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**W**e are entering a new era in which there is not only no social benefit to being Christian, but an actual social cost. In many places, culture is becoming hostile toward faith more and more, and beliefs in God, truth, sin, and the afterlife are disappearing in more and more people. Now, culture is producing people for whom Christianity is not only offensive, but incomprehensible.

Church leaders must find new ways to reach people who won't even think about coming to church or believing Christianity's most basic concepts. And we must find ways of churching and forming people as Christians in the midst of a very different culture. Let's call this the "Outward Move" and the "Inward Move" of a missionary encounter with Western culture.

To clarify, a missionary encounter is *not* a withdrawal from culture into communities with little connection to the rest of society. Nor is it an effort to get political power in order to impose Christian standards and beliefs on an unwilling populace. Nor is it such an effort to become relevant that the church becomes completely adapted to and assimilated by the culture.

Instead, a missionary encounter connects (unlike the strategies of withdrawal) yet confronts (unlike the strategies of assimilation) and therefore actually converts people (unlike all the strategies, including that of political takeover). A church having a missionary encounter also *does* maintain its distinctiveness (which is what the withdrawal approach wants) and it *does* often affirm and always serve neighbors (which is what the assimilation approach wants) and it *does* call people to repent and change (which is what the politically assertive approach wants). And since our Western culture is *post-Christian*, this will not look exactly like any missionary encounter that the church has had in the past.

Here are five basic elements to having a missionary encounter with Western culture.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Christian High Theory

Before we can explain the gospel to a culture, we must explain the culture with the gospel.

Historically, apologetics involves giving arguments and evidences for the truth of Christianity. Such apologetics, as in arguing for the historicity of the Resurrection, go back all the way to the New Testament (1 Corinthians 15). But the early Christian apologists, from Justin Martyr to Augustine, did more than that. They did not merely try to show that Christian practice and beliefs came up to the standards of pagan culture. Instead, they developed a radical critique of pagan culture that showed how pagan culture, by its own standards, failed. In *The City of God*, Augustine developed what would today be called “critical theory,” or High Theory. He used the gospel to critique the dominant culture.

Today, a biblical or Christian High Theory would seek not so much to live up to our secular culture’s standards of rationality, but would reject the standards and question its claims of neutrality, objectivity, and universality. A Christian High Theory would engage the late modern secular view of the world publicly, exposing its severe problems on the basis of its own framework of beliefs, showing how its basic narratives do not fit human nature and intuitions, and proclaiming the gospel as the counterpoint. In particular, it should show how, in an effort to free the individual self completely, the modern secular framework has led to our modern condition in which:

- All values are relative
- All relationships are transactions
- All identities are highly fragile, and
- All (supposed) sources of fulfillment are disappointing.

We are still *not free*: not free objectively, as local

communities and families decline, and not free subjectively, as we experience inner loneliness and enslaving addictions.

This work is largely going to be the work of Christians in the academy, who may have the help of non-Christians scholars and thinkers who see the fatal flaws in late modernity. Many have focused on the problem of unchecked individualism, the problem of the modern self, the problem of relativism—all of which are intensified in modern culture.

### 2. A Truly Post-Christendom Evangelistic Dynamic

Western churches have many evangelistic methods and programs, but they often assume that there are plenty of non-Christians who acknowledge basic concepts of God, truth, sin, and an afterlife and will seek out the church or are open to invitation. To reach today’s culture, we must find a modern version of the evangelistic dynamic of the early church, which grew through conversion in a similarly hostile and non-comprehending culture. The elements of such a dynamic include:

#### *Intentionality*

Michael Green estimates that 80% or more of evangelism in the early church was done not by ministers or evangelists, but by ordinary Christians identifying and explaining themselves to their *oikos*—their network of relatives and close associates.<sup>2</sup> People paid attention to the gospel because someone they knew well, worked with, and perhaps loved, spoke to them about it.

