Idolatry, The Powers, and Cultural Formation

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Every D.Min. project is, I suppose, a labor of love. The quest for knowledge and commitment to vital ministry engagement fuels many years of reading, writing, research, and application. This project also added the fascinating element of the powers and principalities; not only as a subject of scholastic study but as a reality in my life and congregation. Once our eyes are opened, we tend to see things we would perhaps rather not see. The rigors of such a project—in terms of the work required and the forces at work against it—required enormous amounts of technical, prayerful, emotional, and physical support.

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worship planning, and preaching. The saints of FCC were wonderful partners and encouragers on the way. I ended this journey with First Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa. This congregation inherited my fascination with angels, demons, idols, and ongoing questions about the ways we are formed in the world and in Christ. They not only received this inheritance with grace, but challenged and encouraged me with remarkable insight. I am enormously grateful, especially, for Mrs. Margie Baker, my Administrative Assistant, who sweated the details and provided invaluable help throughout the research and writing stage. For the saints in both of these communities, I am eternally grateful.

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Abstract

My ministry project is comprised of a literature review and *Appreciative Inquiry* qualitative study at First Reformed Church to explore the practices and skills needed to live against idolatry and toward faithfulness.

The thesis of my ministry project is that we are surrounded by idols in our communities and in the local church, and must find ways of developing patterns of resistance against the powers that entice us into idolatry. The purpose of my project is to identify practices that will equip and empower the church to resist idolatry and live in faithfulness toward God. The findings of my project will amplify how Christian worship and mission, fueled by Holy Spirit power, are a vital means by which patterns of faithfulness are cultivated and resistance to idolatry and the powers are developed.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... ii

Abstract .............................................................................................................................. v

Chapter 1—Introduction, Thesis, and Statement of Purpose .....................................1

Chapter 2—Review of Literature ..................................................................................28

Chapter 3—Methodology ............................................................................................147

Chapter 4—Ministry Project Findings and Results ..................................................161

Chapter 5—Conclusions and Implications ................................................................203

Appendices ....................................................................................................................238

Appendix A: Summary of Biblical Texts ......................................................................238

Appendix B: Survey .........................................................................................................240

Appendix C: 18-30 Small Group Interview ..................................................................262

Appendix D: 31-45 Small Group Interview .................................................................266

Appendix E: 46-70 Small Group Interview ..................................................................271

Appendix F: 71-90 Small Group Interview ..................................................................277

Appendix G: Cultural Analysis—Sioux Center Football ..........................................280

Appendix H: Cultural Analysis—Family Gathering .....................................................289

Appendix I: Cultural Analysis—Thanksgiving Worship .............................................294

Appendix J: The Idol of Family—Matthew 12 .............................................................300

Appendix K: The Idol of Family Sermon Debriefing ..................................................312

Appendix L: The Idol of Wealth—Ephesians 5 ...........................................................314

Appendix M: The Idol of Wealth Sermon Debriefing .................................................328
Appendix N: The Idol of Community Pride—1 Samuel 2 .................................331
Appendix O: The Idol of Community Pride Sermon Debriefing..................347
Appendix P: The Idol of Work—Genesis 1 .........................................................350
Appendix Q: The Idol of Work Sermon Debriefing ...........................................366
Appendix R: The Idol of Religion—Amos 5 .......................................................370
Appendix S: The Idol of Religion Sermon Debriefing .......................................388
Bibliography ........................................................................................................393
Chapter 1: Introduction, Thesis Statement, and Purpose

Introduction

Scene One: In April 2014, Iowa Governor Terry Branstad signed into Iowa law the following proclamation, designating July 14, 2014 as a statewide and ostensibly special day of Christian prayer and repentance:

“NOW, THEREFORE, I, Terry E Branstad, as Governor of the State of Iowa, do hereby invite all Iowans who choose to join in the thoughtful prayer and humble repentance according to II Chronicles 7:14 in favor of our state and nation to come together on July 14, 2014.”

 Citizens, lawmakers, and a handful of protesters gathered on the steps of the Iowa State Capitol on this date to pray 2 Chronicles 7:14, which reads, “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and will heal their land.” The proclamation was rooted in a general evangelical belief that the United States of America continues in a descent toward hell through liberal, humanistic policy-making and the affirmation of all things immoral.

Definitions of morality are surely selective. In the 2 Chronicles passage, God is speaking to King Solomon after the completion of the Temple. First, it is a stretch to replace the Israelite monarchy with the United States of America—a

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2 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.
3 I am intentionally writing in vague, provocative terms in order to describe the way this day was perceived by non-Christians and those who do not share evangelical America’s line of thought in regard to the Christian faith and how it is lived out in the world.
way of suggesting that the U.S.A. now occupies a special status as God’s special people. Second, and more pertinently, any references to the Israelites’ “wicked ways” in the Hebrew Scriptures are usually focused on idolatry and the oppression of the poor: specifically, failure to care for the widow, orphan, and alien residing in the land. How tragically ironic, then, that on the same day in which government leaders were praying this very prayer, Governor Branstad made this response to the immigration of children into the United States from impoverished countries in Central America:

“The first thing we want is to secure the border,’ Branstad told reporters Monday at his weekly Statehouse news briefing. ‘I do want empathy for these kids, but I do not want to send the signal to send these children to America illegally.’”

In other words: “We don’t want them.” Border security and federal law evidently trump compassionate care toward vulnerable children. The repentance called for in the prayer does not apply when matters of national security are at stake, evidently.

Scene 2: The year is 2003, and a buddy and I had just made the long processional from Rock Valley to Ames, Iowa, arriving along with a caravan of worship-ready pilgrims. Our cathedral was Jack Trice Stadium, appropriately structured to gather the masses in a show of community, and appropriately

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4 “Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt” (Exodus 22:21).
bedecked in the liturgical colors of the fall football season: cardinal and gold.\textsuperscript{6}

Assuming our places in the \textit{ekklesia}, we began the liturgy:

\textbf{Call to worship} — A warm welcome on the PA system invites worshipers to cheer on the Cyclones!

\textbf{Hymn} — “Bells of Iowa State”

\begin{quote}
\textit{Green Hills for thy throne,}
\textit{And for crown a golden melody,}
\textit{Ringing in the hearts of all}
\textit{Who bring thee love and loyalty.}
\textit{Dear Alma Mater,}
\textit{Make our spirits great,}
\textit{True and valiant,}
\textit{Like the Bells of Iowa State.}
\end{quote}

A public state university is, according to the hymn, anthropomorphically endowed with a throne and crown. Able to captivate hearts and make spirits great, the dear institution receives love and loyalty from its subjects.

\textbf{Confession/Assurance of Pardon/Gospel} — The good news is actually played out in the game itself; our confession is the projection of our own inadequacies and need for meaning in a game of which the outcome (pardon) is not certain. The good news results only with a victory, of course. Worship, in this sense, is participation.

\textbf{Sacrament of Communion} — The sacrament celebrates the unity of believers (fans) who partake in the ritual feast of the kingdom (institution): nachos washed down with bourbon and Coke in ubiquitous red plastic cups.

\textsuperscript{6} Modern stadiums bear an uncanny resemblance to modern church buildings. Architectural renderings of the new Minnesota Vikings football stadium, for example, depict a cathedral-like structure (http://www.vikings.com/stadium/new-stadium/images.html) at the cost of $975 million, half of which will be paid by Minnesota tax-payers.
**Blessing and Sending**—Again over the PA, an earnest thank you and plea to keep on cheering the Cyclones, win or lose!

Leading the faithful in this liturgy are the cheerleaders, band, and announcer. The priests are the players themselves, who either represent the object of worship or are the object of worship.

The aim of this practice is devotion to the University. The vision presented is that of community with and devotion to a “winning team.” Produced in this liturgy are Cyclone fanatics who bleed cardinal and gold (and who will remember Iowa State when fundraisers come knocking).

Both of these scenes are presented in provocative, somewhat exaggerated terms, in order to help answer several questions: Is it possible that a call to prayer and subsequent policy-making might reveal something about idolatry and the powers in our culture? Is it possible that an event as inauspicious and ubiquitous as a college football game could tell us something about idolatry and the powers at work in the world today? What is it that makes political success, national security, and economic prosperity paramount? What is it that makes college football something more than a simple pastime, and instead like a religious experience? Are there, in fact, forces at work in the world around us, operating in subtle ways that might be shaping us for something other than the Kingdom of God?

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7 The late Bob Ufer, radio announcer for University of Michigan football, was quoted as saying, “Football is a religion, and Saturday is the holy day of obligation.” As will be made evident in later chapters, however, cultural institutions, including football, are not inescapably idolatrous. For more on the goodness of institutions, see chapter 9 of Andy Crouch’s *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013).
The Apostle Paul addresses this last question affirmatively. Fault does not lie with individual actors (although complicity surely does): Terry Branstad is not the force behind the first scene; Iowa State Cyclone football players or administrators are not the force behind the second scene. Paul points to something else. He writes, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). These forces, and our struggle against them, is the focus of this D.Min. project.

Thesis

Idolatry is a rather antiquated term, and brings to mind images of golden calves, Asherah poles, and wood or stone carvings resembling humans, animals, or “the gods.” Twenty-first century people surely don’t worship idols! In fact, the observant reader might point out that very few people worship anything anymore. Religion, as we know it, has quickly faded into a personalized, specialized interest. Non-religion, or freedom from religion, is particularly prized. And yet, many things in our culture have been granted an elevated status, even to the point of being considered absolute or ultimate. For example, many people defer to technology as the final authority, deferring to it to answer life’s questions.\(^8\) Likewise law, secularism, the economy, democracy, family, or one’s favorite football team might be considered to be the ultimate arbiter of

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\(^8\) Kryzysztof Kieslowski’s brilliant first entry in The Decalogue, “I Am the Lord Thy God,” presents the fictional, though wholly realistic story of a man who has put his complete trust in his home computer. His faith ultimately results in the death of his son. To render anything as absolute or ultimate is to simply elevate its status above and beyond all else.
truth, meaning, or aim in life. Each of these may be trusted, defended, treasured, deferred to, and championed to such an extent that they might be called...idols.

The thesis of this project is that we are surrounded by concepts, institutions, or things in our communities and in the local church that might be called idols. As Christians, we must find ways of developing patterns of resistance against the powers that entice us into practices that resemble ancient idolatry, as it is broadly defined. What are the idols in our community and in our church? Who or what are the powers enlivening these idols and how are we supposed to understand them? What does idolatry today look like? The purpose of my project is to identify the practices of faithfulness that will enable us to confront and resist the powers. The findings of my project will amplify how Christian worship and mission, fueled by Holy Spirit power, is a vital means by which patterns of resistance are developed to resist idolatry and the powers.

Terms

Idolatry: An idol is any good thing we make into an ultimate thing. This definition suggests that, “an idol is a cultural artifact that embodies a false claim about the world’s ultimate meaning.” A created thing assumes the place of God and is given status as both the source and aim of hope, happiness, and meaning. The first command of the Ten Commandments is, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3), suggesting that the “central premise of the Bible...is

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10 Crouch, Playing God, 55.
the rejection of idolatry.”¹¹ Humans are called to love, worship, and serve God alone, and to reject created things (אליל) and images of a deity (פםיל) as objects of worship.¹² According to Calvin, however, “man’s nature...is a perpetual factory of idols.”¹³ For reasons we often cannot explain, we have a tendency to look to created things—including artifacts, institutions, relationships, ideas, and concepts—as the source and aim of meaning and happiness. Because idols are not God, and because God is the only source of our hope, happiness, and life, idolatry is inherently self-destructive and contrary to God’s purposes for humans. And yet, humans have a proclivity toward idolatry as a result of the Fall. What is the source this proclivity?

The Powers: The powers refer to demonic forces and created systems, structures, and institutions that work antithetically to God and his kingdom reign. This reference is based on the Apostle Paul’s language of the “powers and principalities” in the New Testament (Eph. 6:12, et al).¹⁴ The powers serve to animate our idols, leading people to love and worship created things instead of the Living God. The powers work through cultural institutions and ideals—systems, government, politics, war, money, beauty, and health—to shape us as idolaters who worship and serve “created things rather than the Creator”

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¹⁴ See “Summary of Biblical Texts” (Appendix A) to this project for a full listing of New Testament references to the Powers.
(Romans 1:25). In this project *the powers* (referring to “the powers and principalities”) will be used interchangeably with the more general term *power*. While there are distinctions, which will be elucidated in chapter 2, both terms bear reference to authority and the ability to create, which can be either good (organization, structure and order in accordance to God’s intended purposes for his creation) or evil (coercion, domination, and violence antithetical to God’s intended purposes for his creation).\(^{15}\) Like everything else in creation, power is created good but oversteps its bounds and becomes a distortion of its created purpose.

Cultural formation: Human beings are formed by forces constantly at work in our cultural practices. These cultural practices, or liturgies, “shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world.”\(^{16}\) This belief refutes the myth that certain activities are benign, or neutral. Shopping at the mall forms humans. College football games form humans. The news we watch (whether Fox News or MSNBC) forms us. Every activity forms us in certain ways, shaping our desires and cultivating our understanding of the world. All cultural practices have power to shape us in ways that are consistent with or antithetical to the reign of God. Because the powers are at work in the world around us, we are constantly and often unknowingly threatened by forces that shape us in particular ways.

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\(^{15}\) See Part 1 of Crouch’s *Playing God* for a more elaborate description of power, especially as a positive force. For a more clinical definition of power, see Clegg et al, who view power as simply “getting others to do what one [wants] them to do, even against their will” (Stewart R. Clegg, David Courpasson, & Nelson Phillips, *Power and Organizations* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 46).

Kingdom of God: In the first chapter of Mark’s gospel, Jesus of Nazareth proclaims, “The time has come…the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). Jesus heralds, even as he embodies, the reign of God over his fallen creation. The story of the Bible—the overarching metanarrative of creation—is that God created “heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them” (Psalm 146:6a), that his creation rebelled (Genesis 3), that God set about to redeem his creation from the effects of the Fall (fulfilled through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ), and that he will one day fully restore his good creation (Rev. 21:1ff). Throughout the scriptures, God is depicted as the true Sovereign or King, Lord of his creation, while rebel usurpers have sought to establish a false kingdom predicated on pride and autonomy. Complicit in this rebellion is all of creation, including both humans and spiritual forces (angels and demons).17

Church: The word church is derived from the New Testament word ekklesia, literally referring to those “called out” by God.18 In Christianity, the term church refers primarily to the local gathering of God’s people in the community of faith, and in this project refers specifically to First Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa.

17 “Every idol intimates that life apart from God is within reach, within our grasp, available for our control. This is the first lie of power…” (Crouch, Playing, 64). This statement shows the connection between idolatry, power, and the contrast between human kingdoms (life apart from God) and God’s kingdom.
Community: The term community refers specifically to Sioux Center, Iowa. In a broad sense, the term community is used in reference to the geographic confluence of people and the businesses, schools, neighborhoods, organizations, and practices that emerge out of such a gathering. In a stricter sense, the term community refers to the unique culture of a town—in this case, Sioux Center, Iowa. For all of its diversity—politically, ethnically, socially, religiously, and economically—there are commonalities in life, practice, governance, and identity that make Sioux Center a community.19

Ministry Context

In every ministry context I’ve served, the tendency toward idolatry has been evident. Human beings, even in Christian communities, are prone to love, worship, and serve created things. My project will explore the nature of idolatry, and the powers and principalities that animate these idols. Borrowing liberally from sociological understandings of the nature of power, I will explore how idolatry shapes us, and the ways in which the world is saturated with God’s goodness and the competing forces of darkness.20 My project engages the practical implications of Christian practices in overcoming the powers and idolatries that too often form people contrary to the Kingdom of God.

19 Community is here intended to be distinct from the church community—ekklesia or koinonos—and refers especially to a city-state (polis).
My specific concern is predicated on what I believe to be a lack of awareness (cognitive) and insufficient practice (behavioral) in North American churches vis-à-vis the influence of the powers and our call to shared resistance against idolatry. Churches are complicit in the same idolatries as the broader culture, seeking to sanctify those idolatries instead of resisting and ultimately rejecting them. This complicity compromises our witness. Only by acknowledging the reality and presence of the powers in our culture and engaging in practices of resistance against idolatry will we be positioned to more capably disciple people in union with Christ, and in ways that reject the work of the powers.

My project will proactively help the congregation I serve to think deeply about our beliefs and practices (lex orandi), and how they speak to and perhaps even reveal hidden proclivities to idolatry. On the positive side, we are already engaged in practices that effectively reject idolatry; perhaps we only need to be reminded of what is at stake and how our actions lead to faithfulness to the one true God. Ultimately, my project will point to the victory of Jesus Christ over the powers, and how we might more urgently engage in Christian mission as a means of living into our baptismal identity.

With the theological groundwork of faithfulness over/against idolatry and the powers established, other churches may be inclined to identify the idolatries they face and to develop their own ministry practices as a means of building up the body of Christ in resistance to the powers and the cultural idolatries they birth. A theology of faithfulness helps us to know untruth; in other words, by
knowing the real thing, we learn what is counterfeit. My project will provide a model for how to engage ministries of resistance against the powers—in this case, focusing on worship and mission. This model could be replicated, however, to develop materials for counseling, small group ministries, discipleship helps, or healing ministries, to name but a few.

Finally, my project will communicate to our neighboring communities that our union with Christ makes us *different*. We will reject the cultural idolatries of the world, which we believe only lead to disappointment and death, just as we learn what it means to live fully with Jesus Christ, in whom there is life “in abundance” (John 10:10).

**Context**

The broader context of my project is Sioux Center, Iowa, a rural community of 7,500 people located in the northwest corner of the state. The area (Sioux County) is largely comprised of third and fourth generation immigrants from the Netherlands who came to northwest Iowa for land. It is an agricultural economy. Farming, both crops and livestock, remains central to the local economy, though industry (Pella Windows), agri-business, engineering (Interstates Electric), public and private schools, Dordt College, and the local hospital employ the greatest numbers of people.

The particular context of my project is First Reformed Church (FRC). Established by Dutch immigrants in the 1870’s, FRC is the oldest church in the community. With a membership of approximately 1,200 people, it is also the
largest. The congregation is mostly white, Dutch, educated, and affluent. Ministries are diverse and well resourced, and the church has adopted a special interest in missions and orphan-care. Theologically, FRC is in the center-right of the reformed tradition. I am currently one of two ordained pastors, though our staff (including both full- and part-time) numbers fifteen persons.

The community’s many churches play a central and vital role in the community, and have shaped the community’s identity. With roots in the Dutch-reformed church, most congregations in town fall within the reformed tradition—Reformed Church in America (three congregations), Christian Reformed Church (five congregations), United Reformed Church, and Netherlands Reformed Church. The remaining churches in the community are denominationally aligned with the Evangelical Free Church, Roman Catholic Church, and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. A recent study indicates that approximately 95% of the people in Sioux Center are affiliated with a Christian congregation.21

While a majority of people in the community trace their ancestry to the Netherlands, an increasingly number of white-collar and industry jobs attract men and women of many backgrounds, albeit mostly white. Hispanic immigrants (documented and undocumented) increasingly fill low wage-earning jobs. The public schools in Sioux Center are approximately 25% Hispanic. Because of a community-wide commitment to orphan care (spearheaded by FRC), a surprising number of children from Ethiopia and Guatemala call Sioux

Center home. Residents largely recognize Sioux Center as a safe, affluent, and conservative community.

As any community, Sioux Center also shares a shadow side. Those very characteristics and attributes of blessing in the community are also its curses. Family is cherished, but over-connected family systems are prevalent. A toxic, shame-based family-centered culture has been identified by area therapists and pastors. Farming is still considered a noble vocation, but land-grabbing, greed, and corporate farming have excluded many. Furthermore, work ethic is valued to the impediment of health and wholeness for many. Dutch heritage is prized, but often in a prideful way that belittles others from outside of the Dutch “bubble,” and especially those who are of different nationalities or ethnicities. Community pride is evident, but often in ways that are arrogant, insular, and fearful. To a visitor, Sioux Center would seem to be a caricature of the “red state,” marked by conservative economic, political, and religious sensibilities.

The caricature notwithstanding, Sioux Center bears an increasing delineation of older conservatives, younger liberals, and marginalized Hispanics. While counting few Hispanics as members, FRC is comprised of mostly traditional families of Dutch heritage, with an increasing number of more politically and theologically liberal non-Dutch families.

The church, while homogenous in many ways, is ever so slightly changing. This is seen particularly in the values of some of the younger generation. For

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22 Based on a conversation with pastors, therapists, and classis leaders on Wednesday, February 12, 2014 in Sioux Center.
example, Sunday morning, once sacrosanct in the community, is now marked by soccer tournaments, open restaurants, and declining church attendance. In all generations, increased affluence in the farm economy over the last twenty years has resulted in larger homes, foreign automobiles, and long absences in the summer months, when church attendance can decrease by as much as twenty percent. Disposable income, leisure time and pursuits, and entertainment are increasing, while church engagement is decreasing.

Literature Review

This project primarily engaged the Biblical, theological, ethical, and sociological fields of inquiry. Biblical exegesis will provide the foundation for understanding both idolatry and the powers. What does the Bible have to say about idolatry and the powers? Why is idolatry rejected? What identity do the powers take and what influence do they have? Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit establish a basic Jewish understanding of idolatry, including its forms and metaphors. American theologians Timothy Keller and Andy Crouch provide a more distinctly Protestant, North American perspective on idolatry. Walter Wink carefully exegetes the New Testament terms associated with the powers and principalities, and identifies ways of understanding these terms today.

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23 My guides in this endeavor will be Moshe Halbertal & Avishai Margalit, Tim Keller, Andy Crouch, Walter Wink, Chad Pierce, Marva Dawn, Clinton Arnold, and Hendrik Berkhof.  
24 Halbertal et al, *Idolatry*.  
terms; most specifically, the “imprisoned spirits” of 1 Peter 3:19.\textsuperscript{27} Marva Dawn, Clinton Arnold, and Hendrik Berkhof each give distinctive and contrasting views on the powers—both their form and influence.\textsuperscript{28} Ethicist John Howard Yoder supplies a model of teaching in response to power, focusing on the life of Jesus and resulting in his ethic of non-violent resistance.\textsuperscript{29} Each theologian, in their own distinct ways, considers how Christians are to live in the face of idolatry and demonic power. How are we to confront the powers? What is our response to power and how does that response reflect the Kingdom of God?

My interaction with the sociological underpinnings of power will enliven my particular focus on faith and practice in the church today.\textsuperscript{30} Why do we do what we do? Why does power exert the influence it does in the forms it takes? How is the Christian conception of power different from the ordinary ways in which the world understands and practices power? Stewart Clegg, David Courpasson, and Nelson Phillips lay a foundation for understanding power and the ways power is used to shape organizations.\textsuperscript{31} Andy Crouch presents a more positive, and theologically grounded view of power.\textsuperscript{32} James Davison Hunter considers how Christians in the 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} centuries have sought to use power in shaping

\textsuperscript{29} John Howard Yoder, \textit{The Politics of Jesus} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).
\textsuperscript{30} Clegg et al, Crouch, Goudzwaard et al, Hunter, Smith.
\textsuperscript{31} Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, \textit{Power and Organizations}.
\textsuperscript{32} Crouch, \textit{Playing God}.
culture, often to deleterious effects. Bob Gouzewaard considers the way power works through ideologies, exploring 20th century examples of ideology and connecting the means sought in those ideologies to forces beyond our control. Finally, James K.A. Smith explores the ways in which we are shaped by cultural liturgies—the basic practices humans engage in everyday—and how those liturgies reflect (or not) the Kingdom God.

While each source will be critiqued, I am most interested in interacting with them in their identification and response to idolatry and the powers.

Theology

My project is rooted in the witness of the Scriptures, and particularly in the belief that God is creator, ruler, and sovereign Lord of all. He alone is worthy of our love, worship, loyalty, and service. In him is life, and we were designed to live in communion with him. Necessary in my project, then, will be a Biblical presentation of the Old Testament practices of faithfulness against the threat of idolatry, and idolatry’s New Testament counterpart, the powers and principalities. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit are my primary resources on the OT subject of idolatry. Exposition of key Biblical texts will find assistance in the sermons and writings of Timothy Keller.

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33 Hunter, *To Change the World.*
35 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom; Imagining the Kingdom.*
36 Halbertal & Margalit, *Idolatry.*
37 Keller, *Counterfeit.* Additional sermons by Timothy Keller can be found at monergism.com and gospelinlife.com.
The scriptural witness declares the importance of the object of our worship (God as opposed to Baal) and the method by which we worship the one true God (orthopraxy as opposed to “strange fire”). Halbertal and Margalit present the case that the sin of idolatry refers not only to the worship of other gods, but also the false worship of the one true God. An idol is a good thing that we make into an ultimate thing. So, for examples, food is a good thing, but can become an ultimate thing from which people seek to derive their hope and happiness; sex is a good thing, but can become an ultimate thing upon which people spend all their time and energy and from which they seek to derive meaning in life; national security is a good thing, but can become an ultimate thing for which people would sacrifice anything, including civil liberties and even their own children. Few people would suggest that these tendencies are idolatrous, and yet this is the subtle danger of idolatry. In making created things into ultimate things, we establish them as lords over our lives. This is the nature of idolatry.

Walter Wink is the foremost authority on the powers, though I have found that Marva Dawn, especially in her book *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*, is a more practical and reliable source. Clinton Arnold presents a theologically conservative understanding of the Apostle Paul’s concept of the powers, identifying the powers as personal beings—angels and demons. John Howard Yoder, on the other hand, sees the powers almost exclusively in systems

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38 Leviticus 10:2.
39 Halbertal, *Idolatry*.
40 Keller, *Counterfeit*, xvii.
42 Arnold, *Powers*.
and structures. Walter Wink bridges the two camps in an attempt to avoid dualism, on the one hand, or demythologizing, on the other. He views the powers as interchangeable, imprecise, and unsystematic. He points to the inner essence or gestalt of a state or system, claiming that power always finds its manifestation in concreteness. All three theologians, however, affirm that the powers oppress people, and assert themselves as gods. Critical to my project will be showing that the powers are both personal beings and systems/structures of power. Particularly in my theologically conservative evangelical context, it is necessary to show that the powers exist in systems, structures, and “cultural liturgies.” To relegate the powers to angels and demons is good for a horror movie or headline, but doesn’t arrest us in our day-to-day lives. When we recognize the powers at work in the government, nationalism, militarism, politics, money, law, and the created order, our eyes are opened to the real threats the powers pose.

Perhaps the most invaluable theologian in my review of literature is the Dutch theologian Hendrik Berkhof. To Berkhof, the functioning of the powers (stoicheia) is found in nationalism, militarism, class, social structure, and public opinion; anything that would seek to usurp the authority and dominion of the one true God. Suffice to say, Berkhof presents the link between the powers and idolatry.

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43 Yoder, Politics.
44 Wink, Naming, 104.
45 Andy Crouch, Playing God, presents the counterpoint to this thesis, suggesting that power is a God-given resource in the culture-making process mandated by God (“fill the earth and subdue it,” Gen. 1:28).
46 This is term used to great effect by Smith in Desiring the Kingdom. My project will delve deeply into this work.
47 Berkhof, Christ and the Powers.
The point of the project is to identify the powers at work in the world, and the ways in which the church faithfully lives toward God and away from idols.

Trajectory

The learning units I designed in preparation for this D.Min. project cohere nicely, and have very intentionally provided a path to understanding the powers and how these forces form us toward idolatry. My first learning unit focused on discovering, studying, and critiquing the pertinent literature on idolatry and the powers. It established the foundation for understanding idolatry and the powers, and broadened my vocabulary and conception of the powers.

My second learning unit explored the reality that there are cosmic forces at work in shaping systems and structures in the world, producing war, hunger, racial tension, and socio-economic discord. This unit focused on the philosophical, sociological, and political underpinnings of these realities and how we are to view these forces as connected to both life structures and transcendent beings. Additionally, I explored the ways in which the powers work through ideologies. For example, in the human effort to achieve a particular ends, the means employed to achieve this end often becomes deified. In this unit, I explored the ways in which we might be engaged in physical and spiritual warfare against cosmic forces while examining how the church might engage in the battle.

My third learning unit again explored these cosmic forces at work in shaping systems and structures in the world. I transitioned into exploring the ways in
which they are also active in personal and cultural formation, distorting our vision of what it means to be created in the image of God while directing us in rebellion against God. My focus centered on how Christian worship might provide a counter-measure to the cultural formation that is occurring all around us by the influence of the powers. This learning unit marked a transition from identification (defense) to resistance (offense) under the paradigm of Christian worship practices and mission.

My fourth and final learning unit explored the question of why the church seems so often to operate with a power-against-power mentality in fighting against the world, the flesh, and the devil. My contention was that our culture of celebrity pastor and power politics encourages this behavior and ethos, just as the high stakes of the culture wars demand it. Because this way of being seems contrary to Jesus’ way, and that of St. Paul and the Early Church, I asked the question, “What might it look like for the pastoral leader to lead by the Holy Spirit’s power and not by power as it is defined by the world?” I focused on studying the history of power and cultural formation (noting the inner machinations of power in Fordist and Taylorist systems) in addition to contemporary leadership principles.48 Using Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a case study, I compared and contrasted historical power and contemporary leadership principles with Bonhoeffer’s life and witness as a means of showing Holy Spirit

power at work in leadership. The conclusion of this unit identified self-giving service to others as the ultimate manifestation of Holy Spirit power: mission.

Process

The process of my ministry project takes the shape of the 4-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. Through these cycles I identify the working idolatries of FRC and the practices that lead to faithfulness.

Discovery – In the discovery stage, I identify the idols of FRC through the use of a survey completed by groups within the church, followed by analysis identifying themes for each group. Cultural analysis of practices within the community supplements the survey in order to witness the concrete manifestations of potential idolatries in the church and community. The focus was in answering, “What gives life, hope, and happiness?” Small group interviews provided triangulation, and gave members of the congregation the opportunity to reflect on the good things we look to for life, hope, and happiness, while also considering how we might turn those good things into ultimate things.

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51 For the purposes of this project, I observe and analyze three culture-making events: a high school football game, a family meal, and a worship service at FRC.
52 Sensing, Qualitative, 171.
Dream—In the dream stage, I continued the small group interviews by asking participants to make a wish for FRC. What would it look like for the church to resist idolatry? Based on the surveys and interviews, I wrote a sermon series envisioning how we might live more intentionally in resistance to idolatry. The focus was on dreaming, “What would the Kingdom of God look like at FRC if...?”

Design—In the design stage, I produce a series of worship orders along with a missional hermeneutic that will equip the church to practice faithfulness and resist idolatry and the powers. What are the means of developing practices of faithfulness in resistance to the idolatries? What does faithful practice look like at FRC and how do we live it out intentionally through worship and self-giving service to others? This section focuses on the practices of worship and mission.

Destiny—The destiny or “do” stage looks like the people of FRC being equipped and empowered to engage in deep change: embodying distinct values shaped by Word and Spirit and not by the competing forces of power and idolatry; instilling different values in our children, wisely shepherding them in the ways of Christ and not the ways of the world; and as a community creating a new future of discernment and Spirit-fueled power that compels us to willingly and lovingly exist for others. This might look like an increased interest in understanding and enacting worship that explicitly rejects the powers and focuses on the true source of our life and witness—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This might look like a shared and thoughtful critique of popular culture (Fox
News, for example, or, alternatively, MSNBC; film, television, magazines, shopping) and the way culture shapes us antithetically to the Kingdom. This might look like an increased awareness of those marginalized in our community, and thoughtful ways of reaching out in love and service to our neighbor.

The appendices of my project include the survey, cultural analyses, a series of sermons, and worship orders.

Purpose

This project looks in great hopefulness to the reality that there is something more to life. In my various experiences in and out of the church, I’ve found that so often people, including me, are searching for identity, belonging, and purpose, seeking to find happiness and hope in a world filled with suffering, sin, and death. As we are searching, we are unaware of the unseen forces at work in shaping us. The world beckons us to a particular vision of the good life, built on money, sex, power, and success. Money, sex, power, and success are good things created by God for our good and his glory. But these things overstep their bounds and assume the place of God in the world—we make them ultimate things. He intends more for us—true and genuine life that is rooted in him.

In my own life, I’ve responded to the siren call of the world, the flesh, and the devil in seeking to find the good life in created things. I’ve sought popularity, wealth, success, dominance, power, beauty, knowledge, and respect. I have, at various times, erected each of these as idols in whom I place my hopes. I make good things into ultimate things. Willful sin on my part is a component of
idolatry. What I’ve come to find is that these false gods do not deliver on the promises they ostensibly make.\textsuperscript{53} Hope and happiness cannot be found in them, and they invariably leave their worshipers more hopeless and disillusioned than before.\textsuperscript{54}

However, in my maturation as a follower of Jesus Christ, I’ve also come to find that there are forces at work in the world shepherding us into idolatry. We are complicit, but very often we are not the engines driving ourselves to idolatry. The development of my social conscience has brought this reality to my awareness. For instance, it occurred to me some time ago that security and comfort are two of the great idols in the United States. Security and comfort are good things. However, it is evident that there are few things we would not do militaristically (and affirm politically) for the sake of security and comfort. Who wouldn’t we blow up for the sake of security and comfort? This is not necessarily because we affirm violence or murder. And yet it happens. Why? The U.S. economy is another example: it appears that we will go to any lengths to ensure that our national economy is strong; even, ironically, if it means that our own people will suffer. In both of these examples, we have set the military, government, and the national economy up as idols. All three are good things, but they have overstepped their bounds in the created order. We have made them

\textsuperscript{53} “The first move of all idolatry is from good to great” with increasingly diminishing returns. Crouch,\textit{ Playing God}, 56-58.
\textsuperscript{54} “The idols of the nations…[have no] breath in their mouths. Those who make [idols] will be like them, and so will all who trust in them” (Psalm 135:15a, 17b-18).
gods, but because they are not gods (they are creaturely), they are crushed (and crush others) under the weight of being made into an idol.

The question that has persisted for me is, “Why?” Why do we do this? What forces are at work in the world in shaping systems and structures, -isms and –ologies that oppress? If God is the only sovereign Lord, why do we insist on making idols? Why are we so insistent in finding our hope and happiness in created things? My contention is that there are forces at work every day, powers and principalities all around us, shaping us in ways that are antithetical to God and his purpose for us—life in communion with him. These powers almost invariably work to lead us into idolatry and injustice.

As Christians, the means and the end of all that we do is Jesus Christ. As reformers, we recognize that the word of God is the sword by which we vanquish the idols in our midst (Eph. 6:17). Sound biblical theology is critical to the church’s life. Our proclivity to idolatry is a sign of human sinfulness. The Gospel proclaims to us that in and through Jesus Christ, we are forgiven, adopted as God’s children, renewed by the Holy Spirit, and promised eternal life in the presence of God. In short, we are rescued from idolatry, made a new creation, and shaped to live out our God-designed creaturely purpose: “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”55

My project results from my own growing awareness of the forces at work all around us, an increasing humility in the face of those powers, and the trust that in and through Jesus Christ we have all that we need to confront and resist the

55 Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A 1.
powers and idolatry. This is not a passive exercise, but demands our full attention and participation. The church, the vehicle by which God’s grace comes into the world, must be wise in this and take responsibility for shaping disciples in conformity with God’s will and ways.

In an increasingly confused, syncretistic, post-modern culture it is critical that the church identify and confront idolatry humbly and graciously with the gospel: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All of this is to say that my project is rooted in my own weakness and vulnerability in the face of the powers, my belief that the church is the means by which God is engaging the world to resist idolatry and the powers of darkness, and my joy in knowing that I have been entrusted with a mission pastorally and theologically to address this issue.

My desire is that men, women, and children would reject the false promises of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and find their true vocational calling as sons and daughters of the Father, joined to him through Jesus Christ the Son, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to live lives of wholeness, joy, love, worship, and service. Only when this happens will the true shalom of kingdom of God be manifest. O, hasten the day!
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction: Theological Positions

This chapter provides the foundation for ensuing chapters, presenting the theological underpinnings and social implications of idolatry, the powers, and cultural formation across Biblical, sociological, and ethical fields of study. For the purposes of my study, I’ve defined idolatry as the human tendency to make any good thing into an ultimate thing that we look to for life, hope, and happiness. The powers refer to demonic forces and created systems, structures, and institutions that work antithetically to God and his kingdom reign. In this chapter, I am researching these terms in order to present a broad view of the identity, machinations, and result of idolatry. The primary work of my research is in reviewing books and articles associated with the terms. An acknowledgement of the reality and effects of idolatry and the powers, and their work in forming people in ways antithetical to God’s ways, is the first step in the process of developing patterns of resistance in the church.

Two parts comprise the chapter: the first part explores the key Biblical underpinnings related to idolatry and the powers, including various theological positions; the second part considers sociological understandings of the dynamics of power and emergent cultural responses.
Part 1: Theologies of Idolatry and the Powers

Idolatry: An idol is any good thing we make into an ultimate thing. In other words, an idol is any created thing to which we attribute god-like status. Humans imbue idols with authority and power that suggests ultimacy—that the thing is worthy of deference, worship, and/or adoration. This proclivity violates the first command of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Humans are called to love, worship, and serve God alone. While affirming Calvin’s assertion that “man’s nature...is a perpetual factory of idols,” theologian Gerald May places idolatry alongside of a more contemporary term:

“The same processes that are responsible for addiction to alcohol and narcotics are also responsible for addiction to ideas, work, relationships, power, moods, fantasies, and an endless variety of other things. We are all addicts in every sense of the word...Addiction also makes idolaters of us all, because it forces us to worship these objects of attachment, thereby preventing us from truly, freely loving God and one another.”

We are all idolaters; we are all addicts.

The Apostle Paul writes of the proclivity toward idolatry among sinful humans: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom. 1:22-23). For reasons we often cannot explain, we have a tendency to make created things—including artifacts, relationships, ideas, and

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56 Keller, Counterfeit, xvii.
57 These same things have the ability to assume such status, as well, as explained below.
58 Calvin, Institutes, 1.11.7, 108.
concepts—into ultimate things, and establish them as our ultimate source of hope and happiness. Because idols are not God, and because God is the only source of our hope, happiness, and life, idolatry is inherently self-destructive and contrary to God’s purposes for humans. Psalm 135:15-18 states it evocatively:

“The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them!”

And yet, idolatry is pervasive. In an era where churches are equally likely to have abundant iconography as no cross at all, traditional Protestant and Catholic churches are right in line with any run-of-the-mill non-denominational “full-gospel” church in walking the path of idolatry. The rise of personality cults and celebrity pastors within the church are testimony to this. This is not to suggest that the church must implement a hard-core, pietistic, law-driven vendetta to root out idolatry (as some very orthodox Presbyterian churches have done). Christ came to heal us of idolatry. The work comes in determining how we honor Christ in living out our identity as God’s people, the bride now being prepared by the Holy Spirit for the Bridegroom—the same marriage metaphor for the Christian church that harkens back to the marriage covenant depicted in scripture between God and the Israelites. This metaphor is utilized primarily to lament the infidelity of God’s people toward God in the practice of idolatry.

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60 “An idol is a cultural artifact that embodies a false claim about the world’s ultimate meaning.” Crouch, Playing God, 55.
Halbertal and Margalit

In *Idolatry*, authors Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit ask, “What is idolatry and why is it considered as an unspeakable sin?” They are writing from a Jewish academic perspective. Their application is, necessarily, focused on idolatry within Judaism, however they do make strong connecting points with Christianity (and slighter ones with other monotheistic religions). The authors explore in detail the sin of idolatry, utilizing primarily the biblical and anthropological metaphor of a marriage relationship between God and humans (hence, the sin equaling betrayal of a spouse). Their thesis is developed to also consider the nature of idolatry, juxtaposing the differences between the various ways of representing God and how that representation influences worship.

In exploring these issues, the authors posit that “the central theological principle of the Bible...[is] the rejection of idolatry.” The scriptural witness testifies to the importance of both the object of our worship (God as opposed to Baal) and the method by which we worship the one true God (orthopraxy as opposed to strange fire). In this sense, the sin of idolatry refers not only to the worship of other gods (which is pretty easy to ascertain), but even the false worship of the one true God (which challenges the Christian church particularly).

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62 The source material for the authors’ research includes scripture, the Talmud, and rabbinic literature, particularly the thought of Maimonides.
In a detailed analysis of the rabbinic and biblical literature, the authors engage in a detailed study of the metaphors and practice of idolatry within Israel. For instance, it is quite clear that, when I am worshiping Baal, I am betraying my first love—the One who created me and demands full allegiance and love. This is surely why the Bible uses the imagery of spousal betrayal within the marriage covenant. To worship any other god is an act of infidelity toward the one true God.

More difficult is understanding that idolatry also includes forbidden ways of representing God. For instance, what are we to make of the painting representing God in the Sistine Chapel? Obviously, the picture is not God, and yet it is intended to represent God. What about words that represent or symbolize or substitute for God? The words or symbols are not God, and yet they are somehow intended to represent Him. Is that idolatry? The study includes idolatry as myth and cognitive error (i.e. Is it idolatry to think wrongly about God, and what constitutes the error?). The authors posit that belief determines practice, thereby suggesting that the way we think about God (which may be idolatrous in itself) will lead to idolatrous ways of worshiping God.

Halbertal and Margalit present a distinction between representation and metaphor, drawing on Biblical imagery:

“A picture has a transparent quality, and just as the expression ‘the hand of God’ is a metaphor for his power, so a drawing of God’s hand can be such a metaphor. Michelangelo’s famous painting can thus be interpreted as a metaphor for God’s primacy, creativity, and power.”\(^{64}\)

\(^{64}\) Halbertal, *Idolatry*, 51.
We don’t worship the painting, as it is not intended to be a representation of God; rather, we worship God by suggesting those attributes that make him worthy of worship.

One could surely get tied up in knots wondering about whether their appreciation of any picture made to metaphorically express the power of God is, in fact, idolatry. The problem with any pictorial representation, metaphorical or not, is that, invariably, the picture offers something concrete. In our fallenness, we are prone to worship the concrete manifestation of the thing, even when it is intended as a sign of the thing signified: “the believer will transform the object into a focus of his attitude, into a ritual center of gravity.”65 Conversely, language does not so easily fall prey to this objectification and, ultimately, worship. “This blurring of the distinction between the symbol and the thing symbolized, which is so common in idolatry, does not occur in language because in the latter there is no concrete object that can be endowed with some of the powers of the symbolized thing.”66 Here it is affirmed that Biblical imagery, including anthropomorphism (i.e. “the right hand of God” noted in Psalm 118:16) is appropriate, whereas a painting of Jesus is not.

The sin of idolatry is thus grounded in a misunderstanding about God, and our attempts to objectify him. Deeper still is our desire to control God. The authors find paganism rooted in this idea: “Pagan ritual is a form of magic, and in it man claims to be able to control the gods. In contrast, biblical ritual is the

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65 Halbertal, Idolatry, 52.
66 Halbertal, Idolatry.
fulfillment of God’s will.”67 For pagans and all idolaters, the tendency is to seek to be in control while ultimately being deluded about who to worship. “An important model of idolatry is the worship of the heavenly beings.”68 So, in addition to worshiping the gods out of the stories we create (paganism), humans worship as gods those things that are most visible (astral worship).

The authors present (without seeming to take sides) a distinction between monotheism (there is only one God), and monolatry (God is to be worshiped alone among all the gods). In describing the teaching of kabbalist Nachmanides, the authors note the prohibition against worshiping anything other than God:

“Nachmanides describes idolatry as the worship of various elements in the hierarchy of forces—angels, constellations, demons. The implication is that these forces are real ones, that God gave the constellations dominion over the gentile nations, and, moreover, that it is possible to foretell the future by means of witchcrafts and divination. Israel is forbidden to worship these forces principally because the constellations have no dominion over them, as the Israelites are God’s portion and property.”69

The four forms of idolatry are, in the end, listed by the authors as follows:

1. The first conception of idolatry views idolatry as betrayal and rebellion;
2. The second conception of idolatry (particularly that of Maimonides) is that of “a great metaphysical error.”70 Here, the main mistake is an anthropomorphic conception of God (through projection) or representation/objectification of God;
3. The third conception of idolatry is polytheism, the belief in other gods;

67 Halbertal, Idolatry, 69.
68 Halbertal, Idolatry, 140.
69 Halbertal, Idolatry, 191.
70 Halbertal, Idolatry, 238.
4. The fourth conception of idolatry is tied to the rabbinic term *avodah zarah*, referring “to strangeness in the worship itself.” In other words, idolatry is connected not only to the object of our worship, but the way of worship.