#### *Alternative Answers*

Helping non-Christians recognize they have a problem that requires salvation requires questioning people’s answers (even before answering their questions or objections to Christianity). By “people’s answers,” we mean their working answers to the big questions of life. No one can live without meaning, satisfaction, freedom, identity, ways to get and give forgiveness, ways to resolve

<sup>1</sup> See: Larry Hurtado. *Destroyer of the Gods* (Baylor, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Green. *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Eerdmans, 2004).

moral questions, and hope for the future. Culture's ways to provide these things ultimately will not work, and if we have their attention (usually through intentionality) we can, at the opportune time, point to the unsurpassed fulfillments Christianity can provide:

- a meaning in life that suffering can't take away (and even deepen)
- a satisfaction not based on circumstances
- a freedom that does not turn community and love relationships into thin transactions
- an identity that is not fragile, not based on performance or exclusion
- a way to deal with guilt and to forgive without residual bitterness or shame
- a basis for seeking justice that does not turn you into an oppressor yourself
- a way to face not only the future, but death itself with poise and peace

Put another way, we must help non-Christians see that their indelible needs and longings for these things are actually echoes of their need for God.

#### *Good News*

We also have to explain the gospel in a way that is compelling and attracts many late modern people.

The gospel is that "Salvation comes (only from) the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). Gospel presentations must always make two points:

- **The bad news:** you are trying to save yourself, but you can't.
- **The good news:** you can be saved through Christ alone, not your efforts.

In traditional culture, in which the basic narrative is "the meaning of life is to be good," the bad news and good news look different from late modern culture, in which the basic narrative is "the meaning of life is to be free." We need to flesh out a new gospel presentation and new approaches for corporate worship.

### **3. A Category-Defying Social Project**

In *Destroyer of the Gods*, Larry Hurtado seeks to explain why an increasing number of people converted to Christianity in the Roman world, even though it was the most persecuted of all religions and carried significant social cost. But Hurtado speaks of the unique Christian social project—a unique kind of human community that defied categories then and will still do so today.<sup>3</sup> It has at least five elements that could be broken down and expounded at greater length, but which also need to be seen together, as they constitute a whole. The early church social project was:

- Multi-racial and multi-ethnic
- Highly committed to caring for the poor and marginalized
- Non-retaliatory, marked by a commitment to forgiveness
- Strongly and practically against abortion and infanticide
- Revolutionary regarding the ethics of sex

The early Christian community was both offensive and attractive. But believers did not construct their social project in some strategic way to reach Roman culture. Each of the five elements was there because Christians sought to submit to biblical authority. They are all commanded. They are just as category-defying—both offensive and attractive—today. The first two views on ethnic diversity and caring for the poor sound "liberal" and the last two views on abortion and sexual ethics sound "conservative." But the third element, of course, sounds like no particular party. Churches today are under enormous pressure to jettison the first two or the last two but not to keep them all. Yet to give up any of them would make Christianity the handmaid of a particular political program and undermine a missionary encounter.

### **4. Counter-Catechesis for a Digital Age**

By using the word "catechesis," I am not necessarily

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<sup>3</sup> Larry Hurtado. *Destroyer of the Gods* (Baylor, 2017).

calling for the use of the actual catechism method of question-and-answer. I am a proponent of that method, but that's not my point here. I use it to refer to the way churches have instructed and formed Christians who are shaped by the Bible and Christian teaching rather than by the world. The fact is that we have virtually stopped doing catechesis as it was done in the past. We have forgotten three things about formation.

*Catechesis was always counter-catechesis.*<sup>4</sup> During the Reformation, there was an explosion of catechesis—new catechisms were written by the hundreds. This was not merely because they were incorporating their members into their teaching—they were also inoculating their members against the only real alternative to being a Protestant: being a Catholic. They not only constructed a worldview; they dismantled and vaccinated against the dominant alternatives.

Catechesis was part of a moral ecology. It is no surprise that so many young people raised in the church, taught and instructed for years, say, “I don't see what's wrong about two people having sex if they really love each other.” Alarmed parents can point them to biblical texts, but they won't be effective, because the underlying narratives that make such a view of sex plausible—narratives of identity and freedom and morality—were never identified as such and exposed as implausible.

Catechesis must include faithful Christian presence in public spheres.