The authors insist on the Bible’s central theme of monotheism: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). Idolatry is forbidden, and is established by God’s word—the Torah and prophets. Humans are susceptible to idolatry in both belief and practice.

Andy Crouch and Timothy Keller

Contemporary American theologians Andy Crouch and Timothy Keller have recently written popular books on the subject of idolatry, exposing and naming the idols of our day in accessible, culturally-astute prose. Written pastorally (as opposed to academically) both Crouch and Keller seek to present a viable, accessible definition of idolatry as it is exercised in twenty-first century American culture. Idols of our day are not Baal or Dagon, but love or drugs: good things that are made into ultimate things.

Crouch suggests that, “Idolatry is the biblical name for the human capacity for creative power run amok.” Idol-making is, according to Crouch, a matter of misdirected culture-making: idols are the “stuff” or “sense” (artifacts) we create out of creation that are given preeminence, offering “transcendent benefits” and

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demanding “ultimate allegiance.””74 They are things embued with exaggerated meaning, and ultimacy.

“Since the Creator God is the ultimate meaning of the world, an idol is a representation of a false god. Implicitly or explicitly, all idols represent a challenge and counterclaim to the identity and character of the true Christian God.”75

To put it succinctly, idols are created things given the status and ultimacy of God.

Idols give a sense of control—mastery over weather, fertility, love, health, and sickness—allowing humans to feel they can transcend creation; to become god-like: “Wine, games of chance, even the visual depiction of love, eros and bodies, are all part of a very good world. But we are not satisfied with very good. When we use them as fuel for our journey to greatness, they become our idols.”76

Crouch’s over-arching premise is that humans are habitual god-players or god-makers. Humans use power to play god, lording over people in unjust ways; or to make gods, making created things like money or beauty or prestige into idols (false gods offering great things for little cost). Utilizing the example of global economic theory as an idol, Crouch writes:

“The problem is not economics, nor economists, nor the human economy of creativity and commerce, all of which are in fact very good things. The problem is expecting ultimate things from them, expecting them to give us godlike control when all of us, economists included, are never more—and sadly, sometimes less—than very good image bearers who cannot even know what we cannot know.”77

74 Crouch, Playing God, 55-56. “We start with a good, created thing, but then we ask it to be great” (56-57).
75 Crouch, Playing God, 55-56.
76 Crouch, Playing God, 57-58.
77 Crouch, Playing God, 59.
Whether technology, food, wealth, or our own intellect—all good things—idols are good things, which we expect will give us ultimate things.

Keller begins with the premise that “every human being must live for something…but without the intervention of the Holy Spirit, that object will never be God himself.”78 The desires of the human heart are distorted, and in an effort to fill the “God-shaped void” each image-bearer feels, humans shape their desires into idols, ostensibly to fill the void. Idolatry, then, is “looking to some created thing to give us the meaning, hope, and happiness that only God himself can give.”79

Keller utilizes the Scriptures to show the presence and/or threat of idolatry in unexpected places:

Genesis 22—God rescues Abraham from making his son, Isaac, into an idol. “If anyone puts a child in the place of the true God, it creates an idolatrous love that will smother the child and strangle the relationship.”80

Genesis 29—God rescues Jacob and Leah from their respective idols—Rachel and Jacob. Both are looking for love, and both claim that, “If only I had this…my life would be complete and I would be happy.” Each has made love into an idol.

Luke 19—God rescues Zacchaeus from the idol of money. Like Crouch, Keller suggests that the false promise of money is control—“Trusters of money feel they have control of their lives and are safe and secure because of their wealth.”81

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78 Keller, Counterfeit, 3.
79 Keller, Counterfeit.
80 Keller, Counterfeit, 7.
1 Kings 5—God rescues Naaman from the idol of prestige or honor. Naaman believed he could control his circumstances (in this case, a skin ailment) because he was a successful, well-connected, and influential person. He had a hard time coming to terms with a God who could not be controlled, and who ultimately healed him out of sheer grace.

Daniel 2—God rescues Nebuchadnezzar from the idol of power, identified by politics, philosophy, or systems. Typically represented as particular –isms or -ologies (i.e. psychology, Marxism, capitalism, etc.), these idols are the result of humans elevating “some finite value or object to be The Answer.”82

Keller’s list, while not exhaustive, shows the pervasiveness of idolatry: it can emerge anywhere and out of most anything. It must be noted that, like Crouch, Keller presents idols as good things made into supreme things. “[An idol] is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”83 Ultimately, only God can rescue us from our idolatries.

The powers: The powers refer to demonic forces and created systems, structures, and institutions that work antithetically to God and his kingdom reign. This reference is based on the Apostle Paul’s language of the “powers and principalities” in the New Testament (Ephesians 6:12). The powers serve to animate our idols, leading people to love and worship created things instead of

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81 Keller, Counterfeit, 57.
83 Keller, Counterfeit, xvii.
the Living God. The powers are the New Testament counterpart to idols in the Old Testament. The powers work through culture—systems, government, politics, war, money, beauty, and health—to shape us as idolaters who worship and serve “created things rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25).

In this project, I also refer to power in a more general sense, as in reference to the God-given resource that enables creation to flourish. Power is a necessary component of the culture-making process mandated by God (“fill the earth and subdue it,” Gen. 1:28).84 When used correctly, power leads to the flourishing of all creation. When abused, as it most often is in a sinful world, power corrupts. Words like coercion, dominance, and violence are most often associated with power.85

While the terms are connected, the focus of this project is on the Biblical usage of the terms for power. A complete listing of those terms can be found in the appendices, while many will be discussed in the review below.

Walter Wink

Writing in response to a history of scholarship that has focused almost exclusively on the language of power in Pauline literature, theologian Walter Wink demands that “the language of power pervades the whole New Testament,”

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84 See Crouch, Playing God.
85 Most recently, the exercise of police power in Ferguson, Missouri was viewed in almost completely negative light.
(italics mine) and in his *magnus opus* presents a comprehensive treatment of the theme.\(^\text{86}\)

Wink’s exegetical work sets the foundation for his primary thesis on the powers: a thesis that contests conservative scholarship (which focuses on the personification of power in demons, angels, Satan, et al.) and liberal scholarship (which focuses almost entirely on social structures and institutions).\(^\text{87}\) Wink proposes that neither of these foci take into consideration the worldview of New Testament writers, and instead adopt a dualistic definition or demythologize altogether the Biblical notion of power.

Wink works a very thorough treatment of the Biblical text, focusing less on the traditional passages delineating “the powers,” and instead considering the comprehensive use of the terms of power throughout the New Testament.\(^\text{88}\) For instance, Wink juxtaposes 1 Cor. 2:6-8 and Rom. 13:1-3 in determining that the powers are human *and* divine, spiritual *and* political (not either/or, but both/and). Wink is, in these passages and many others, building a case for the fluidity of terms for the powers, and attempting to place them in a proper historical context that does not succumb to dualism or to demythologizing.

Wink’s arguments, in the end, rest on the following proposals:


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\(^\text{86}\) Wink, *Naming*, 7.  
\(^\text{87}\) See the review of Arnold and Yoder, below.  
\(^\text{88}\) I.e. *arche/archon, exousia, dynamis, thronos, kyriotes, onoma, aggelos*.  

3. “Despite all this imprecision and interchangeability, certain clear patterns of usage emerge”;

4. “Because these terms are to a degree interchangeable, one or a pair or a series can be made to represent them all”;

5. “These Powers are both heavenly and earthly, divine and human, spiritual and political, invisible and structural”;

6. “These Powers are also both good and evil”;

7. “Unless the context further specifies, we are to take the terms for power in their most comprehensive sense”.  

Based on these proposals, Wink establishes a new understanding of the powers that is not limited by modernistic dualism or, conversely, a complete dismissal of ancient “superstition.” In other words, consideration of the broad range of usage for terms of power in the New Testament witness demands that we think of the powers as being both good and evil, heavenly and earthly, hostile to God and yet contingent on God. Only such explanations, according to Wink, give full credence to the Biblical witness and explain difficult passages such as Eph. 3:10, which places earthly terms for power in the “heavenly realms.”

Here, Wink seems to be taking a very novel approach in creating a new definition for power that dispels modernistic categories for interpretation. The answer for Wink is to merge the spiritual dimension with the human institutional and cultural arrangements of power as best expressed in this definition for the powers: “the inner aspect of material or tangible manifestations

\[89\] Wink, Naming, 99-100.
of power.”90 This is rather cryptic. Wink goes on to explain this definition by saying, “We encounter [the Powers] primarily in reference to the material or ‘earthly’ reality of which they are the innermost essence.”91 In other words, rather than believing that the powers are manifest as distinct, ethereal spirits hovering above, the powers take concrete form in the collective consciousness of tangible realities. So, for instance, it would not be possible to speak of a demon removed from a concrete, tangible reality. Here, Wink is demanding that even spirits “are inseparable from their material or physical concretions…[None] of these spiritual realities has an existence independent of its material counterpart.”92

For liberation theologians, the powers are the institution or seat of power. For more conservative theologians, great emphasis is placed on spirituality and the personified spirits who may or may not take concrete form. The powers are, for Wink, the inner aspect or personality of a material reality. In this sense, Wink can say that the term the powers can be used for all manifestations of power, but sheds the dualism of Cullman by demanding that, “the Powers are simultaneously the outer and inner aspects of one and the same indivisible concretion of power.”93

An example Wink explores is that of the words arche and archon in the New Testament. In the Bible, these terms refer to the role of human agents in the exercise of power. The fluidity of the terms, as noted above, certainly leaves

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90 Wink, Naming, 104.
91 Wink, Naming, 105.
92 Wink, Naming.
room for these terms to also be used for spirits. However, following Wink’s criteria, the correct way to think about *arche* and *archon* is in their reference to *suprahuman* qualities within, in this case, a position of authority. A sort of spirit or personality develops out of the ruler that is not limited to the one who happens to sit in the seat of power, but rather exists throughout time as the “logic of the institutional life itself.”\(^94\)

The concrete, tangible manifestations of power are only visible signs of a deeper invisible reality. Wink effectively uses the example of early Christians working seditiously against the Roman Empire through prayer instead of rebellion, which would have been an acknowledgement of *only* the material realities of power:

“Even in death these Christians were not only challenging the ultimacy of the emperor and the ‘spirit’ of empire but also demonstrating the emperor’s powerlessness to impose his will even by death. The final sanction had been publicly robbed of its power. Even as the lions lapped the blood of the saints, Caesar was stripped of his arms and led captive in Christ’s triumphal procession. His authority was shown to be only penultimate after all.”\(^95\)

Through physical passivity and great activity in prayer, early Christians were addressing the seats of power in the Roman Empire with a stark declaration of Christ’s ultimate authority.

Wink’s argument is persuasive, however novel in its application. He certainly seems to rebut liberal notions of power as simply structures, institutions, and culture. He also presents a cogent argument against a hyper-spiritualized notion of the powers. Wink is remarkably faithful to the Biblical texts in presenting a

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\(^{94}\) Wink, *Naming*, 14 & 110.
\(^{95}\) Wink, *Naming*, 111.
thesis that holds the spirituality and concrete-ness of power together. In the end, his argument simply seems untenable. What, after all, comprises the “inner or spiritual essence, or gestalt” of a state or system? Can organizations really emanate “psychic or spiritual power”? Must the powers always take concrete form, and does any deviation from such concrete-ness necessarily imply dualism? Is Satan an actual being, or according to Wink is Satan simply “the actual power that congeals around collective idolatry, injustice, or inhumanity, a power that increases or decreases according to the degree of collective refusal to choose higher values”? Wink suggests that evil does not exist on its own but is only created (whether by humans or the “inner essence” of an organization).

I appreciate Wink’s attempt to locate power in its tangible form while also refraining from demythologizing power. I have little doubt that humans are perfectly capable of doing evil without any help from evil spirits and, additionally, that evil does take shape in institutions and their “inner essence.” But Wink’s thesis discounts the reality of power as defined in the New Testament that does not necessarily have a particular locus in materiality. If the New Testament can refer to exousia, for example, outside of human agency, it seems as fair to accept that it refers to the power of a malevolent being as it does to refer to the power as simply “the exercise of authority.”

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96 Wink, Naming, 104.
97 Wink, Naming.
98 Wink, Naming, 105.
99 Wink, Naming, 15.
My primary question for Wink is this: “From where does the essence of power emerge? What gives power its personality?” The ancients seemed to have had little trouble in believing that there were forces at work in creation that were beyond us. Perhaps we are now so sociologically advanced that we can posit the reality of what really was simply the “innermost essence” of an organization.

In the introduction of his second volume on “The Powers,” Wink asserts that “Angels, spirits, principalities, powers, gods, Satan—these, along with all other spiritual realities, are the unmentionables of our culture. The dominant materialistic worldview has absolutely no place for them.” 100 Materialism’s denial of spiritual realities demands, in Wink’s view, a reassessment of spirituality informed by scientific values “without succumbing to its reductionism.” 101 Such reassessment is required in order to bring spirituality out of the shadows of Christianity—acknowledging spirituality as it is presented in the Scriptures while also being true to what we know of the world and ourselves. Unmasking the Powers is Wink’s effort to create a vocabulary and understanding of the hidden realities of spirituality formed out of the premise that spirituality is “the interiority of material, organic, and social entities.” 102 In developing this thesis and presenting a case for such interiority, Wink proposes new way of understanding Satan, demons, angels, the gods, and the elements, and the ways in which they affect us.

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100 Wink, Unmasking, 1.
101 Wink, Unmasking, 2.
102 Ibid. This thesis regarding spirituality as the interior or inner-aspect of material manifestations of power is the core of Naming the Powers, above.
Wink’s primary thesis throughout his study of the powers is that “power must become incarnate…possessing both an outer, visible form (constitutions, judges, police, leaders, office complexes), and an inner, invisible spirit that provides it legitimacy, compliance, credibility, and clout.”\footnote{Wink, \textit{Unmasking}, 4.} Whereas the ancients believed that spirits were personal beings at work just beyond our senses, Wink argues that such belief was merely “symbolic projection.”\footnote{Wink, \textit{Unmasking}.} A cosmology described as such by the ancients was their way of understanding the interiority of shared experiences. While in some way Wink is suggesting simply a change in semantics, at the heart of his thesis is a denial of the reality of distinct personal beings. Instead, he posits that spiritual realities emerge out of shared experiences; the former descriptions of Satan, gods, and demons being mere projections of human and institutional interiority.

Wink takes the reality of Satan’s evil very seriously. He posits, however, that Satan, having been relegated to a symbol (of evil, malevolence, and rebellion against God), never comes into our conscious awareness—he remains distant, categorized, and tucked away safely as either a red guy living in the underworld with a pitchfork or some nightmarish superstition. In reassessing Satan, Wink goes back to the text of the Bible and demands that Satan is a servant of God. In the Old Testament, Satan is cast as the Adversary or Accuser of man—and yet he
is a part of God’s heavenly council. “The Adversary has assumed the function of executor of God’s wrath.”

Wink’s exegesis leads him to suggest that Satan, established in this role, “cannot be described here as ‘good’ or ‘evil.’ It is our choices that cause him to crystallize as the one or the other.” To suggest Satan’s benign character or usefulness based solely on our choices and actions seems to place a great deal of undue emphasis on humans being the primary actors in the unfolding drama of history. While we as humans can certainly do bad on our own, such relegation suggests not only passivity on the part of Satan, but on the part of God. According to Wink, our thinking, acting, and choosing is, finally, determinative of all things, good and bad. I appreciate Wink’s utilization of Scripture and resistance to the notion that what God has created is so irretrievably bad that we cannot say with any degree of certitude that God is all-powerful. This seems, however, an attempt to give an answer to questions of theodicy, placing both evil and its resolution squarely on the shoulders of humans. Ultimately, for Wink, Satan is little more than a self-initiated and human-psyche formed inhibitor that suffocates “creative potentiality.”

For all that I agree with Wink (Satan’s place in the heavenly council, role of adversary and accuser, and his genuine, evil presence), in the end I cannot adhere to his final formulation of who (or what) Satan is:

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105 Wink, *Unmasking*, 12. 1 Chron. 21:1; Zech. 3:1-5; and Job 1-2 are utilized by Wink as proof texts.
106 Wink, *Unmasking*, 16.
“If Satan has any reality at all, it is not as a sign or an idea or even an explanation, but as a profound experience of numinous, uncanny power in the psychic and historic lives of real people. Satan is the real interiority of a society that idolatrously pursues its own enhancement as the highest good. Satan is the spirituality of an epoch, the peculiar constellation of alienation, greed, inhumanity, oppression, and entropy that characterizes a specific period of history as a consequence of human decisions to tolerate and even further such a state of affairs.”

For Wink, Satan is not a literal “person,” but instead an “archetypal reality, a visionary or imaginal presence or event experienced within.” Here, I think Wink ultimately falls prey to the very dualism he so earnestly tries to avoid. He demands that Satan as God’s servant is a person, but as the evil one is a symbol—whether he is one or the other is based on human choices. Wink further argues that humans are ultimately responsible for Satan’s redemption:

“We made Satan evil. Only we can restore him to his rightful role at God’s left hand.” I’ve only heard such notions from the lemic cults.

Wink suggests that Satan, and evil itself, can be controlled if only brought out of our shared repressive subconsciousness—it is a call for an inner knowledge of our shared interiority. In the end, he is suggesting that there is indeed a Satan in the room, and that Satan is me. Based on this logic, and using the same formula, might he also conclude that there is indeed God in the room, and that God is me? Both are determined by the choices I make—oppression and violence if I choose one way; fulfillment of creative potentiality if I choose the other way?

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108 Wink, Unmasking, 25.
109 Wink, Unmasking.
110 Wink, Unmasking, 34. “But by our choices we do determine which side Satan is on.”
111 Wink, Unmasking.
It seems that Wink desires to make Satan contingent upon human action. The Biblical witness, however, appears far more willing to grant Satan accountability outside of human or divine action. My critiques notwithstanding, I appreciate the way in which Wink seeks to understand the concreteness of the powers, particularly in its visible manifestation as evidenced in sin. Furthermore, we agree that the manifestation of God’s love and character is evidenced in human love and character.

Wink’s chapter on demons is a variation on this theme, distinguishing between various forms of possession and categorizing these forms using Jungian terms. Wink attempts to sort through the various ways in which demon possession has been understood in modernity—from systemic oppression as identified by Marx to psychopathology identified by the sciences. Wink’s biblical reference point for demons is Mark 7:14-15, 21-23. Here, Jesus is warning us that, “the things which come out are what defile.” That is to say that, in Wink’s understanding, demon possession is simply the projection (outer), “socially-shared psychopathology” (collective), or manifestation (inner) of society’s ills.113 In each case, it is the “psychic or spiritual power emanating from organizations or individuals or subaspects of individuals whose energies are bent on overpowering others.”114 So, while Wink is reticent to say that systems, structures, and institutions are demonic, he demands that such systems,

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113 Wink, Unmasking, 50.
114 Wink, Unmasking, 59.
structures, and institutions possess an interiority—formed by the shared experiences and psychopathologies of people—that may be demonic.

Wink’s chapter on the Angels of the Churches hinges on the thesis that, “angels and people are the inner and outer aspects of one and the same reality.”115 Using Revelation 2-3 as his text, Wink suggests that, “people incarnate or embody the angelic spirit; the angel distills the invisible essence of their totality as a group…the one cannot exist without the other.”116 Again, Wink is removing any hint of dualism from the discussion of the angels, and instead sets the “spiritual” only within the context of the shared “essence” or gestalt of the church.

I do appreciate Wink’s strong Christology as he acknowledges the “higher power” who can change culture and group spirit—Jesus Christ.117 Furthermore, he creates a language for understanding the deep-rooted and culturally-conditioned dysfunctions within communities and churches that must be attributed to something. For Wink, however, that something must not be angels and demons, per se, but rather the shared experiences of the culture both good and bad.

In addressing the Angels of the Nations, Wink begins to make the connection between nationalism and idolatry. This connection is the result of “gods behind the states,” and the observance that the ancients believed in a veritable pantheon of gods. The uniqueness of Jewish monotheism, Wink asserts, was not that there

115 Wink, Unmasking, 70.
116 Wink, Unmasking.
117 Wink, Unmasking, 80.
were no other gods, but that only Yahweh was ultimate. I can certainly affirm this belief, even while I hold in some ambivalence the notion of there being other gods.\textsuperscript{118} Here, again, Wink is forwarding his thesis that the gods of the nations are “the actual inner spirituality of the social entity itself.”\textsuperscript{119} That is to say that each nation necessarily has a god, manifested in the society, and realized as the actual spirituality of the group. “They are the invisible spirituality that animates, sustains, and guides a nation.”\textsuperscript{120} In this sense, it is easy to see how idolatry forms: the shared spirituality of the nation is established and realized, glorified, and ultimately worshiped. This realized spirituality is “impersonal and ungoverned,” and eventually becomes irresistible as it asserts its power. Idolatry invariably becomes focused on the powerful – the very realization of the shared spirituality of the nation. The irony is that power, borne out of insecurities and fear and forged to protect the nation, becomes an oppressive force that virtually assures its destruction.\textsuperscript{121} Resistance against these powers, and any other idolatry, is to acknowledge their subjection to the ultimate power, God.

In exploring the reality of The Gods and Elements of the Universe, Wink turns to Jung, who defines a god as “anything physically powerful.”\textsuperscript{122} Wink clarifies by stating that the gods “are, at the personal level, a psychic

\textsuperscript{118} How does one understand “the gods” and “sons of God” in Psalm 82 and Deut. 32:9 while also acknowledging that the gods people worship are, in fact, lifeless idols per Psalm 135?
\textsuperscript{119} Wink, \textit{Unmasking}, 88.
\textsuperscript{120} Wink, \textit{Unmasking}, 93.
\textsuperscript{121} Wink is writing during the waning days of the Cold War, when Mutually Assured Destruction evidently seemed inevitable. Islamism and the ideology of North Korea are current examples, perhaps.
\textsuperscript{122} Wink, \textit{Unmasking}, 118.
representation of our organism’s craving for life.”123 Wink defines “the gods,” then, as some latent spirituality of the whole that again seeks power:

“Christians have been afraid to admit the existence of gods for fear people would succumb to worshiping them. That danger is great, but no greater than the opposite danger of denying their existence and being unconsciously tyrannized by them. The only sane course would appear to be to acknowledge their reality, learn their characteristics, raise to consciousness their ineluctable workings in our depths, and subject them to the sovereignty of the God of gods.”124

I appreciate his sentiment here, and his desire to bring what is typically regarded as “spirituality” out of the dark and into our collective consciousness. It appears that his entire thesis rests on a psychological premise, whereby “we simply project [the gods] unconsciously into matter” – natural elements of the universe like earth, air, fire, and water.125 These powers (archon) and principles (stoicheia) become god-like only in our projection of power onto them. I agree with Wink in that “having projected ultimacy onto matter, we could only bow before it.”126

Idolatry is finally this: that we project ultimacy to things that cannot bear the weight of such ultimacy. Sex, people, the Law, and technology, all of which come to us from the elements of the universe, the very things created by God, are set above God as we bow down before them. “Acknowledging God is the sole check against idolizing the elements.”127 In bringing into light those subjects that we have largely, as Christians, relegated to darkness, Wink is forcing us to confront

123 Wink, *Unmasking*.
125 Wink, *Unmasking*, 135.
126 Wink, *Unmasking*, 137.
127 Wink, *Unmasking*, 143.
and stand up against the forces of evil in the world. However we understand their existence, we agree that they are real and that only Christ is the answer.

In the third and final installment of his treatment of the powers, Wink lays out the various worldviews used to describe the powers.128 The Ancient Worldview, as depicted in the Bible, suggests a simultaneity of both earthly and heavenly. The Spiritualistic Worldview maintains that humans are divided into souls and bodies whereby the spirit is good and the body is corrupt. The Materialistic Worldview is a rejection of the Spiritualistic Worldview, denying spirit, heaven, soul, and God. The Theological Worldview preserves a spiritual realm that is exempt from critique by modernistic leanings, suggesting that there is a supersensible realm that cannot be discerned by the senses or science.

Wink proposes an Integral Worldview, in which everything has “an outer and an inner aspect.”129 This understanding of the cosmos flows out of his understanding of spirituality as presented in Naming the Powers, and is worth repeating here:

“The Powers…are both visible and invisible, earthly and heavenly, spiritual and institutional. The Powers possess an outer, physical manifestation (buildings, portfolios, personnel, trucks, fax machines) and an inner spirituality, or corporate culture, or collective personality. The Powers are the simultaneity of an outer, visible structure and an inner, spiritual reality. The Powers, properly speaking, are not just the spirituality of institutions, but their outer manifestations as well. The New Testament uses the language of power to refer now to the outer aspect, now to the inner aspect, now to both together…”130

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128 Wink, Engaging.
129 Wink, Engaging, 5.
130 Wink, Engaging, 3.
Wink argues that “’spirits’ are real, but they are not independent operatives from on high; they are the actual spirituality of the nations involved, and the sheer intensity of evil renders them, for a brief time, almost visible.”  

So what is the spirituality of the nations? What is the ethos of the modern/postmodern world? Wink points to the myth of redemptive violence as the dominating power, even the religion, of the world in general and of America in particular. The Enuma Elish and Babylonian creation myths informed not just ancient religion, but all religion to this day. Violence was required to bring order out of the chaos. The myth of redemptive violence continues today in our culture, as seen in foreign policy, nationalism, media, television, economics, corporate business culture, and even (posits Wink) in children’s cartoons. This myth of redemptive violence, a form of idolatry in itself in putting the Powers over-and-against God through violence, force, and oppression, informs the system that guides the world. Wink’s term for this system is the Domination System.

Wink suggests that the Bible was very familiar with the Domination System, however used different terms for describing it—“kosmos (world), aion (age), and sarx (flesh).” Kosmos, in this case, “refers to the human sociological realm that exists in estrangement from God.” This is a persuasive argument, as in exchanging the word “system” for “world” in John’s Gospel, for instance, we perceive a less docetic and far more counter-cultural Jesus. “Those who belong to

131 Wink, Engaging, 8.
132 Wink, Engaging, 51.
133 Wink, Engaging.
the Domination System cannot comprehend the values displayed by Jesus, or understand why he is turning their world upside down.”

134 Jesus is not against the world, but against the prevailing system of the world.

I very much appreciate Wink’s argument regarding the language of the New Testament and Jesus’ new way—against the Domination System. To Wink, it seems that non-violence, human actualization, and a world no longer dominated by the Domination System are the main things; these are the things that God values most and that Jesus came to address. This sort of humanism makes humans the primary actors in the story of redemptive history; perhaps the fate of the cosmos is determined not by a sovereign God but by human choices.

If kosmos is the domination system, aion is the domination epoch, and sarx is the dominated existence, then Christ has certainly overcome the Domination System through his death and resurrection. This is salvation. However, Wink argues that this salvation is not a result of good overcoming and defeating evil. For Wink to suggest as much would be to regress into the myth of redemptive violence. Instead, he debates that “the gospel is not a dualistic myth of good and evil forces vying for ascendance…”

135 Wink is suggesting that there is no evil in the powers, but rather that the powers are made evil by idolatry.136 The problem is a matter of distortion: a misdirection of love that results in evil.

134 Wink, Engaging, 52. Jesus is here rejecting this Domination System and replacing it with something else—an ethic of love embodied in himself.

135 Wink, Engaging, 65.

136 Wink, Engaging. “Their evil is not intrinsic…Therefore they can be redeemed.” Wink claims that idolatry is simply conferring a value of ultimacy on the powers that they are not capable of bearing. Acting outside of their God-ordained means, the powers become evil. “[The] spirituality of actual institutions that have rebelled against their divine vocations and have made themselves gods” (85).
Because there is nothing evil about the powers intrinsically, Wink can write: "The Powers are good/the Powers are fallen/the Powers will be redeemed." 137

This begs the questions, "How do we live in response to the reality of the powers?" In other words, how do we engage the idolatrous powers of the world in a way that moves us beyond the Domination System? Wink posits that "insofar as we have been socialized into patterns of injustice" we are dead, echoing Paul’s words in Ephesians 2:1-2. 138 In our own acquiescence and complicity to violence we are killed, swallowing the poison we were only too glad to concoct. "And by a kind of heavenly homeopathy, we must swallow what killed us in order to come to life." 139

Wink suggests that it is not because of original sin or our proclivity to violate God’s law—he makes no mention of God’s law whatsoever—but only in our socially-conditioned propensity to violence we are dead. We do agree that enslavement is an apt metaphor for our condition. Furthermore, we agree that our enslavement is idolatry. We must die to the very things that hold us in bondage. He utilizes Jung’s concept of the unconscious will and our need to have that ego-based will annihilated. 140 While housed in the ego, according to Wink and Jung, this is indeed a heart issue. Where liberals focus on changed ideas, systems, and structures, fundamentalists correctly aim for the heart, where “the

137 Wink, Engaging.
138 Wink, Engaging, 157. “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of the Domination System (kosmos).”
139 Wink, Engaging.
140 Wink, Engaging, 158.
whole gestalt of the ego, ideas, emotions, beliefs, and myths” reside. The fundamentalists stop woefully short, however, failing to recognize the broader dimensions of the powers. “As a consequence, the genuinely converted person is reinstated into the old, unchanged world with little understanding of the social dimensions of sin, which are kept mystified by blaming everything on ‘Satan,’ who is conceived as a bugaboo rather than the spirit of the Domination System.” Wink is here making some genuine connections to a very Calvinistic understanding of the faith and our union with Christ. It is only in our union with Christ that we are truly and fully human. Would not Calvin, if he had the vocabulary, suggest the same as Wink?

What is required is the crucifixion of the ego, wherein it dies to its illusion that it is “the center of the psyche and the world, and is confronted by the greater self and the universe of God.” Only by dying to the self/ego are we free from the Domination System. As Paul wrote, “For our sake he made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus defeated sin and death through sin and death. The Domination System seemed to win the decisive victory in the death of Jesus Christ, only to find that the love of God triumphs in the end. Dying and rising, Christ unmasked the powers and stripped them of their power. So, too, in our baptism we are dying to the powers (the Domination System etched in our ego)
and rising to new life in Christ. This new life in Christ, according to Wink, is a life of non-violence and freedom from the Domination System.

Wink’s point in dying to the Domination System and rising to new life reoriented to God is to say that this new life is the truly human life. Anything less is sub-human. The Domination System projects sub-humanness upon us. We are only too happy to oblige and go along with the “spirit of the age.” Christ introduces us to something else—abundant life. Our responses are acts of reorientation to God and testimony to our liberation from the Domination System. Worship, confession, prayer, and suffering lead us to remember who we are and whose we are. Self-giving service shapes us in loving others.

We celebrate our dying to the powers in the sacrament of baptism. The church’s special task in engaging the powers, then, is to administer the sign of our “death” to us and to the prevailing powers of world. Our work is to continue to engage the powers with the reality and truth of Christ’s victory. “So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:10). Because of Christ’s victory on the cross, the powers are in subjugation to Him. “We simply have to remind them that they exist in and through and for God.”

Wink’s most compelling chapter in the entire series is on “Prayer and the Powers.” He demands that Christians must pray, and to not pray is a

144 Wink, Engaging, 167.
145 Wink, Engaging, Chapter 16, pages 297-317.
confirmation of “the effectiveness of the Powers in diminishing our
humanity.”146 His basic premise for the necessity of prayer is as follows:

“Those who pray do so not because they believe certain intellectual
propositions about the value of prayer, but simply because the struggle to be
human in the face of suprahuman Powers requires it. The act of praying is
itself one of the indispensable means by which we engage the Powers. It is, in
fact, that engagement at its most fundamental level, where their secret spell
over us is broken and we are reestablished in a bit more of that freedom
which is our birthright and potential.”147

Wink even acknowledges that without the protection of prayer, all of our best
and most well-meaning actions eventually tend towards self-justifying good
works. Unsupported by love, our wells of love run dry.

For all I appreciate of Wink’s arguments—the goodness of God’s creation; the
rejection of dualism; the concrete realities of evil; the triumph of Christ over the
Domination System; and the way Christian practice shapes us against idolatry—he
appears to occasionally drift out to sea in order to support his theses. Wink’s
major problem is ontological. He argues that full humanity is determined by
human action—a general idea of flourishing through the fulfillment of human
potentialities. While I don’t disagree with the ends he proposes, I do disagree
with his suggested means. Our full humanity is exercised only in our union with
Christ—the participation of which we celebrate through the Sacraments,
worship, confession, suffering, and prayer. For example, when I pray, I can only
do so in Christ by the Spirit, who prays for me that the will of God be done in my
life and in the world. Our dependence is on the prayerful intercession on our

146 Wink, Engaging, 297.
147 Wink, Engaging.
behalf by Christ and the fulfillment of the sovereign God’s good purposes in the world. Wink appears to adopt a form of semi-Pelagianism, too seldom directing his focus to the necessary intercession of Christ to heal, redeem, and make whole.

Clinton Arnold

The primary thesis of Arnold’s *Powers of Darkness* is that gods, spirits, and demons are real. They are not figments of the imagination, impersonal explanations of evil (i.e. “structures”), metaphors for malevolence in general, reflections of personality, or simply antiquated (and outdated) modes of understanding the world for superstitious ancients. They are personal, tangible, and intelligent beings that seek to malign people and lead them away from the one true God of heaven and earth. This thesis is grounded in an understanding of ancient Hellenistic, Persian, and Jewish worldview, and most particularly in the writings of the Apostle Paul in the first century AD.

Arnold posits that ancients were very sensitive to the spiritual world. They genuinely believed in the reality of gods, spirits, angels, and demons. While the spiritual world was not always understood to be malevolent, people were largely afraid of these powerful forces thought to control everyday life and even one’s destiny. For this reason, magic was a common practice within the religious cult of the ancient world. Ancient magical texts reveal three fundamental assumptions about the spirit-world and the use of magic: “Gods, spirits, angels and demons do exist; they are involved in everyday life; and, most important,  

148 Arnold, *Powers*. 
they can be manipulated.” Therefore, the use of magical texts and incantations, amulets (worn to ward off evil spirits), spirit guides (self-initiated demon possession), and divination was prevalent.

The religious syncretism of the Hellenistic world brought a large and disparate pantheon of gods to the culture. “Pagans believed their gods were alive and could help them in practical ways for their earthly needs and, in many instances, bring them a blissful afterlife.” Paul and the early Christian community did not dispute the existence of these gods and idols (i.e. Asclepius, Hekate, and Dionysius). However, they viewed them as being animated by evil demons and Satan himself, who sought to inspire rebellion against the one true God of heaven and earth, and specifically the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures bear witness to the prevalence of idolatry and spiritualism in Paul’s day—he was immersed in it. Furthermore, while testimony to the proliferation of powers in the first century is attested to by many writers (Persian, Greek, and Asian), it was Paul’s own religion, Judaism, that most particularly ascribed meaning to the reality of these powers and their larger purposes in the world. While idols depicted in the Old Testament were regarded as “dead” (Psalm 115:4), they were not thought to be benign. Rather, demons animated these idols in their work to lead the people of Israel and the nations astray. “Biblical writers complete the picture of Yahweh’s attitude toward false

149 Arnold, Powers, 27.
150 Arnold, Powers, 35.
gods by portraying the pagan cults as the work of demons.”¹⁵¹ Thus the Biblical proscription of idolatry and all forms of occult activity associated with idolatry, as these practices pointed to the activity of personal forces of darkness.¹⁵²

Ironically, this prohibition somehow resulted in a rather perverse curiosity toward demonology and magic within Judaism, as attested by Biblical pseudepigrapha. This became common to the extent that by Jesus’ day there was no question of the reality of (and battle against) the powers of darkness. “Jesus’ conflict with the powers of darkness is a major theme in all the Gospel accounts of his ministry.”¹⁵³ Jesus Christ came to confront Satan and the powers of darkness in his life and ministry—and ultimately defeat them in his death and resurrection.¹⁵⁴ Jesus engaged in battle against Satan and the powers and principalities of the world.

Paul’s ministry was to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ—Christ’s decisive victory over the powers and principalities in his death and resurrection. This victory—and the subsequent battle for Christians—was won over “the cosmic powers over this present darkness” (Eph. 6:12). According to Arnold, modern scholars have demythologized demons by suggesting that, “the idea of the demonic is a cultural or mythical way of referring to the evil thoughts and actions of an individual person or a corrupt social institution.”¹⁵⁵ This redefines Paul’s language in referring to the forces of darkness in the world: angeloi, archai,

¹⁵¹ Arnold, Powers, 56 (c.f. Deut. 32:16-17).
¹⁵² I.e. astrology, child sacrifice, necromancy, sorcery, and magic.
¹⁵³ Arnold, Powers, 75.
¹⁵⁵ Arnold, Powers, 89.
archontes, daimonia, daimon, dynameis, exousiai, thronoi kosmokratores, kyriotetes, stoicheia. According to Arnold, all of these terms refer not to ideas, cultures, or vague notions of “power,” but rather to personal, intelligent, and transcendent beings. Paul believed these evil spirits animated idols. Paul believed these spirits to be behind opposition to the gospel. Paul believed these spirits lead people away from the one true God. Paul believed these spirits were under the direction and authority of Satan, pulling together the fall in Genesis 3 and God’s rescue of those enslaved to Satan by the blood of the Lamb. Ultimately, Paul preached that all of these malevolent forces became subject to the authority of Christ through his death and resurrection, which would be very good news, indeed, to those who lived in fear of the malevolent forces of the air.

While the victory was won by Christ, there is still a battle in which Christians are engaged against evil influences, most notably expressed by the world, the flesh, and the devil. Included in these are societal influences and attitudes (the world), the inner drive in people “to act in ways deviant to the standard of God’s righteousness” (the flesh), and “a powerful supernatural being in charge of a whole host of evil spirits” (the devil). 156 Arnold argues that Satan influences all of these: “In practice Satan exploits the depraved tendencies of the flesh and exercises a measure of control over all levels of a social order.” 157 On one hand, we are perfectly capable of “doing bad all by ourselves” (as Tyler Perry might say). On the other hand, Paul seemed willing to suggest the influence of Satan

156 Arnold, Powers, 125.
157 Arnold, Powers, 126.
and his minions in all evil perpetrated. This influence is born out in Satan getting “a foothold,” whereby anger turns into something far more insidious, and even the law which, however good, could be used by the evil one to distort and derail people from true faith (Gal. 4:3). The same stoicheia who enslaved early Christians in observance to the law also influenced the false teaching that plagued the early church. Early Christians adopted syncretistic religious practice if only to “cover all their bases,” so fearful were they of these forces at work in the world and their lives.

In response to this, Paul proclaimed the supremacy of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:15-20), and stated that “the powers and principalities were defeated on the cross...although they are still active and continue to wreak havoc and promote evil, they are under the control and authority of one more powerful, one they are compelled to obey.” There is no need for syncretization, because Christ is all we need. Being immersed in the teaching of Christ (both his life and the Gospel of his death and resurrection) and prayer allow us to tap into a way of life that finds confidence and peace amidst the realities of the forces of darkness. Furthermore, the power of God that resurrected Christ is available to all Christians in fighting the powers and principalities: 1) God’s power is above and beyond any power known through the pagan cult; 2) access to God’s power is through Jesus Christ, the Son, and our union with him; 3) the purpose of this power is for new lives whereby we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to love God and neighbor and not for self-centered ends which was the focus of magic and

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158 Arnold, Powers, 144.
pagan religion. So, while Christians must yet contend with the powers and principalities in *spiritual warfare*, Christians have “objective endowments from God” by which to engage in the fight: truth, righteousness, the gospel, salvation, and the Spirit/the word of God.\(^{159}\) While the battle continues, the decisive victory has already been won. When Christ returns, the war will be over, as Christ will put “all his enemies under his feet,” and deliver the kingdom to God (1 Cor. 15:24-25).

The grand narrative of Scripture displays this epic story of rescue—God rescuing sinful people from enslavement to the flesh, the world, and the devil. Early Judaism, Greek, Persian, and Asian paganism embraced the notion of evil spirits, angels, and demons. Only more recently has such spirituality been rejected, thus rendering Paul’s descriptions highly tenuous to the modern ear. Modernism advanced the “new supremacy of a materialistic and rationalistic world view…the references to demons and angels now became regarded as ‘myth,’ perhaps important for conveying theological truth but devoid of any historical substance.”\(^{160}\) Scholars sought to find new ways of explaining angels, demons, and the spiritual realm that would not go against empirical science. Rudolf Bultmann believed myth to play an important role for the ancient world (and the church) in explaining the *other world* in terms of *this world*. For Bultmann, powers and principalities were tied to the mythology of Jewish apocalyptic. In other words, angels and demons were a way for Jews to explain

the reality of evil and the unsavory political situations they faced. Paul Ricoeur sought to explain myth in terms of cosmogony (origins), and in so doing refrained from making any judgment about the myth’s reality. Sigmund Freud viewed the devil as an expression of individual repressions. Carl Jung equated evil power with the negative side of personality. In all of these cases, the underlying theme is simply that angels and demons are not real. There is some other explanation for powers and principalities that does not succumb to the superstition of the ancients, however useful their mythology in explaining origins and the world around them.

According to Arnold, “the question now becomes whether the New Testament view of evil spirits should reshape and correct the prevailing Western world view on this particular point.”161 His contention is that science is unable to decide the question, naturalistic explanations don’t go far enough in describing evil, the Western world view does not take into account a broad sweep of human history, the West is the only contemporary society that still denies the reality of evil spirits, and even in the West, there is an increasing acceptance of and attraction to the occult.

Arnold’s entire book, then, hinges on this question: are evil spirits real? Human history, culture, and the Biblical witness affirm the reality of the spirit world. Modern scholarship and the Western worldview largely reject its existence. How is evil explained in such a worldview? Arnold’s general contention appears to be that all evil can be traced directly to Satan. Satan holds

161 Arnold, Powers, 177.
people in slavery “by supernaturally influencing individuals to disobey God—that is, by inciting them to sin...through direct and immediate influence, by exploiting the inner impulse to do evil, and by influencing the environment and social structures.” Modern scholarship has largely denounced belief in Satan’s organized front threatening humans (categorized as the world). Since World War II, many scholars have so demythologized the powers that they use the term “almost exclusively as the structures of our existence.” These structures are categorized as religious structures (especially tradition), political and economic structures (i.e. imperialism, nationalism, dictatorship, socialism, capitalism), social values (morality, public opinion, notions of justice), and intellectual structures (-isms and -ologies).

The question is this: are these structures necessarily evil and should they be equated with the powers? Indeed, all of the structures mentioned above exert influence on society. Are they ineluctably evil, or simply capable of becoming evil (demonic)? A modern Western worldview is forced to choose the former, because it has no room in it for evil spirits or personalized powers. To Arnold, this is erroneous for the following reason:

“The two categories are ontologically distinct. One is personal, the other is non-personal; one possesses intelligence and the ability to will, the other does not. Truer to Paul’s letters is to say that the powers exert their influence over the structures of our existence than to make the powers coextensive with the structures.”

162 Arnold, Powers, 183.
163 Arnold, Powers, 194.
164 Arnold, Powers, 195 (Arnold exegetes Eph. 2:2 and 3:10 to helpfully illuminate this point).
It is reductionistic to equate the powers with the structures, and reveals an insistence on denying prima facie evidence in support of imposing a modern worldview on the language of Paul’s writings.