We live in a culture dominated by non-Christian thought and themes (about reason/science, individualism, relativism, materialism). This means that the church must train and disciple Christians to integrate their faith with their work in the public sphere. If Christians are equipped to do this, the gospel will become “salt and light” in culture more naturally than if we took a more political approach in which Christians sought to

gain the reins of coercive power, or took a more withdrawn approach in which being a Christian was seen as something you did only in private with no application to every area of life.

## 5. Grace to the Point

We must never lose grasp of the difference between gospel grace and religious moralism. Why does the Protestant church constantly fall into the temptation to self-righteousness, dominance, and exclusion? Why does it fail to reproduce the early church's social project? Because it loses its grip on the very core of its faith.

When we lapse back into thinking that we are saved by our moral efforts, we become enmeshed in both pride and fear. Pride because we may think God and the world owe us acclaim; fear because we can never be sure we've lived truly good-enough lives. And so, when we lose the existential (or doctrinal) grasp on the truth that we are saved by faith alone through grace alone because of Christ alone, we not only lose our joy and fall into fear, but also lose our graciousness and fall into pride. The world, of course, is quick—too quick—to find fault with the church and thus justify its dismissal of the gospel message. And yet it is quite right to do so. If the church continually moves toward dominance and control rather than love and service, it shows that it doesn't really believe the gospel it preaches. If the church doesn't believe the gospel, why should the world?

The challenges are formidable, but the gospel brings hope. There is no hope without it. We have, at least, these encouragements:

### 1. The Rise of Global Christianity

One of the main developments of the 20th and 21st centuries is the explosive growth of non-Western Christianity, the vast majority of which is evangelical and Pentecostal. At the very least, 70% of all Christians today live outside of the West, and many believers in Western countries are non-Anglo people from non-Western countries. There are more

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<sup>4</sup> I borrow this term from Alan Jacobs. “Dare to Make a Daniel.” Snakes and Ladders. September 19, 2018. Accessed August 21, 2019. <https://blog.ajjay.org/dare-to-make-a-daniel>

Presbyterians in Ghana than in the U.S. and the U.K. There are more Anglicans in Nigeria alone than in all of the U.S. and the U.K.

The reality is that the most secular populations of North America and Europe are in decline. Meanwhile, through evangelism and birth-rate, Christianity is growing rapidly, and through immigration and mission work, the church will continue to thrive and grow many places in the West. As a result, the number of people who are “secular” or who have “no religious preference” is expected to decline.

## 2. The Power of Chosen Religion

Some religions can be largely inherited. There are religions you adhere to because of your family background or nationality.

“Of course I’m Lutheran. I’m Norwegian.”  
“I’m Italian, so I’m Catholic.”  
“I’m Hindu because I’m Indian.”

In modernity, however, the emphasis is on individual choice and decision. Young people do not want to follow a path that they have not chosen for themselves. This is why traditional inherited religion—Catholic and mainline Protestantism—is in sharp decline. But evangelical faith is far better suited to such a cultural situation because it insists on a personal decision of faith and a conversion experience for everyone. Nevertheless, evangelical faith, while well-adapted to the culture of individual choice, also appropriately challenges it. When we freely choose to follow Christ, we also choose to give up living according to our own desires but to submit to his loving authority.

## 3. The Culturally Formative Power of Cities

As we read above, much of the energy of Christian growth today is among non-white, non-Western people and young people who want chosen religion, not inherited religion. This is why the great cities of the West may become hotbeds of new, growing churches. There, the populations are both young

and multi-ethnic.

Cities are the culture-forming wombs of modern society. Through agglomeration—the amassing of talent in urban proximity—new innovations and creative enterprises arise and spread out to the rest of the culture. If churches thrive and grow in cities, and if increasing numbers of urban Christians integrate their faith with their work in business, the arts, the media, and the academy—then Christians will continue to be salt and light in society.

## 4. Everything is Unprecedented Once

Up until 1900, there had never been a fast-growing revival in a non-Western pre-Christian country. Then there was (see the Korean revival and the East African revival). There has never been a fast-growing revival in a post-Christian, secular society. But every great new thing is unprecedented until it happens. There was never a renewal movement of monasticism until there was. There was never a Reformation until there was. There never was anything like a Great Awakening until there was.

Jesus said, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” There’s no reason to believe that this promise has an expiration date.

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