Arnold takes particular aim at Wink, who suggests that the powers are

“[The] inner and outer aspects of any given manifestation of power…[as] the inner aspect they are the spirituality of institutions, the ‘within’ of corporate structures and systems, the inner essence of outer organizations of power. As the outer aspect they are political systems, appointed officials, the ‘chair’ of an organization, laws—in short, all the tangible manifestations which power takes.”165

Wink’s self-acknowledged bias is that he does not believe in the actual existence of evil spirits as distinct entities. It is this, particularly, that incurs Arnold’s general riposte:

“He describes the ontological status of the principalities and powers, not as real angelic or spirit entities, but as ‘an inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates, and regulates its physical manifestation in the world.’ For Wink the heavenly powers are not merely human projections of material existence that serve to validate institutions. They are real and are experienced in the sense that they are the interiority or the spirituality of earthly institutions, systems and forces.”166

Describing the powers as such, Wink is able to move beyond the demythologized categories of modern scholarship (“they are not merely human projections”) while not giving in to superstitious belief in angels and demons. This is where Arnold and Wink most notably disagree.

There is, on the other hand, a very close connection between the positions of Arnold and Wink. What Arnold describes of Wink is similar to the idea of the powers animating idols—giving animus to dead things (like structures and

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165 Wink, Naming, 5.
166 Arnold, Powers, 199.
systems). Wink seems to be imaginatively stretching the meaning of Scripture’s multivalent language in creating a demythologized Jungian psychological categorization of earthly institutions. Wink’s purpose in this seems to be in an effort to define the source of evil spirituality that necessarily takes concrete form. Arnold argues, as he believes Paul would and did, that such spirituality comes from “real, living entities who brought terror and inflicted harm.” Arnold certainly agrees that structures can become evil, but believes that the powers are behind such animus of structures. He considers the work of the powers directly on individuals (i.e. Adolf Hitler and Idi Amin) who in turn control governments, corporations, and the media, and on structural evils in the world (influencing cultures and systems). Evil powers are at work, but these powers are not to be confused with the structures.

Arnold debates the reality and tangibility of angels, demons, and evil spirits, and predicates such arguments on Paul’s own witness. My critique of Arnold is simply that he appears to be imposing a modernistic worldview upon the Pauline text, and is reticent to acknowledge the possibility of Scripture’s meaning outside of what might appear to be the most basic meaning of the text.

Oscar Cullman

French theologian Oscar Cullmann wrote prolifically on Christian ecumenism, largely from the context of post-World War II Europe. In his influential work *Christ and Time*, Cullman sought to identify the powers within

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167 Arnold, *Powers*.  

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the framework of redemptive history—a history that finds its center in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Cullman begins by identifying the powers—identities determined by primitive Christianity and an historic understanding in the Church. “By ‘the rulers of this age’ (archontes) Paul manifestly means both the invisible ‘princes of this world,’ who are often mentioned as such, and their actual human instruments, Herod and Pilate.”

Cullmann asserts that in His death and resurrection Christ is victorious over the powers, both visible and invisible. Redemptive history is grounded in this center-of-time act, and extends beyond the contemporary situations of the Biblical text to all of creation. Understanding what “all of creation” refers to demands a particular focus on late-Jewish teaching regarding angelic powers.

It is Cullmann’s view that “invisible beings…stand behind what occurs in the world.” Even this language is significant, as it makes a spatial distinction between the invisible powers and the tangible powers of the world, contra Wink. Whereas Wink uses the multivalent contexts of Scripture and corresponding liquidity of meaning in use of the terms of power to demand indivisibility, Cullmann allows this same liquidity and imprecision to point to divisibility:

“[The] Old Testament saying of Isa. 45:22f., ‘To me every knee shall bow,’ which originally had in view the Gentiles, could be referred to the ‘beings in heaven, on

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168 Cullmann, Christ, 191. This is in contrast to Wink’s view, which holds that the powers are indivisible as such, and must be held together in a both/and relationship. The alternative, for Wink, is to fall into Platonic dualism.
169 Cullmann, Christ, 192.
earth, and in the underworld’” in Phil. 2:10.170 This is, to Cullmann, a proper understanding of the late-Jewish teaching on the powers. “State authority is thought of as the executive agent of angelic powers.”171 Therefore, both exousiais (in Rom. 13:1) and archonton (1 Cor. 2:8) refer to the material powers of the age in the context of the passages, but would have also been understood by primitive Christians to be referring to “invisible angelic powers [standing] behind the earthly states.”172 The lynchpin holding these two texts together is, for Cullmann, 1 Corinthians 6:3—“Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!” The State and angelic powers are held together, and because of the victory of Christ over all the powers, we must recognize Christ’s ultimate authority over both angelic powers and State powers, Herod and Pilate, the presumed reference of 1 Cor. 2:8.

The reason Christians must “be subject to the governing authorities” (exousiais, Rom. 13:1) and yet at the same time not lay out their legal laundry before the State (1 Cor. 6:3) is because these governing authorities are now under the lordship of Jesus Christ. His work on the cross was the defeat of all angelic powers and State powers. We can subject ourselves to State power because it is now bound by Christ and used as His instrument in the world. At the same time, it is not the ultimate authority; Christ is. Therefore, as Christians comprising the body of Christ on earth, it would be a contradiction to render to the State any ultimate authority over our affairs.

170 Cullmann, Christ, 193.
171 Cullmann, Christ, 195.
172 Cullmann, Christ, 193.
While this could be understood as a sort of dualism, Cullmann demands such dualism only emerges if we fail to recognize the lordship of Christ over all things, visible and invisible, in heaven and on earth. Where this would seem to break down is in the perceived reality of our present time—a time in which it seems that evil (and the State) stand in no way under the authority of Jesus Christ. This is a question that emerges in a “temporal but not in a metaphysical dualism.”173 Indeed, this is the tension of the already/not yet reign of Christ. Again, Cullmann makes this argument out of his broader thesis, that the Christ-event is the central point in time and subsequently transcends time. Therefore, while we trust in the future and full reign of Christ upon his return, we acknowledge even now the lordship of Christ over all things.

The practical implications of this are exercised in the Christian’s interaction with the world (and its governing authorities). If the powers stand behind the State—therefore making all structures and institutions and governments their agents—and all powers “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” are subjects of Christ, then the Christian attains a unique relationship with the State, even if its original nature (its corresponding angel) was malevolent. “Paul starts from the principle that the State has attained to such a dignity that obedience is due to it, not by reason of its original nature, but only because it has been given its place in the divine order.”174 Because of Christ’s victory, the State is subject to

173 Cullmann, Christ, 199.
174 Cullmann, Christ, 200.
the will and rule of God, as is its corresponding angel. Thus, for Cullmann, the “Christological foundation of the State” is proved correct.175

This applies even to pagan or evil states.176 So prevailing is the sovereignty of Christ! And yet, the evil or demonic nature of the powers can be revealed through the State when they “seek to free themselves from their subjection under Christ’s Lordship, and so again, with their apparent power, become demonic.”177 When the State assumes this role, the Christian no longer owes a debt of allegiance or submission, as the order brought by Christ’s lordship over the State is deviated from. This gives room for civil disobedience when the State seeks to usurp authority from the ultimate authority of Christ. There is in this a remarkable tension as what, after all, indicates such deviation from this authority—the God-given authority granted to the State under the lordship of Christ. The emperor cult of the Roman Empire would surely seem to be example 1A of such deviation, but Cullmann does not seek to answer this question fully.

In the end, Cullmann affirms his broader thesis—“Nothing exists that stands outside of the redemptive history of Christ.”178 The seemingly contradictory texts of Romans 13:1 and 1 Corinthians 2:8 can be held together because of the lordship of Jesus Christ over all things. Particularly as the rulers and authorities of heaven and earth are considered, we can speak of both the visible and invisible together. Scripture may very well allude to a temporal dualism that

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175 Cullmann, Christ, 202.
176 Could the Roman Empire be described as anything if not these?
177 Cullmann, Christ, 202.
178 Cullmann, Christ, 209.
distinguishes between the State and demons (however connected one is to the other), but no metaphysical dualism exists because “even in the time before Christ, [demons] never possessed a power independent of God…since even at that time they were destined to be subjected through Jesus Christ.”179

Cullmann’s focus is time and redemptive history, and not the powers, per se. While his exegesis is not as well developed as either Arnold or Wink, he lays out a compelling argument for how we are to understand the powers based upon late-Jewish teaching, the Scriptural witness, and his proposed foundation of redemption history as the center of time. Ultimately, Cullmann points to the subjection of both physical and demonic power to the lordship of Christ.

Marva Dawn

The fluidity of the powers is affirmed in our description of forces at work in the world around us: the news alerts us to the reality of economic powers, political power, the power of the media, the power of violence, and the powers of evil. There are forces at work in the world that are embodied in humans corporately, but also seem to exist outside of us. American theologian Marva Dawn, drawing largely upon the philosophy of Jacques Ellul, seeks to understand the nature of power at work in the world: defining, categorizing, and ultimately resisting it.

Quoting Christian ethicist Tom Yoder Neufeld, Dawn states, “[The powers are] pervasive and insidious…their demonic character rests not so much in their transcendent nature or personal agency, as in their capacity to control the

imaginations and behavior of human beings, individually and communally.”

As John Howard Yoder seeks to focus on the concrete manifestations of power in systems and structures (discussed below), and Arnold emphasizes the incorporeal spiritual dimension of the powers as personal beings (with Wink bridging the two), Dawn seeks to better understand how we are to apply the gospel to the power structures in which we live.

Dawn points to the Biblical witness concerning the powers by laying a foundational sketch: “the powers are created for good” (Col. 1:16); the powers are fallen, sharing in creation’s brokenness and “overstepping their proper bounds” (Rom. 8:19-22); the powers are not stronger than God’s love for us in Christ (Rom. 8:19-22); “death is one of the cosmic enemies to be subjected to Christ” (1 Cor. 15:25-26); Christ has disarmed, exposed, and triumphed over the powers (Col. 2:13b-15); powers and principalities (including angels) are subject to Christ (1 Peter 3:22, see Pierce, below), underscoring their spiritual dimension; earthly rulers (principalities) crucified Christ, underscoring the reality of the powers “functioning in religious, as well as political, spheres” (1 Cor. 2:8); “we must stand against the powers and resist them by means of the armor of God” (Eph. 6:10-20). Dawn agrees with Wink that the powers are created and fallen. She diverges from Wink, however, in how she identifies and understands the powers.

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181 John Howard Yoder’s views will be more fully engaged below.
Demythologizers such as Bultmann suggest that the powers are merely myth, and “only exist for those who let them be significant.”\textsuperscript{183} On the other side of the spectrum, Arnold consigns the powers to only personal, demonic, and transcendent beings. Still others have sought to bridge the two poles, emphasizing the “all-pervasive large-scale effects of the demonic-complex as a whole,” including individual personal beings and/or collective entities and institutions.\textsuperscript{184} Dawn presents an even-handed overview of the historical study of the powers and principalities, identifying particular strengths and weaknesses in the various arguments while highlighting the disparate positions—there are broadly divergent views on what constitutes the powers.

Dawn takes special aim at Wink, whose above-noted study in three volumes has become “most often associated with investigation of the powers in our time.”\textsuperscript{185} Most particularly at issue for Dawn is Wink’s final hypothesis regarding the powers in the New Testament. He suggests that, “Unless the context further specifies, we are to take the terms for power in their most comprehensive sense, understanding them to mean both heavenly and earthly, divine and human, good and evil powers.”\textsuperscript{186} While noting the fluidity and occasional interchangeability of terms (for archē, dunamis, exousia, thronos, and kuriōtēs), Dawn argues there are differences between these terms and the words for angels (angeslo) and demons.

\textsuperscript{186} Wink, \textit{Naming}, 39.
(daimonia). In other words, there is a distinction between supernatural beings and human agents or structures. While Wink demands the powers are always and, Dawn argues that this limitation is inconsistent with the scriptural witness and its apparent allowance of the powers being or—either natural or supernatural. “Wink’s own investigation of the spiritual element falsely locates it only within the material structures and acknowledges no spiritual dimension beyond the natural.” By not allowing spiritual realities to exist independently of their material counterpart, ostensibly avoiding the dualism of matter and spirit, “Wink [wrongly eliminates] a different realm of spiritual forces...and reduces the cosmic battle in which we are engaged, [and] the significance of the work of Christ.”

Ultimately, Dawn rejects Wink’s reduction of the powers to simply the problems of violence. “The way of Jesus is much more than nonviolence, and the battle against the powers includes exposing many more diabolical methods and much larger forces.” The conflict instigated by the powers runs much deeper, and while it includes much flesh and blood, it is not limited to flesh and blood (Eph. 6:12). The powers must be understood as “diverse manifestations of a seamless web of reality hostile to God.” While the struggle against the powers

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188 Dawn, Powers, 15.
189 Dawn, Powers, 17. “Wink’s collapse of the supernatural world of evil makes one wonder how much he has collapsed good and God” (17).
often occurs within the realm of social existence, it is marked by the participation of supra-human forces.\footnote{A thoroughly chilling representation of this belief is given in the 2005 film \textit{The Exorcism of Emily Rose} (Sony Pictures), an updated retelling of Pastor Johann Christoph Blumhardt’s experience of evil’s power in his small German village. See Friedrich Zuendel, \textit{The Awakening: One Man’s Battle with Darkness} (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 1999).}

In their form as both earthly and/or heavenly, human and/or divine, the point of agreement for all (excepting the demythologizers) is that the powers exist. Created good, they have, like the rest of creation, fallen. However, in his death and resurrection, Christ has defeated the powers. “The defeat of the powers is understood as a past fact, a present experience, and a future hope.”\footnote{Dawn, \textit{Powers}, 27.}  This statement, however paradoxical, suggests an “already-not yet” eschatology that affirms Christ’s victory and the ongoing battle of the church to live into this reality. “A merely futurist eschatology undervalues Christ’s victory and makes him only a potential king,” giving little comfort as we engage in the battle today.\footnote{Dawn, \textit{Powers}, 26.}  “On the other hand, an interpretation that sees only a victory already achieved underestimates the reality of the principalities and powers as adversaries and loses the hope of the end of salvation history.”\footnote{Dawn, \textit{Powers}.}  Furthermore, such a triumphalistic view does not leave room for lament in our current struggle against the powers. Though Christ has defeated the powers on the cross, the battle must continue through time until “[Christ] has put all enemies under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:25).
The church is called into the battle: “The sovereignty of the principalities and powers has been broken, and it is the task of the Church to proclaim that.”195 Christians neither make the powers good (through teaching) nor bring them under the lordship of Christ—for Christ is already their Lord.196 “The Church is now the realm through which the powers continue to be defeated and by which their final end is foreshadowed.”197 Such an understanding begins to explain the significance of Article 28 of The Belgic Confession: “There is no salvation apart from [the Church].”198 In Paul’s rather strange command to “deliver this man to Satan” (1 Cor. 5:5; cf. 1 Tim. 1:20), he is affirming that while Jesus’ lordship extends over all of creation (including Satan), it is exercised in the church. Satan remains (however falsely) the “god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2). To hand people over to Satan means to kick them out of the church; out of the very place where the powers are defeated; where their rule is put to an end.

The rule of Jesus is exercised in the church through its worship:

“The sermon should name [the powers] and demonstrate their perversions. The offering attacks the power of money. The intercessory prayers remind us of our task to be agents of God’s reconciliation and commit us to live out our confession of faith in Christ’s victory over the powers. The sacraments of baptism and the eucharist give signs and seals that we participate in the triumph of Christ so that the powers have no ultimate control over us.”199

And through its witness:

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195 Dawn, Powers, 27.
196 For a more elaborate discussion on this, see Markus Barth, The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1959), 230-231.
197 Dawn, Powers, 29.
“Submitting to, honoring, and praying for the powers; prophetically preaching the gospel of repentance to the structures; participating in the transformation of the structures; opposing structures when necessary; offering counter-structures where feasible; disarming the structures in preaching Christ crucified; and holding fast to the promises of God in spite of the powers.”

The church does all of this by the power of the Holy Spirit, proclaiming our hope in God, and not the powers. The way of the Christian, and the way of the church, is ultimately dependence on God’s power.

Dawn locates Christ centrally, and identifies the church as the outworking of Christ’s presence in the world. The church’s action embodies the reality of Christ’s redeeming work in the world: all of creation is subject to the ultimate authority of Christ, and this relationship is enacted, and celebrated, in the life of the worshiping body. Dawn seems more willing to allow for even greater fluidity of Biblical terms, deferring not to concerns over interpretation, but rather the prima facie evidence of the text. In other words, Dawn adopts an either-or/both-and approach that focuses less on the nature of the powers, and more on the church’s response.

Chad Pierce

Writing from a 21st century American academic perspective, New Testament scholar Chad Pierce puts 1 Peter 3:18-22 under the microscope to more fully explore demonology. Pierce is most particularly focused on sin and punishment traditions in early Jewish and Christian literature, and how these subjects shape New Testament understandings of “the spirits” in the ancient world. In many

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200 Dawn, Powers, 32.
ways, Pierce bridges the psychology of Wink and the cosmology of Arnold. Instead of speculating on how to name and understand the powers centuries removed from ancient myth (per Wink), or focusing on a literal understanding of the myths as understood by the ancients (per Arnold), Pierce looks to the literary traditions of Jews and Christians and how those traditions shaped the Biblical writers.

A significant portion of Pierce’s writing is focused on the identity of the “spirits in prison” to whom Christ made his proclamation in 1 Peter 3:19. A very traditional understanding of Christ’s proclamation, and the view I was taught growing up, maintains that Christ made his proclamation to the spirits between his death and resurrection (triduum mortis). In other words, Christ descended into hell upon his death, during which time he made his proclamation, before his resurrection. Even this view segments into different strands of thought: 1) that Christ “offered salvation to the sinners of Noah’s generation who had perished in the flood”202; 2) that Christ proclaimed salvation to “Noah’s contemporaries who had repented of their sins prior to the demise”203; 3) that Christ proclaimed condemnation “to the unrepentant sinners of Noah’s generation.”204 In each case, it is important to note that the spirits to whom Christ is proclaiming either salvation or condemnation are the spirits of physically dead humans in the underworld.

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201 See Wink, Naming, and Arnold, Powers.
202 Pierce, Spirits and the Proclamation of Christ, 3.
203 Pierce, Spirits, 6.
204 Pierce, Spirits, 10.
An alternative view emerged in the Western Church in the fourth century, maintaining that Christ did not undergo a cosmic journey during the *triduum mortis*. Rather, the proclamation recorded in 1 Peter 3:19 was the pre-existent Christ’s message of repentance delivered to sinners during Noah’s generation.

“The predominant interpretation of the Western Church from Augustine up to the Reformation understood verse 19 as a projection of Christ back to the days of Noah.”205 This allegorical understanding of the text suggests that the spirits to whom Christ made his proclamation were not dead humans, but humans still alive however imprisoned by sin during the time of Noah.

A third broad interpretation of *when* Christ’s proclamation was made—with reference points to *who* the spirits were and *what* was proclaimed—developed in the late nineteenth century. According to this interpretation, “Christ’s proclamation to the spirits is a message given not to living or deceased humans but to fallen angels stemming from the primordial story found in Genesis 6:1-4.”206 This interpretation found its source material in the fallen angel myth of 1 *Enoch*. Subsequently, Christ’s proclamation was understood to be largely one of condemnation to the fallen angels and giants imprisoned since the flood. Three views of when this proclamation took place—*triduum mortis*, the pre-existent Christ, during the ascension—have been held within this interpretation. Making liberal use of William Dalton’s material, Pierce suggests that the primary concern for the author of 1 Peter to make his claims was not to identify specifics

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concerning when or where Christ made his proclamation. “The author of 1 Peter is concerned about human salvation, and this passage informs his readers that the evil spirits are now powerless to harm the Christian believer. The preaching serves to rescue humans from evil angelic powers; its point is not to offer the spirits salvation but to bring them under subjugation.”207 Using 1 Enoch, Pierce then sets out to determine whom, exactly, these fallen angels and giants are.

Using Jewish and Christian literature dating from the third century B.C.E. through the second century C.E., Pierce seeks to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the fallen angel and giant punishment traditions that would have influenced the writing of 1 Peter. Special status is given to the apocryphal book 1 Enoch, particularly chapters 1-36, commonly referred to as “The Book of Watchers.” This initial section of 1 Enoch expands on the story of Genesis 6:1-4, and establishes for Pierce a literary and cultural history that must be accounted for in interpreting 1 Peter 3:18-22.

“The Enochic corpus describes the sin, judgment, and punishment of the watchers, their offspring the giants, as well as humans.”208 The sins of fallen angels recorded in the The Book of Watchers are two-fold: 1) improper sexual relationships with human women resulting in the birth of giants (nephilim); and 2) the revelation of heavenly secrets to humans. “Bands or armies of angels, often because of their illicit union with humans or for their revelation of hidden things,

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207 Pierce, Spirits, 18. While this is a summary of Dalton’s view, Pierce affirms it by writing, “this work supports the generally accepted conclusion...[that 1 Peter 3:18-22 was written] in order to comfort and support a persecuted church” (21).
208 Pierce, Spirits, 31. Watchers/fallen angels (ben-elohim).
are imprisoned or punished.”209 In this view, humans are largely depicted as passive victims. For this reason, this tradition is held to be distinct from and pre-dating the flood motif of Genesis 6:1-4. However, humans are indicted in the end, as “the concept of sinful angelic instruction allows for humanity to become recipients of the sinful situation described in Genesis 6.”210 Understanding his thesis that sin and punishment traditions of angels pre-date the Biblical material helps form a better understanding of the traditions that influenced the writer of 1 Peter 3:18-22. Furthermore, such material allows for the identification of the spirits in Genesis, 1 Peter, and the apocryphal literature.

The giant offspring of illicit angel/human unions are punished for the violence they carry out against each other, against the earth, and against humans. In 1 Enoch, God commissions Gabriel to punish the giants “by means of a war in which the giants ultimately destroy each another.”211 Already in The Book of Watchers, posits Pierce, there is an expanding and shifting understanding of the responsibility for sin. Where punishment is meted out by God to the fallen angels and giants, humans are now included in the punishment tradition. Responsibility for evil is given to cosmic beings and to humans. The form of punishment for each of these groups varies: incarceration in an unspecified place until the final punishment on the Day of Judgment (fallen angels); mutually-assured destruction through war and/or the allowance of continued destructive

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209 Pierce, Spirits, 32.
210 Pierce, Spirits, 34.
211 Pierce, Spirits, 36.
behavior (giants)\textsuperscript{212}; and a great flood and/or imprisonment of the soul (humanity). “All human spirits are awaiting some form of eschatological judgment…\textit{[The Book of Watchers]} contains material which could provide the basis for imprisoned human spirits awaiting a future sentence of either salvation or punishment.”\textsuperscript{213}

In each case, the agents carrying out God’s judgments are angels. The primary battle in the cosmos is that of God’s angels (led by Michael) against the rebel fallen angels. The fallen angels are identified in various ways and led by various antagonists (Satan, Shemihaza, Asael, Belial, Mastema, et al). While the giants are destroyed, their spirits survive. These spirits “are described as leading astray, committing violence, and rising up against men and women from which they come…[and] will do so until the final judgment.”\textsuperscript{214} Humans are held in captivity for eternity or until the final judgment.

A conflation of the sin, punishment, and identity traditions in \textit{1 Enoch} suggests that “the spirits” refer to angels, giants, and humans. “The author/redactor of \textit{BW} clearly utilizes ‘spirits’ to refer to angels (both good and evil), giants, and humans.”\textsuperscript{215} A very general line of thought suggests that fallen angels initiated sin in the world and are ultimately responsible for all sin; that their diabolical offspring persisted in destruction and rebellion and, while destroyed, have been allowed to continue in persecuting humans; and that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[\textsuperscript{212}] Pierce rightfully points out that such a war would have been understood as a genuine historical event played out on earth (p. 42; c.f. Cullman, Wink).
\item[\textsuperscript{213}] Pierce, \textit{Spirits}, 45.
\item[\textsuperscript{214}] Pierce, \textit{Spirits}, 49.
\item[\textsuperscript{215}] Pierce, \textit{Spirits}, 54.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
humans, having been taught to sin, are more than happy to oblige and continue in rebellion against God. In any case, Pierce here concludes “all three entities fit within the description of the recipients of Christ’s proclamation in 1 Pet. 3:19.”

It should be noted that human sin, while not acknowledged in 1 Enoch as extensively, is found primarily in idolatry, power quests, blasphemy, persecuting the righteous, and trampling on the poor. While fallen angels are primarily responsible for sin and the spirits of giants continue to entice humans to sin, humans have followed their lead and persist in sinfulness. Humans are culpable, and this culpability is found largely in people of power—kings, rulers, and the powerful. There are echoes in Parables (1 Enoch 38-69) of Wink’s thesis of powers and principalities existing in the interiority of thrones, rulers, and authorities. In other words, while rebellion is a cosmic reality, it takes its shape in the structures of power.

This tradition of sin and punishment continues to unfold historically in early Jewish and Christian writings, most notably in Jubilees. “The role of evil spirits in Jubilees is to lead humanity astray…in two distinct areas: the shedding and consumption of blood as well as the threat of syncretism with the nations and idolatry.” Murder, uncleanness, and idolatry are sin in the Old Testament. Demons are the diabolical forces that lead humans into these sins. While demons are active, enticing people to sin, responsibility lies with humans. Humans are not passive victims, but corrupted participants.

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Pierce, Spirits, 55.
Pierce, Spirits, 117.
Interestingly, in both Jubilees and Baruch, there is some divergence as to the role of God: “While Mastema is in charge of evil spirits in Jubilees, it is unclear whether he performs this duty as an agent of God or as his enemy”\textsuperscript{218}; [in 3 Baruch] rather than being evil entities with their own agenda, demons are “controlled by angels (and ultimately God), and are thus agents of God rather than part of a separate force of evil.”\textsuperscript{219} This is a rather significant evolution from the early 1 Enoch tradition.

A continued evolution of the source and identity of evil is found in the Apocalypse of Abraham. Asael from The Book of Watchers is identified with Azazel, “who forsook his place in heaven for earth: the place of his sin.”\textsuperscript{220} “Azazel controls evil spirits as well as the wrath and trials that befall humanity.”\textsuperscript{221} “God gives him dominion over humans who choose evil.”\textsuperscript{222} This is evidence of further conflation of the 1 Enoch tradition and “satan” in Genesis 3. The Qumran literature begins to reveal a more classical understanding of evil and sin traditions. For instance, “[supernatural] beings in the War Scroll, like humans, are portrayed in dualistic terms. On the one hand there are the good angels, who reside with God in heaven…[conversely] evil angels exist under the command of Belial.”\textsuperscript{223} In every one of these cases there is a conflation of identities for the spirits—both spiritual and earthly. A movement from the source of evil being cosmic to human (with myriad variances) continues through apocalyptic

\textsuperscript{218} Pierce, Spirits.
\textsuperscript{219} Pierce, Spirits, 129. This seems closer in line with Wink’s view of Satan.
\textsuperscript{220} Pierce, Spirits, 131.
\textsuperscript{221} Pierce, Spirits.
\textsuperscript{222} Pierce, Spirits.
\textsuperscript{223} Pierce, Spirits, 146.
literature. The purposes behind such conflation are varied, as well—to understand evil; to protect God; to assign the reality of evil to an appropriate source (monotheistically, henotheistically, cosmically, or humanly); and to correct human behavior.

In the New Testament literature, there is an increasing dualism suggested, pitting good versus evil. A question remains, however, in regard to how the spirits work. Does the heavenly battle between good and evil correlate to human events? Pierce posits that “[Revelation] unites human and cosmic evil...[and] describes the punishment of both cosmic and human agents of evil.”²²⁴ The ontological view in Revelation is that “earthly realities are mirrored by cosmic ones.”²²⁵ Rome (and Babylon) is depicted as an agent of Satan. Revelation details the eschatological punishment of both Rome (Babylon) and the spiritual powers that stand behind it. Both fallen angels (including Satan) and evil humans will be judged, thrown into a burning lake of fire where they will reside forever.

Throughout the entire ancient corpus Pierce utilizes, it is clear that “the spirits” refers to fallen angels, giants, evil spirits, demons, humans, and other cosmic entities. “It is evident that there is no consensus in early Jewish and Christian literature regarding the identity of evil spirits, those who experience incarceration as a form of punishment, or those responsible for sinning in the days of Noah.”²²⁶ For the author of 1 Peter, it is primarily evil spirits but also sinful humans who are persecuting the church and thus contained in his view.

²²⁴ Pierce, Spirits, 165.
²²⁵ Pierce, Spirits.
²²⁶ Pierce, Spirits, 192.
Evil spirits, led by their leader (Satan), continue to entice humans to sin. So while Satan’s role can be found primarily in causing disease and insanity, or attempting to lead humanity away from God by trial and temptation, his role as addressed in 1 Peter 3 is as the persecutor of God’s church.

Lastly, Pierce considers the intent of the author in 1 Peter 3:18-22 in determining the purpose of Christ’s proclamation. Considering that the early church was being enticed by both cosmic forces (disease, trial, temptation) and human forces (Rome), Pierce states the epistle’s purpose as such: to have Christ proclaiming a message of victory over the powers. “Christ’s message of victory was intended to subjugate evil in all of its forms, both cosmic and human.”227 Rome is given its authority by Satan. Human forces of oppression and persecution are linked with cosmic forces of darkness. “The ultimate hope for the recipients of the epistle would be that Christ had been victorious and subjugated all types of evil, including human and cosmic, under his authority.”228 It is a proclamation of hope.

In 1 Peter 3:18-22, Christ preached a message of condemnation to the fallen angels upon his ascent and exaltation. All evil is now under his command. While final victory is assured, it is not yet complete. “Thus, evil still exists in the world, but it does so now in a defeated state as they await final judgment.”229 This is a word of hope for people living in persecution: that victory over evil is assured even as they struggle against evil. Forces of evil, whether cosmic or human, are

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227 Pierce, Spirits, 214.
228 Pierce, Spirits, 215.
229 Pierce, Spirits, 224.
ultimately under the authority and lordship of Jesus Christ. Fallen angels have been defeated by the death and resurrection of Christ. It follows that the human agents of these forces of evil are also defeated. Christ is victorious! That is the Good News!

Pierce closes with a short chapter on baptism, rightly remarking that

“Baptism is not a magic rite in and of itself, but rather it initiates the believer into a new existence and community in which Christ has subjugated the powers of evil. As long as the new believers keep God’s commands they will remain free from the devil’s control.”

Through faith, we are connected to Jesus Christ, who has subjected the powers and evil forces of darkness to his lordship and authority. His people are victorious in and through his death and resurrection. This is a word of good news and hope for those who are suffering, persecuted, oppressed, and tried. Like Dawn, Pierce offers no easy ontological answers for the exact identity of the spirits. While willing to leave open the ways in which we define or identify the spirits, Pierce is focused on what is primary in the text: the good news of Jesus Christ’s victory over all evil in all of its manifestations. The church remains as the presence of Christ in the world, empowered by his Holy Spirit, proclaiming the victory of Christ and offering freedom for all who are in him.

John Howard Yoder

The question for American ethicist John Howard Yoder in The Politics of Jesus is whether the Gospel provides us with guidance regarding social responsibility,

\footnote{Pierce, *Spirits*, 235.}
and if so, how? Yoder writes from a perspective of questioning the way of God’s people in the world: how then shall we live? If Jesus was concerned only with personal salvation, we need not bother with the question. If, rather, Jesus had a concern not only for individuals but also for people as a whole, it is necessary to explore how the Gospel intersects with social structures, and how the early apostles (particularly Paul) understood this.

Refuting an *interim* ethic, by which it is presumed that Jesus and his followers were so preoccupied with the impending end of history, an *elenchitic* ethic, by which it is believed that Jesus’ ethical demands are presented only to show us our inability to meet them and thus flee to the cross in repentance, and the aforementioned *personal salvation* ethic, whereby the Gospel is concerned only with the individual, Yoder establishes a *social* ethic demanded by the Gospel. This new model is based on the language of power in the New Testament. Based on Paul’s language of power, Yoder presents a detailed social ethic upon his proposed *politics of Jesus*. So, while *The Politics of Jesus* is primarily focused on establishing a messianic social ethic based on the Gospel, my primary interest in this chapter is to consider how Yoder understood power.

*The Politics of Jesus* can be considered a companion piece to Dutch theologian Hendrik Berkhof’s *Christ and the Powers*, discussed below. Yoder has great reverence for Berkhof, quoting him at length. He follows Berkhof in considering the multivalent and sometimes confusing language of power in the New

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232 Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*. 

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Testament. Paul uses political language, cosmological language, and religious language in referring to power. While Paul surely had a specific, technical understanding of all the terms used for power, he seems to be referring to “the patterns or regularities that transcend or precede or condition the individual phenomena we can immediately perceive.” In other words, Paul is pointing to structures of power.

Like Berkhof and Wink, Yoder is seeking to provide a third way between the modernist dismissal of an antique worldview and the Protestant individualism that assumed Paul was not concerned with structures. To Yoder, power suggests something more than angels and demons, and affirms Paul’s great interest in power structures. This is supported in Paul’s language of power in his letter to the church in Colossae. Writing, “all things subsist in him” (Col. 1:17b), Paul is demanding that those very things that keep the universe together are the created systems and powers of the universe:

“The universe is not sustained arbitrarily, immediately, and erratically by an unbroken succession of new divine interventions…[the] creative power worked in a mediated form, by means of the Powers that regularized all visible reality.” This implies that the powers were first part of creation, and as such were very good.

233 Respectively, “thrones and dominions,” “angels and archangels,” and “law and knowledge,” (Yoder, Politics, 137).
234 Yoder, Politics, 138.
235 Yoder, Politics, 141. And could not these same powers also regulate invisible reality?
While the ordering function of the powers was good, like every other creature the powers are fallen:

“[Now] we find them seeking to separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:38); we find them ruling over the lives of those who live far from the love of God (Eph. 2:2); we find them holding us in servitude to their rules (Col. 2:20); we find them holding us under their tutelage (Gal. 4:3). These structures which were supposed to be our servants have become our masters and our guardians.”

Created by God, the powers are fallen and have assumed for themselves an absolute value. However, while the powers are created and fallen, Yoder also suggests that the powers are not outside of the sovereignty of God; “[God will] still use them for good.”

The question remains as to the identity of the powers as structures. Here, Yoder turns to Berkhof for help, listing “human traditions…morality, fixed religious and ethical rules, the administration of justice and the ordering of the state…the State, politics, class, social struggle, national interest,” et cetera. Far from suggesting that these things are inherently bad, Yoder demands that, in fact, without these powers there would be no society or history: “we cannot live without them.” However, because “they have absolutized themselves and they demand from the individual and society an unconditional loyalty…we cannot live with them.” In this winsome terminology, Yoder suggests that Paul has

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236 Yoder, Politics, 142.
237 Yoder, Politics. Like Berkhof, Yoder notes that affirming these powers as structures does not imply the rejection of more literal meanings of the powers (i.e. angels and demons).
238 Yoder, Politics, 143.
239 Yoder, Politics.
created a theology that holds together humanity’s fallen condition and God’s sovereign, providential control.

Christ confronted these powers at the point of their assumed sovereignty—in his death and resurrection beating the powers at their own game:

“He permitted the Jews to profane a holy day (refuting thereby their own moral pretensions) and permitted the Romans to deny their vaunted respect for law as they proceeded illegally against him...[therefore] his cross is a victory, the confirmation that he was free from the rebellious pretensions of the creaturely condition.”

In other words, Christ met the Jewish law with a greater righteousness and the Pax Romana with a greater justice—crushing them both under the weight of their own falsely claimed assumptions. At the cross, Christ disarmed the powers. Here, Yoder quotes Berkhof:

“It is precisely in the crucifixion that the true nature of the Powers has come to light. Previously they were accepted as the most basic and ultimate realities, as the gods of the world...Now that the true God appears on earth in Christ, it becomes apparent that the Powers are inimical to Him, acting not as His instruments but as His adversaries.”

So, while civil law, moral law, and God’s law can rightly be considered good and thoroughly useful in the world as a means of keeping order, these laws or any other systems of structure become idols, asserting themselves in such a way as to hold humans as slaves. This is generally the nature of idols—to avert our eyes from the one true God of heaven and earth and hold us in misplaced fear and submission.

Jesus Christ came to break their claims and reestablish them in the proper place within the created order. This is the message for the church to proclaim.

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240 Yoder, *Politics*, 146.
“The very existence of the church is its primary task. It is in itself a proclamation of the lordship of Christ to the Powers from whose dominion the church has begun to be liberated.” 241 Practically, the church exercises the reality of Christ’s lordship and liberation from the powers through worship. Yoder again turns to Berkhof:

“There is nothing greater that the Church can do for society than to be a center in which small groups of persons are together entering into this experience of renewal and giving each other mutual support in Christian living and action in secular spheres. Such groups will find their vital inspiration in Word and Sacrament and in the fellowship of such gatherings as the parish meeting.” 242

In the end, the church functions to influence the creation of better structures. Here, something beyond personal ethics is demanded. Social, political structures are in view—certainly informed and lived out by personal ethics, but with a broader view in mind. “That Christ is Lord…[is] a social, political, structural fact which constitutes a challenge to the Powers.” 243 As such, Christians are called to live in a way both personally and socially that proclaims Christ as Lord of all—the universe, along with all of its powers and structures, is his!

Hendrik Berkhof

Dutch theologian Hendrik Berkhof’s Christ and the Powers serves as a sort of CliffsNotes precursor to Wink’s sprawling three-volume study on the powers. 244

Set between the pre-modern tendency toward mythologizing and modernity’s

241 Yoder, Politics, 150.
242 Yoder, Politics, 152.
243 Yoder, Politics, 157.
244 Berkhof, Christ and the Powers.
cold naturalism, Berkhof wrote this book as a mid-twentieth century response to the questions, “Who are the powers to whom Paul refers?” “How do the powers fit into the Gospel’s story of redemption?” and “What is the Church to think about the powers?”

Using the term exousiae as a foundation, Berkhof seeks to find the meaning of the powers in the New Testament. Acknowledging Paul’s terminology as vague, Berkhof believes that the trends of theological scholarship have offered very little help in discerning their meaning in Paul’s writings, and thus for the church today. “Either one read therein the confirmation of a conventional orthodox doctrine about angels and devils, or else they were seen as vestiges of antiquated mythology in Paul’s thought, with which more enlightened ages need waste no time.”245 Informed by Jewish apocalyptic writings (especially the Book of Daniel), Near-Eastern nature religions, and the Book of Enoch, Berkhof proposes that Paul intended that any reference to the powers would be a reference to “personal, spiritual beings…[who] influence events on earth, especially events within nature.”246 For Paul, however, there was surely a greater, deeper meaning.

1 Corinthians 2:8 points to “the rulers of this age…[who] crucified the Lord of glory.” This is surely a reference to the priests, Herod, and Pilate. The first thing to note about these rulers is that they are in the business of domination. The second thing to note is that, based on Paul’s use of the term elsewhere, “in and

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245 Berkhof, Christ, 15.
246 Berkhof, Christ, 17.
behind these visible authorities, Paul sees invisible higher Powers working.”

In elaborating on this, Berkhof points to Paul’s use of the term stoicheia. Paul is here suggesting that these powers rule over human life outside of Christ through both pagan and Jewish ethical rules and traditions. The priests and scribes surely pointed to the Jewish law; Pilate surely pointed to Roman law. All of this is to say that, far from being connected to angels, “the powers are the structures” of earthly existence.

God created these structures of earthly existence. They were created not for ill, but as the system of creation—the very system by which the universe is held together. “Then the Powers serve as the invisible weight-bearing substratum of the world, as the underpinnings of creation.” In this sense, the powers are not evil, but rather “hold life together, preserving it within God’s love, and serving as aids to bind men fast in His fellowship.” Like the rest of creation, however, these invisible powers now operate under the reality of sin. Instead of being “aids to bind men fast in His fellowship,” they have by way of the Fall become gods (Gal. 4:8), “behaving as though they were the ultimate ground of being, and demanding from men an appropriate worship.”

This demonic shift away from their creaturely, God-intended purpose has resulted in the powers separating us from God. Here I have some trouble with

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248 “Basic principles” (NIV), or “elemental spirits” (NRSV).
249 Berkhof, Christ, 21. Life is ruled by these powers—time and space, life and death, politics and philosophy, public opinion and Jewish law, tradition and astrology... “Apart from Christ man is at the mercy of these Powers” (22).
250 Berkhof, Christ, 28-29.
251 Berkhof, Christ, 29.
252 Berkhof, Christ, 30.
Berkhof’s description, as he seems to implant in the powers something akin to personality. If the powers are not personal beings, but instead inert creation, the powers are guilty of nothing, and it is instead another indictment against sinful humanity who essentially makes them into gods (idolatry). Berkhof does not seem to want to say that. In fact, it seems that he desires to place something of supra-human personality behind the powers in the air, just as the effects of their work is carried out in humans—the invisible and visible.

In the end, and sounding very much like Wink, Berkhof posits that the functioning of the *stoicheia* is found in nationalism, militarism, class, social structure, and public opinion; anything that would seek to usurp the authority and dominion of the one true God. However, while the powers are fallen and invariably lead humanity away from God, they do not cease to function as God’s preserving agents in mercifully holding life in line.253 It was in Christ’s death and resurrection that the powers were unmasked and revealed for what they truly and only are: God’s instruments.

“Previously they were accepted as the most basic and ultimate realities, as the gods of the world…Now that the true God appears on earth in Christ, it becomes apparent that the Powers are inimical to Him, acting not as His instruments but as His adversaries.”

Through his death and resurrection, Christ has subjected the powers to his dominion—essentially claiming, “I’m stronger than you!” The powers are now subject to Christ, who has freed his people from slavery to these elemental spirits of the world.

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253 Berkhof, *Christ*, 34. This is right in line with Luther’s and Calvin’s first and second uses, respectively, of the Law of God.
The church necessarily proclaims the Lordship of Jesus Christ over-against the powers, and thus limits the powers from over-reaching their God-intended role in creation. While the powers may seek to make Christians, the Church, and the world forget about Christ and His Lordship, they cannot succeed. The victory of Christ has already been won. In writing about the role of the Church against the powers in light of Christ’s resurrection, Berkhof uses poignant illustrations:

“The Holy Spirit ‘shrinks’ the Powers before the eye of faith...Where the Spirit of Christ rules, Mammon shrivels down to ‘finances,’ conventional morality to a set of rules of thumb, subject to criticism and limited in scope and authority. Changing customs, slogans, and isms of the moment are seen as ideas which are merely ‘in the air,’ worth no more and no less than the older slogans they replaced. Where the victorious kingship of Christ is confessed, there prevails a consistent unbelief in the utility of military power, and national or international armament is at the most grudgingly accepted as a bitter duty of responsible citizenship. Anxiety before the fearsome future gives way to a simple carefulness, since we know that the future as well is in God’s hands.”

Instead of deifying the world—a constant temptation—the believer is called to flee to Christ, who has already defeated the powers of the world.

It is Berkhof’s contention that the church is not to be the aggressor in fighting the powers. Ours is a defensive stance (Eph. 6:10-18). Christ is the conqueror, and the powers’ complete and utter defeat is his task. “Ours is to hold the Powers, in their seduction and their enslavement, at a distance.” To do this, we have only to stick close to Christ. Furthermore, as we gather together with Christ as our head, we must live out the reality we profess regarding Jesus’ dominion and the powers’ subjection under him:

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“We can only preach the manifold wisdom of God to Mammon if our life displays that we are joyfully freed from his clutches. To reject nationalism we must begin by no longer recognizing in our own bosoms any difference between people. We shall only resist social injustice and the disintegration of community if justice and mercy prevail in our own common life and social differences have lost their power to divide.”

The church must, both in resistance and proclamation, constantly point to Jesus Christ as the supreme power and Lord of life. A failure to do so results in competing powers filling those spaces previously cleaned up. That is to say that failing to live out in practice and proclamation the Lordship of Christ will invariably lead to some other power attempting to usurp Christ’s authority—legalism and nihilism are offered as likely intruders by Berkhof. The church living “in word, deed, and presence” to Christ neutralizes the powers, and places them in their God-given role. This, in the end, is what Paul teaches: “to be a church which in word and deed lives from the fact that Christ has overcome the Powers, and which holds them at arm’s length by virtue of its faith.”

Who are the powers? What are they doing? Approaching these questions from various perspectives and concluding with divergent points of emphasis, there is general agreement from all of the authors reviewed: the Scriptural language for the powers is multivalent and open to different interpretations; whether considered as being personal beings, the interiority of collective will, or the gestalt of an institution, the powers are...the powers exist and are real today; the powers are created by God and are therefore good; the powers are fallen and seek to usurp God’s authority, establishing themselves as ultimate. The powers

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256 Berkhof, Christ, 50.
257 Berkhof, Christ, 61.
become idols, lording over creation in a way that was not intended, and leading people in ways inimical to God’s rule and reign, ultimately resulting in suffering. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, however, the powers have been defeated. Christ is Lord over all creation, including every power and principality.

In consideration of the fluid descriptions and multivalent depictions of power in Scripture, a theological worldview that leaves open issues of interpretation seems most apt. Such a worldview preserves a spiritual realm that is exempt from critique by modernistic leanings, suggesting that there is a supersensible realm that cannot be discerned by the senses or science. This view affords generous interpretation and imaginative ways of understanding what is surely beyond what is comprehensible, without letting readers today off the hook in recognizing both the peril of idolatry and the powers and our need to resist them.

The critical point of the Scripture’s dealings with the powers—and all of idolatry—is to demand that God is Creator and Sovereign over all, and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ his authority has been definitively established forever. The role of the church is to live into this reality in tangible ways: through worship, prayer, self-giving service, and submission to Christ’s reign over all creation. In this sense, the role of the church is proclamation—insisting through word and deed that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

Part Two of this chapter considers the impact of the powers on the world beyond theological interpretation and speculation. What impact do idolatry and
the powers have on the world today? How do we recognize this, and what are we called to do about it in light of the Gospel?

Part 2: Sociological Understandings of the Dynamics of Power

It is one thing to identify the powers; it is something else to understand how the powers influence people and systems. The sociological influences of the powers, and more generally of power, are far-reaching, and observation of these influences helps to answer many questions: Why do people do what they do? Why does power exert the influence it does in the forms it takes? How is the Christian conception of power different from the ordinary ways in which the world understands and practices power? Stewart Clegg, David Courpasson, and Nelson Phillips lay a foundation for understanding power and the ways power is used to shape organizations.258 James Davison Hunter considers how Christians in the 20th and 21st centuries have sought to use power in shaping culture, often to deleterious effects.259 Bob Gouzewaard, Mark Vander Vennen, and David Van Heemst consider the way power works through ideologies, exploring 20th century examples of ideology and connecting the means sought in those ideologies to forces beyond our control.260 Finally, James K.A. Smith explores the ways in which we are shaped by cultural liturgies—the basic practices humans

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258 Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, Power and Organizations.
259 Hunter, To Change the World.
engage in everyday—and how those liturgies reflect (or not) the Kingdom God.²⁶¹

While the terms power, as it is used in scientific management theory, and the powers, as it is understood in theological circles, bear some resemblance, they are distinct. The former refers to the fuel that enables action in an organization. The latter refers to the cosmic forces identified in the Scriptures. Both terms, however, identify unique dynamics that shape us in particular ways. This section seeks to bridge the two, exploring sociological understandings of how power works in organizations as a means of illuminating the dynamics of the powers.

Clegg et al

How do people become idol-worshipers? Is the stain of sin so pervasive, and so focused, that bowing down to the gods of efficiency or mammon is somehow automatic and unavoidable, without the help of outside influences? In other words, is our tendency towards idolatry innate, or is it formed? If it is formed, how is it formed? Clegg, et al, in their study, Power and Organizations, traces the history of so-called scientific management theory and practice. This history is quite useful for understanding the philosophical underpinnings of scientific management, showing that the effect of management vis-à-vis organizational power is the formation of a certain kind of people, ultimately resulting in greater potentialities for idolatry.

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²⁶¹ Smith, Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation; Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works.
To be clear, it must be noted that *Power and Organizations* is an academic guide. Its over-arching thesis is to “refix the institutionalization of power and organizations in both theory and practice, in the analysis and even the experience of being in organization, as well as of organizing.”²⁶² There is no explicit mention of idols within the text, and even as a *secular* text is most concerned with laying out the intellectual, philosophical, and academic history of power and organizations. My primary purpose is to connect these dots with idolatry, seeking to understand how humans are shaped by the forces around us; particularly within the sphere of organizational management. Power, as exercised within organizations, shapes and forms people into a particular way of being in the world. For the purposes of this project, my focus is on the way power shapes people to worship the god of efficiency, and the ways in which this formation is manifest in the world today.

The authors’ basic premise is that, “[organization is] the collective bending of individual wills to a common purpose…with organization almost anything can be attempted: wars waged, empires challenged, worlds conquered, space explored, and good fortune built.”²⁶³ Power is the fuel that drives organization. Power is a part of organizational achievement. According to Clegg, it is neither good nor bad.²⁶⁴ It simply *is*, both in being and necessity.

²⁶³ Clegg, *Power*.
²⁶⁴ Power need not be, as Lord Acton once noted, something corrupting, but instead may be understood as a positive, necessary force. Cf. Crouch, *Playing God*, above.
Christians generally affirm this view, suggesting that power and organization are part of the created order, the very things by which God forms and governs the universe.265 Power is the resource needed to create things. The creation of good things depends on the use of power. However, “the power to achieve each of these good things may entail violence being unleashed, domination being enforced, and manipulation being employed.”266 There is a shadow-side to everything, including organization and power. Clegg’s focus is almost exclusively on this negative side of power, and particularly the way that power works in opposition to human flourishing.

The exercise of power in relation to other people for the purposes of achieving a desired effect is the very nature of management: “Management as a practice of power involving the imposition of will is directed at framing the conduct not only of others but also of oneself. It is a form of government linking ‘how to mandate’ with ‘how to obey.’”267 Such use of power can be traced back through the history of the country, from managing forced labor in the 19th century U.S. South to managing free labor in business today. In managing others, regiment and discipline are affected so that those managed will conform to a certain way of doing and being. The aim of management is always on the ends, whether safety, efficiency, production, et cetera.

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265 “The Powers serve as the invisible weight-bearing substratum of the world, as the underpinnings of creation.” Berkhof, Christ, 28-29.
266 Clegg, Power, 5.
267 Clegg, Power, 40.
Early policy-makers and government leaders determined that in order for society to function well, citizens should be rewarded or punished based on the utility of their action: punishment for sloth and vice; reward for work and honesty. Such utilitarianism sought to achieve the goals of order and human flourishing: “the standard by which we judge the worth or goodness of moral and legal action and the principle of usefulness must be elevated above all else in order to minimize human misery and maximize human happiness.”

Character-formation was the goal by which such happiness and human flourishing would be achieved. Usefulness became the key measure. Such utilitarianism was, of course, ideologically-driven, seeking to put the lazy and indigent to work, shaping “workingmen” who would contribute gainfully to society. It must be noted that all of these are subjective categories determined by a ruling elite (those in power/management).

The means by which to achieve such desired aims of character-formation and usefulness were many and varied, particularly as directed towards the indigent. Clegg notes the Panopticon in outlining the history of management. The Panopticon was an institutional building designed in the 18th century for incarcerating inmates, allowing a single guard to watch inmates without them knowing they were being watched. It was initially designed as an “efficient cause” — a means of socializing employees (prisoners) into “submitting their will to the task at hand.” Clegg notes the Panopticon because it instituted a sort of

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269 Clegg, *Power*, 44.
precursor of management theory and practice, affording the overseer/manager/guard a way to play God. The manager exercised power by clandestinely surveying the prisoner/worker. The manager could scrutinize the worker; the worker could not see the manager, and could have no real way of knowing if he was under surveillance or not. In a very genuine sense, the manager was God. Within this role, the manager had the discretion and warrant to exercise disciplinary power. The will and behavior of the worker could be bent according the desired ends of the manager, organization, or society.

In tracing the continued development of management practices, Clegg notes that power was employed scientifically in “getting others to do what one wanted them to do, even against their will.” Do what you are told; be where you are to be; do not go where you are not to go. The aim of such management was a “general interest in utilitarian efficiency, an interest from which all people...might prosper.” By managing people deliberately, efficiency would be achieved, rewards maximized, and profits accrued. Both worker and manager/overseer/lord would benefit.

Such oversight began to take shape as modern scientific management with F.W.Taylor’s teleological utilitarianism. Clegg writes: “Whereas Bentham was concerned with bringing idle hands to work, Taylor’s utilitarian calculus was oriented to the problem of making hands already at work even more

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270 Clegg, Power, 45.
271 Clegg, Power, 46.
272 Clegg, Power.
productive.”\textsuperscript{273} The train of ideologically-driven efficiency—with an eye on profit—was now moving down the tracks; already a departure from its original intention of human flourishing through the essential duties of labor. A shift was made as the workman, instead of existing and being developed as a creature of habit, was managed to being the object and subject of scientific knowledge. Man was no longer viewed as a creature, but rather as a part of the greater machine designed for efficiency:

“Taylor was oriented to the problem of making employed, rather than idle, hands busier in the service of the greatest good of national efficiency and for the better reward of both hands and the businesses that employed them...efficiency became iconic for all American organizations...it had to be worshipped, feted, and widely represented in cultural artifacts of the age.”\textsuperscript{274}

This is the language of idolatry! “Efficiency became the meta-routine that shaped the future of power.”\textsuperscript{275} Efficiency would determine worth of the human and the organization, shaping not only the future of power, but the future of culture, economy, and work. Efficiency became the god before whom humanity bowed.

Clegg’s mention of Taylor’s method are important to note: Taylor’s stopwatch—an ethnographic method to know exactly how quickly workers accomplished their task—was a means of reforming work to achieve maximum efficiency. Men were viewed scientifically, reformed by scientific management, into “better machines” rewarded through greater profits derived from greater (more efficient) output (piece-rates). The worker, formerly finding his worth in creation (task-knowledge), was now judged based on efficiency. This marked a

\textsuperscript{273} Clegg, \textit{Power}.
\textsuperscript{274} Clegg, \textit{Power}, 47.
\textsuperscript{275} Clegg, \textit{Power}.
shift from practice-based (knowledge) power to financial power. Money became the “dominant social value shaping management and work.” Efficiency opened the door for Mammon to assert itself as god.

Scientific management effectively took away the humanity of a person, believing empty minds and hands to be best, because it is about the system, not the person. Efficiency, then, requires depersonalized workers and competent overseers. Routine takes over as power. Here we see the ultimate aim of scientific management: the human being is viewed as a machine that could be programmed (reformed) for efficiency. The economic reward ostensibly justifies this depersonalization. Humans are formed according to the over-arching meta-narrative of existence: we exist for efficiency and profit. Again, we see the early workings of idolatry as a people are formed according to the aims of usurping gods.

Movement to assembly line production and further depersonalization followed from Taylor’s early efforts, according to Clegg. The assembly line determined the pace of work, with a narrowing of each job. No longer was there craft or expertise, but only small, monotonous jobs to be carried out in a strictly routinized manner, at pace with the line. Placing all of this within my own theological framework, it is here that Mammon asserted its power fully with the continued confining of the job to mechanized routine, which increased efficiency and profits, thereby making ordinary workers economically positioned to enjoy

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consumer goods. According to Clegg, Taylor’s system found its zenith with Henry Ford’s “five-dollar day man.”

Clegg suggests that Ford and his Sociological Department sought to expand this notion of scientific management into the broader social sphere, beyond the workplace, instituting “meta-routines” in the home. More than just a body capable of producing efficiently at work, Ford sought efficiency in the home. The whole idea was based on a Protestant ethic of personal and vocational morality and fecundity — both for the sake of profit. Efficiency and control were still the hallmarks of modern management, but could now extend beyond the production floor into the living room and kitchen. It marked a movement from management of the body to management of the soul. While collateral damage was inevitable, specifically racism against black migrants and Catholic immigrants, such management could justify itself in ensuring morality and the “greater good of society,” ergo human flourishing.

Ford’s Sociological Department ultimately became untenable, and was eventually supplanted by a Stasi-like Service Department to ensure morality. When this, too, became unwieldy for the organization, the State took on the role of morality police:

“[But] the state, as an ideal total moralist, supplemented the work of surveillance over those in whom the churches and associated temperance movements had not succeeded in instilling a governmental soul. Power shifted its focus from the individual to the collective.”

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278 Unless, of course, you happened to be black or Roman Catholic.
So, while Taylor had focused on management of the body, Ford expanded to management of the soul—social and family life. The State completed the coup by expanding the reach of management of body and soul over the entire populace (the collective). Scientific management became a means of social, cultural, and moral formation, exerted through mechanization based on control and efficiency. This trajectory of management again seems to affirm the notion, in my own view, that formation was taking place, “interiority” was developed in business, home, and society, and people were being shaped into the image of the gods they had created: Efficiency & Mammon.280

Clegg writes that theorists soon began to recognize that workers were more than just a body to be formed as “precision instruments through the use of meta-routines.”281 More than simply disciplining at work would be required. As social beings, workers needed to be formed at home, as well. Efficiency concerns persisted; so how to overcome the limitations of forming workers’ souls? Society would have to be confronted and changed in order for the whole person to be formed. Through the measures of control and efficiency, the desired aim was sought, affecting work and play, leisure and rest, economy and thrift, and the very ways in which we would view the world around us.

The assault on the soul found great effectiveness through economy: increased efficiency increased the income of employees, while scientific management

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280 Psalm 135:18.
281 Clegg, Power, 66.
determined that rest and leisure were critical to increased efficiency—thus, more
disposable leisure time and money to spend on leisure was afforded the worker.

“Credit helped democratize consumption and extend its pleasures of
seduction from the lifestyles of the rich and famous to those of the poor but
honest. A war was waged on working-class habits of thrift, seeking to channel
consumption into home and recreation, using advertising to nullify
customary habits and create new ones, fuelled by hire purchase, with little
present income put aside for future social insurance.”282

While Clegg does not identify the powers, it seems appropriate to make the
connection: in this process Mammon was established and firmly in control of the
formation of people. It further asserted itself as god, distracting and making itself
the sole aim of life even as it developed a super-structure around itself to
perpetuate its aims. Leisure time, disposable income, a movement away from
thrift and saving, and a system put in place to fuel desire (advertising)...

“supported a new kind of calculating hedonism in consumption, embodied...in a
new personality type, that of the narcissistic person.”283

The system of formation of people as consumers, as subjects of the god of
Mammon, was complete, according to Clegg. Shopping, radio, and television
“increasingly became tutelary sites” for consumption and narcissism as
“increasingly, the legitimation for the relations of domination at work was the
pleasure of consumption it afforded at home.”284 Again, a system was being
created which established power subtly with efficiency. What started in the
workplace now found its way into media, commerce, and the home (i.e., kitchen

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282 Clegg, Power, 70.
283 Clegg, Power.
284 Clegg, Power.
design). Efficient work allowed efficient leisure and efficient homes so that we might consume as efficient consumers in an efficient world governed by the gods of Efficiency and Mammon!

If that is not unnerving, consider that these efficient systems served to cultivate desires in humanity through an elaborate system of production and marketing. Social control is established as an untouchable system that is fully engrained in the culture.

“[These images] told a story in which people’s orderly role in production was to be rewarded with an equally orderly role in consumption...The advertisements and tableaux vivants always depicted the future as something whole and inevitable. People were to be propelled forward by larger forces into a world that is rational, dynamic, prosperous, and harmonious.”

As one considers Clegg’s point in light of our earlier ideas about the powers, we might make the connection that these larger forces are the work of the powers. Consumerism is a force! The story told by the forces of consumerism, efficiency, and control is intended to spark imaginations towards a vision of shalom; a vision based on prosperity, “the good life,” and human flourishing.285 The insidious nature of these forces and the stories they tell is that they are invisible, working behind the scenes: “Efficiency has been naturalized as to be almost invisible, its logic so entrenched that we have a hard time identifying its impact.”286 This is the nature of idolatry and ideology.

Clegg’s summary of the history of management theory affirms that humans are desiring creatures. Always in question is what we are being formed to desire.

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285 Smith, Desiring. See below.
286 Clegg, Power, 71.
The work of power is to shape those desires in us. “While certain categories of goods meet needs or wants, anything can become the object of desire and, then, only that can satisfy.”\textsuperscript{287} The key word in this is only. If an object is the only means of fulfilling a desire, and is depended on solely for satisfaction, then it is likely an idol. An object that becomes the sole aim of our desire is an idol, by definition.

Taylorist systems have the ability to create desires in people that are exclusive: I must have that in order to be whole, happy, or well. Of course, the fulfillment is usually short-lived. This is precisely the nature of idols—they make promises they can never keep, and become for people who bow down to them ultimate things that can never live up to the status granted them. This is the destructive nature of idolatry, which we are more than happy to accommodate/perpetuate in our longing to fill the God-shaped void in our lives. In scientific management, power has a means by which to influence and shape human desire.

Clegg proceeds to identify theorist Mary Parker Follett, who sought to get away from the individualism of authoritarian power, and instead focus on the democratization of power—power with instead of power over; “coactive power rather than coercive power”\textsuperscript{288}:

“She produced a rationale for authority distinct from Taylor’s ‘scientific’ approach, which identified management as a responsible discharge of necessary functions rather than the privilege of elites. Authority and responsibility should derive from function, not privilege. Both politics and business require an understanding of how to produce collaborative action between different people integrated in a common enterprise rather than creating their mutually assured destruction through the incivility and non-

\textsuperscript{287} Smith, Desiring, 91 (footnote 2).
\textsuperscript{288} Clegg, Power, 72.
democracy of a despotic regime of formal organization borne on the body of the worker.”

Efficiency came at a cost to civility and, ultimately, to humanity. Follett saw the need to move beyond this individualism, which she viewed as constrained, possessive, and highly competitive, to a more civil and democratic understanding of the “overall pattern of functions”; of union instead of competition. “In her view, the potentialities of the individual remain potentialities until they are released by group life. Only through the group can men and women discover their true nature and gain their true freedom.” Only in the cooperation of the corporation can real personality emerge.

So, while Follett surely moved away from authoritarian, coercive power, it would be naïve to suggest that this new form of “democratic understanding” ushered in a benign, power-free system. The very language of real personality elicits a warning of “the interiority” of a collective, which according to theologian Walter Wink is the very manifestation of power at work: “the inner aspect of material or tangible manifestations of power.” Furthermore, and unsurprisingly, this conception does not account for the reality of human fallenness.

It is, however, an improvement: whereas Taylor identifies the individual as a highly replaceable cog in the great machinery of efficiency, Follett sees something more human and organic; perhaps a more palatable version of power.

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289 Clegg, Power, 73.
290 Clegg, Power.
291 Clegg, Power, 73-74.
292 Wink, Naming, 104.
that at the very least affords openness to the Holy Spirit. From Taylor’s “autocracy of expertise imposed on the body,” Follett marked a shift to polyphony/diversity.293 According to Clegg, there are three views of power within management practices historically, particularly within the area of conflict resolution: the Taylorist or traditional view, which focuses on domination, “a victory of one side at the expense of the other”; the way of compromise, in which “all parties relinquish a part of their original interests”; and Follet’s view, which focuses on integration. Follet determined that, “A new, and better, solution emerged from negotiation that preserved the original interests of both sides.”294

Reflecting now on some of the key ideas that have emerged in the history of organizational management, Clegg provides fodder for considering how leadership might be positively exercised outside of the Taylorist paradigm of authority and coercion. What might the exercise of power look like for a consistory, for example, as together we listen to the Holy Spirit and lead Christ’s church? Ultimately, the power we desire is only that of the Holy Spirit as we seek to bow down only to the one true God of heaven and earth.

Many churches in our culture, in small and perhaps not so small ways, have been influenced by a Taylorist paradigm: the pastor as a Domini who dictates; the parishioner as a worker who obeys. In such a system, the manager/pastor is charged with overseeing the spiritual health of the parishioner through oftentimes coercive means, speaking, watching, preaching, and counseling as an

293 Clegg, Power, 74.
294 Clegg, Power.
authority figure. Efficiency and control are the means of mechanization by which workers/parishioners are shaped/discipled. The focus for some churches remains on the ends, and thus establish various means—any means—necessary to achieve those ends most efficiently.

Clegg presents a vital contrast between Taylor and Follett, and this contrast presents important implications for the church. Follett’s integrative paradigm appears to cohere more with Christian values in the movement away from coercion and toward the balance of power. In other words, while Taylorism is marked by competitive individualism, disempowerment (the Domini is the leader), coercive power (however aimed to a proper ends), and power over others, Follett looks to communitarian democracy, empowerment, coactive power, and power with others. According to Follet, the legitimacy of power is only found through coactive power, and any form of coercive power is demonic. This is a marked shift, and in consideration of the way that most systems operate, such a shift requires a rather remarkable readjustment of vision. Writing in regard to my own current experience in leading a consistory, we are struggling mightily in moving away from a hierarchical, power over paradigm. In this struggle, we are finding that we keep moving back to the old power-over paradigm almost unconsciously. It requires constant diligence to live into what we have established as a core value of the church: empowerment!

Leaders in the church are surely charged with power. Again, as noted above, power is the fuel that drives organization. God, in Christ, by the Spirit, gives
power to the church. Pastors and leaders are the agents of that divine power. The question for church leaders is how power is going to be used, understanding that the use and practice of power ultimately determine the ends. If, as Clegg notes in quoting Foucault, “contemporary forms of power are engaged in a struggle for the soul,” then we had better be very mindful about how we are shepherding people.\footnote{Clegg, Power, 75.} Their souls are at stake. Furthermore, we must know the forms power takes in the world, as there is constant competition between forces of power for human souls, and we best know what we are up against.

We are formed through the invisible forces that develop as we worship, for example, efficiency. “We worship what we love and we love what we worship.”\footnote{Smith, Desiring, 51.} In the seemingly innocuous movement toward punishing indigency and rewarding virtue; in developing efficiency and generating profit; in shaping the body, soul, and collective towards a vision of human flourishing (the good life), idolatry takes on a snowball effect. This is the nature of ideology, as the ends (efficiency, profit) justify any means. Idolatry, however, is far more subtle. No one ever wakes up and says, “I’m going to bow down to the god of efficiency today!” It develops, invisible, hidden. This is what makes idolatry so insidious.

Typically, we will not see idolatry at work on the surface, even in cases of clearly evident power at work, or ideology in policy-making, or a particular zeitgeist (the collective soul) forming in an organization. Very occasionally, total institutions will emerge—Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa, penal
institutions—that garner our attention as we notice concentrated power and the extraordinarily cruel and inhuman actions that emerge almost benignly from normal humans doing unthinkable things. The church, sadly, is far from exempt is falling prey to such dehumanizing and violent action (spanning from the Crusades to the current crisis of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church). We must become wise.

Power is necessary. Leadership, equipped with power, is critical for the health of organizations. Organizations will form people toward a particular end. Mary Parker Follett presents a strong and compelling case that organizational health is not going to be found in the old, Taylorist models that have largely shaped our culture economically, socially, and spiritually. Power in leadership will be rightly exercised when many voices are heard, in horizontal rather than vertical structures of leadership, and in diversity: “Strong organizational cultures that suppress value difference are more likely to produce unreflective and sometimes inappropriate organizational action than more democratic and pluralistic settings.” While messy and inefficient, this is the way of the Spirit, and ultimately the way of the church as an organization.

Finally, it would seem that perhaps we might stop for a moment and consider means as equally important to the ends. Christ is both, after all. The church, and particularly our leaders, will be wise to humbly acknowledge our own vulnerability to the way of ideology and idolatry. Understanding the threat, we

\[298\] Clegg, *Power*, 150.
will seek more and more the Spirit’s power in shaping us and the people we serve as followers of Jesus Christ.

James Davison Hunter

In 1971, novelist Walker Percy wrote: “Now in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came to myself…”299 Such is the state that I find myself in today as I wake to the reality of a hyper-politicized culture drowning in contempt toward itself and the other. How did it come to such hatred and polarization even in (perhaps particularly in) the Christian community?

Diagnosis of where we are and how we got here is certainly important; a vision for the future is critical. In To Change the World, James Davison Hunter explores the ways in which culture is shaped and how Christians have gone awry in seeking to change the culture while offering an ameliorative vision for the transformation of the world.

Hunter’s thesis is premised on the belief that Christians are created to change the world. “In the Christian view…human beings are, by divine intent and their very nature, world-makers.”300 This is a much broader view than the basic (and perhaps caricatured) evangelical view that suggests the sole purpose of Christians is to save souls. By our design as ones created in the image of God, we are called to “develop and cherish the world in ways that meet human needs and

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300 Hunter, To Change the World, 3. This assessment echoes Crouch, above.
bring glory and honor to [God].”301 This creation mandate is central, and implies the task of engaging the world for the sake of changing the world for the better.

According to Hunter, the problem for Christians today is that, “the dominant ways of thinking about culture and cultural change are flawed.”302 The prevailing view, forwarded primarily by the Christian Right but espoused almost universally, is that “culture is made up of the accumulation of values held by the majority of people and the choices made on the basis of those values.”303 Based on this view, it follows that in order to change the culture the hearts and minds of individuals must be changed. This belief is certainly evident in Sioux Center, where the language of worldview is redolent in churches, organizations, and schools. To be sure, there are very compelling reasons to affirm this notion of worldview as vitally important and certainly beneficial to our communities. However, Hunter’s point is that such a view of culture and culture change simply does not work.

In making his critique against the idea that changes in values and worldview will necessarily change the culture, Hunter is very gracious. He acknowledges the importance of spiritual, social, and political action. But, his warning is that these efforts simply do not work effectively in changing culture. Changed individuals do not automatically translate into a changed culture. The majority, in the end, does not necessarily influence the world in such a way that the world will be changed. Therefore, Christian leaders who demand that Christians need

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301 Hunter, Change.
302 Hunter, Change, 5.
303 Hunter, Change, 6.
to try harder, or simply that there need to be more Christians living out their beliefs, are misguided themselves. Any suggestion that a majority of Christians possessing an appropriate Christian worldview will serve as a panacea for the brokenness of our world is simply wrong.

Any simplistic understanding of culture and culture change fails to comprehend the complexity of culture and how it is transformed. Simplistic remedies fail to take into account the slowness by which culture change takes place in history, and the incoherence of such change. Cultural change, according to Hunter, is effected over time by elite individuals and institutions at the center of culture who possess “symbolic capital” and work in networks on the periphery of that center, challenging the norms and conventions at the center.\textsuperscript{304} Christians are not, by and large, a part of the plutocracy of influence that drives cultural change—neither in terms of wealth or power. Furthermore, the notion of changing culture from the “bottom up” by way of personal transformation (worldview) is effectively false, as “the deepest and most enduring forms of cultural change nearly always occur from the ‘top down.’”\textsuperscript{305} That top is comprised of individuals and institutions possessing symbolic (or cultural) capital such as the government, the media, the wealthy, et al. Christian organizations are simply not a part of this club. All of this is to say, simply, that Christians are not in positions of power when it comes to culture and culture change.

\textsuperscript{304} Hunter, \textit{Change}, 35.
\textsuperscript{305} Hunter, \textit{Change}, 41.
This somewhat harsh reality is all the harder to swallow for Christian leaders primarily because the Christian community was the center of power for much of history in the Common Era. From its earliest days, Christianity drove, albeit slowly, culture change. From education to art to intellectualism, Christianity was at the fore. From the time of Constantine, Christianity was the driving influence in matters of state. Since the Enlightenment, Christianity’s influence has waned dramatically. To that end, we live today in a post-Christian world. Efforts at whole-scale, dramatic world-changing one soul at a time is a pipe dream. Hunter presents compellingly that it will not work.

In light of this history and current position, Hunter rightly inquires as to “the capacity of present-day Christianity to reproduce itself in ways that influence the larger world for good.”306 The movement of the Christian community has been an attempt to regain the influence it once possessed. However, in terms of wealth, cultural capital, and power, Christianity is not close to being in a position of influence. Ultimately, it is Hunter’s conclusion that “Christianity in America is not only marginalized as a culture but it is also a very weak culture.”307 This is to question whether, even if American Christianity were in a position of influence, it has anything to offer for the good of the world.

The heart of Hunter’s essay then focuses on the primary problem with American Christianity as it seeks to fulfill the creation mandate via the commonly held and erroneous view of culture and culture change. An

306 Hunter, Change, 68.
307 Hunter, Change, 92.
overwhelming focus has been placed on power. This is understandable, as the evidence certainly suggests that it is indeed the powerful who effect change within the culture. The answer, however, is also the primary problem. Power corrupts. He states it this way:

“When faith and its cultures flourish, they do so, in part, because it operates with an implicit view of power in its proper place. When faith and its cultures deteriorate, they do so, in part, because it operates with a view of power that is corrupt. The end can only be corrupting.”

Power is the currency of culture and of change in our fragmented, socially stratified world. Power is useful, but it is too often made ultimate. Power elevated to such a position of ultimacy inevitably corrupts, as power is not, in and of itself, absolute.

The clearest manifestation of this reality is found in the state. The state is the repository of power, possessing more than any other body the ability to coerce, control, and legitimate. “In short, the state has increasingly become the incarnation of the public weal. It’s laws, policies, and procedures have become the predominant framework by which we understand collective life…”

This is not an exaggeration, and becomes all the more clearer in the increasing polarization of political parties in Washington, fringe groups, and lobbies. With shootings in Chicago and around the country increasing at an alarming rate, the debate continues to escalate regarding gun control. This is certainly a worthwhile debate. What is most interesting, however, is that the debate is framed around the Constitution and engaged within the political machine—NRA honchos

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308 Hunter, Change, 99.  
309 Hunter, Change, 103.
versus the Obama Administration, Republicans versus Democrats, and CNN versus Fox News. It is almost entirely political. Every debate is a political debate, and every problem is supposed to be solved through the political process. If, then, it is true that “the final arbiter within most of social life is the coercive power of the state,” it certainly stands to reason that people will do just about anything to attain that power.310 Thus, the political machine perpetuates itself.

The will to power is strikingly played out every night on the news and in the public square. It is impossible to ignore that behind the will is a seething ressentiment. Hunter employs this Nietzschean term to accurately and disturbingly diagnose the underlying anxiety and anger that drives the will to power and the will to dominate. In my generation this hatred is perhaps merely assumed. I grew up with Rage Against the Machine and Public Enemy; Rush Limbaugh and Pat Robertson; Michael Moore and George Clooney. The Weathermen and Black Panthers still occupy a space in our collective conscience as a nation. Occupy Wall Street and the Christian Coalition is seldom far from the front pages. These are all political acts, celebrities, movements, and ideologies. Ressentiment fuels the demand for change with cries of “unfair!” Yet even these forms of ressentiment occur in response to politics or aspiring to power within the political structures: change occurs primarily in politics; politics determines the ideology of the state; and the state possesses the real power.

It stands to reason, then, that the Christian Right would so ardently seek power through politics. If politics is the means to power, and power is the means

310 Hunter, Change, 106.
to change, and change is the impetus to a better world (even the Kingdom of God), then by all means Christians must engage in politics. The problem, as has already been stated, is where this ends when power is attained; history has already shown where Christians have gone miserably awry—i.e. The Crusades, The Inquisition, papal abuses, civil religion, etc.—as they have achieved their goals. The demise of culture, according to the Right, is the secularization of society and movement away from Judeo-Christian values. Therefore, via the political process, the Right endeavors to restore America and avert impending doom, ultimately taking back the culture and setting the nation on right paths once again. This myth of the past (America as a Christian nation) and plan for the future (restoring the glory of the nation) is riddled with fear, hatred, and a perceived sense of harm incurred at the hands of those who adhere to opposing viewpoints. All hope for change that will honor God is placed in the political process.

The Christian Left takes a similar path via the political process, though its animating myth is “the right ordering of society...of equality and community.”

Progressive politics are de rigeur today, perhaps particularly among young evangelicals. The movement rightly aspires to a just, liberated world comprised of equals. Strangely, the Left has also made these ideals absolute. Unlike the Christian Right, however, which directs its vitriol towards the secularizing humanists of the age, the Christian Left directs its hatred towards the Christian Right. They disdain the Right’s proclivity to wealth, war, the Republican Party,

311 Hunter, Change, 132.
and nationalism (both sides, of course, do a magnificent job of caricaturing the other). Very much like the Right, however, their motive is to “take back the faith and the nation.”\textsuperscript{312} Interestingly, the aspiration of both the Right and the Left is a theocracy, “a righteous empire.”\textsuperscript{313} The means, once again, is politics.

The neo-Anabaptist movement is slightly different from the Left and the Right in that it seeks to distance itself from the state. The operative myth of the neo-Anabaptist movement is “the ideal of true and authentic New Testament Christianity and the primitive church of the apostolic age,” which compels its independence from the state.\textsuperscript{314} Constantine’s conversion assured the conflation of church and state, making Christianity complicit with the violent, domineering, coercive, and corrupt state. “Rather than challenging the principalities and powers, the people of God became united with the powers.”\textsuperscript{315} Important in this statement is the belief of the neo-Anabaptists that in overcoming the powers, Jesus Christ overcame “the institutional or systemic patterns of thought, behavior, and relationship that govern our lives and the spiritual realm that animates them.”\textsuperscript{316} For Christians to work in and through the state or civil authorities is to be joined to the powers and principalities, who in their fallen state always retain a demonic character. Even within the dualism of good and

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{312} Hunter, \textit{Change}, 144.
\bibitem{313} Hunter, \textit{Change}, 145. The hypocrisy on both sides is breathtaking.
\bibitem{314} Hunter, \textit{Change}, 151.
\bibitem{315} Hunter, \textit{Change}, 153.
\bibitem{316} Hunter, \textit{Change}, 157. According to Berkhof & Yoder, the powers are structures of earthly existence. “The state, politics, class, social struggle, national interest, public opinion, accepted morality, the ideas of decency, humanity, democracy—these give unity and direction to thousands of lives. Yet precisely by giving unity and direction they separate these many lives from the true God” (Berkhof, \textit{Christ and the Powers}, 32-33).
\end{thebibliography}
evil (church-good; state-evil), the neo-Anabaptist movement resorts to the language and action of politics. “The active opposition to the powers...is ultimately oriented toward changing political, military, and economic policy.”

The very identity of the movement loses its meaning outside of politics.

In all three cases, it is clear that politics is about power. The will to dominate and coerce is endemic to power. Whether humans are walking lock-step with the powers or identifying themselves against them, it is clear that politics rule the day, and have been elevated in our culture to the position of final arbiter of what is, good or evil. Tragically, I’ve found across the board (from the Right and the Left) an abdication of responsibility in the church and as individuals, as politics has become the only hope of change and the means of accomplishing such change.

Whether Christians are defending their positions against the world, seeking to be relevant to the world, or insisting on purity from the world, it is clear that Christianity in its engagement with culture and culture change has rooted its actions in the ressentiment, distortion, and coercive influence of politics:

“By nurturing its resentments, sustaining them through a discourse of negation toward outsiders, and in cases, pursuing their will to power, [Christians] become functional Nietzscheans, participating in the very cultural breakdown they so ardently strive to resist.”

Suffice to say, this is not working.

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317 Hunter, Change, 164.
318 “Their identity depends on the State and other powers being corrupt...” (164).
319 It is much easier to vote, hold a sign, and shout for increased care of the poor than it is to adopt a child, share a meal with the hungry, or befriend the lonely.
320 Hunter, Change, 174.
However, Hunter is quick to point out that power is not inherently bad. After all, the powers are created by God and subject to the authority of Christ. “[The powers] are to hold life together, preserving it within God’s love, serving as aids to bind men fast in His fellowship…as bonds, aids and signposts toward the service of God.”321 The problem with power is that it absolutizes itself. In its fallenness, it fails to stay within its created place, and seeks to usurp God’s authority, setting itself up over-against God. Power becomes an idol, and in our own fallenness, humans are more than eager to bow down before it. We live in the tension of its ubiquity, usefulness, and fallenness.

Hunter proposes a movement away from the conflation of politics and Christian witness in the world. We must “disentangle the life and identity of the church from the life and identity of American society” just as we “decouple the ‘public’ from the ‘private.’”322 This is to say that we must stop running to politics and the political process to solve all of our issues. We must move away from our proclivity to negation, distortion, and coercion. We must recognize that “the natural disposition of all human power is to its abuse.”323 We must recognize that Satan animates power, making it an idol, and in so doing invariably makes of power an instrument to dominate and control others. As a result of the fall and the human tendency to distort power, power always bears with it the potential toward the demonic.

321 Berkhof, Christ, 29.
322 Hunter, Change, 184-85.
323 Hunter, Change, 188.
To resist power, or to use power in ways that lead to human flourishing, requires a change in our thinking and acting. This change involves humble submission to the only One who has true authority and power; the rejection of privilege; humility and compassion; and seeking the good of all, regardless of their faith. Beyond these very practical prescriptions, Christians must recognize some glaringly obvious realities about our post-modern culture: we live in an increasingly pluralistic culture in which it is hard to find connecting points of shared belief (difference) and, subsequently, a shared framework of understanding the world through the most basic points of reference (dissolution). Our challenges are myriad, and even as the tension rises, we must recognize that the old way of doing things will not work.

Hunter proposes an ameliorative vision for how Christians can engage the world and live as Christians in a way that fulfills the creation mandate. He refers to this as faithful presence. Faithful presence involves spiritual formation that “is oriented toward the cultivation of faithfulness in the totality of life.” This suggests that a movement must be made away from formation that inevitably comes from our participation in the post-Christian world and toward Biblical Christian discipleship. “When people are saved by God through faith in Christ…they are saved in order to resume the tasks mandated at creation.” In Christ we seek to fulfill the creation mandate. The way this is practiced vis-à-vis

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324 This is essentially a summary of Hunter’s prescription for the church, pages 188-191.
325 A short, pithy summary of the philosophical underpinnings of post-modernism is given treatment in James K.A. Smith’s wonderful Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).
326 Christian formation, which is a critical part of faithful presence, will be explored in earnest in Smith, Desiring, below.
327 Hunter, Change, 236.
the world (how could we do this out of the world?) is described succinctly by Hunter: “accommodation to existing social realities and calling them into question by being different.” In a word, “affirmation” and “antithesis.” Or, as suggested by Tim Keller, “resonate and defy.” The goal is the shalom of the kingdom of God, and necessitates the active engagement of Christians in the world living out the reality of the kingdom just as we await its fulfillment. We affirm the goodness, beauty, and common grace of God in the world, even in its institutions and structures. However, we also call into question those things (cultural artifacts) of creation that have been distorted by sin.

The call on us in and through Christ is not to change the world, but to be faithful. Christ will change the world. Our faithfulness is exercised in being “faithful to each other,” being “fully present and committed to [our] tasks,” and being “committed in [our] spheres of influence.” In doing these things, the call extends to the pursuit of the flourishing of all humans even as we honor and glorify God. This is a fulfillment of the creation mandate. This is what it means to be world-makers: “Christians and the church as a whole would be creating structures that incarnate blessing, beauty, meaningfulness, and purpose not just for the benefit of believers but for the good of all.”

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328 Hunter, Change, 231.
329 Hunter, Change.
330 Timothy Keller, Qideas.org “Q-Commons New York,” October 9, 2014 via simulcast.
331 “The church is the sign, foretaste, and instrument of the kingdom of God.” James V. Brownson, The Promise of Baptism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 12.
332 Hunter, Change, refers to this as “constructive subversion” (235).
333 Hunter, Change, 244-247. This far more holistic approach is covered very nicely by Timothy Keller in Every Good Endeavor (New York: Dutton, 2012).
334 Hunter, Change, 270.
This is a vision I can get very excited about, as ultimately it points to this: “the primary good of God himself and the primary task of worshipping him and honoring him in all [we] do.” This is the goal of the church, and a worthy endeavor in our resistance to the powers.

Bob Goudzwaard et al

My initial interest in the powers was stimulated by very basic observations of the world in crisis: war, poverty, famine, exploitation, oppression, and environmental degradation are so pervasive as to be endemic. While as an evangelical Christian I possess the general lexicon to speak about such realities, namely by the language of sin, there has been little to account for why the world is as it is. What undergirds the fallenness of humanity and all of creation? There are certainly exceptions, but it does not seem that people ever set out to cause starvation or violent armed conflict. Yet it is grossly inadequate to suggest that these things simply happen, as though unavoidable. Furthermore, even when gross injustice is recognized and addressed, there is something that seems to propel and even exacerbate the crisis; such devices suggest that perhaps there are forces at work engaged in setting the world on an unstoppable, self-determined course.

In January 2010, a massive earthquake caused catastrophic damage to the island nation of Haiti. Billions of dollars flowed into the country to address immediate need and rebuilding. Today, despite the best of intentions from many

Hunter, Change, 286.
nations in providing aid, Haiti continues to be mired in poverty, disease, a lack of infrastructure, and general misery. How can this be? Bob Gouzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen, and David Van Heemst seek to understand the world in crisis—a world faced with increasing problems and few viable solutions. Even where political will is present, there seems to be little hope in facing the challenges of environmental degradation, terrorism, and global poverty. The challenges these issues pose is enormous, and humans feel increasingly helpless:

“[Many] people in today’s society feel they no longer have a significant impact on the events that most influence their lives. Sometimes people even admit to a baffling sense that the future does not belong to them as much as it once did, as if the future itself decided to embark upon its own self-determined course.”

This is hopelessness.

What are the forces at work that lead to this sort of helpless fatalism? What is it about our current world crises that suggest the future has a mind of its own? How is it that the solutions provided seem invariably to lead to only greater problems? How did the war to end all wars lead to more fatalities (in the 20th century) that all previous wars combined? How is it that, despite the economic boon of globalization and ever-expanding economies, the gulf between rich and poor is ever-widening, and global poverty is epidemic? Why are key players in addressing the needs of the world persistently thwarted? Why, after all, does the future look so bleak?

Gouzwaard et al propose a thesis for why the world’s challenges have not and will not be met:

336 Goudzwaard, Vander Vennen, and Van Heemst, Hope in Troubled Times, 19, italics mine.
“[Perhaps], as decision-makers and citizens, we have become more or less trapped inside the cocoon of an extremely narrow, reduced view or perspective that considers acceptable only the solutions that fall in line with the way Western society defines its further ‘progress.’”

This thesis is premised on the evidence that the very means of progress employed to address global crisis (money, economic growth, and technology) have actually perpetuated, even multiplied the problems. “The means…have become elevated to such a prominent place that they now, to some degree, chart their own course, as if independent of us.” This is the language of idolatry.

Tim Keller writes, “the human heart takes good things…and turns them into ultimate things.” As policy-makers seek to recast the world based on a vision of human flourishing (e.g. democratic government, free-market economy), and then attempt to address the problems brought by such vision (globalization, increased security), we find that the ends sought lords over us as a tyrannical despot. “We conscript every available object or force into a tool or means for reaching the all-encompassing objective…the means to our ends function as idols or gods.” The idol is animated and possesses a mind of its own, so to speak. By demanding another solution using the same process (deifying the ends sought), idol is heaped upon idol. The misdirection of our aim in life invariably results in depravation. Putting our hope into (essentially loving) and giving ultimacy to

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341 “Man’s nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols.” Calvin, *Institutes*, I.XI.8.
anything other than God will lead to distortion.\textsuperscript{342} The forces then used to achieve the ends “increasingly display autonomy and domination.”\textsuperscript{343}

The language used by Goudzwaard et al to explain this phenomenon is that of ideology. More than simply the study of ideas, ideology is marked by “a deliberate political attempt to systematically regulate or manipulate people’s currently held ideas in order to achieve certain societal ends.”\textsuperscript{344} Ideology holds in view a vision of human flourishing, and makes that vision (the goal or ends) the ultimate aim or objective. The authors lay out a six-phase progression of modern ideology:

Conception—The focus here is in identifying the need for radical change and the end sought. In the conception phase “more and more people accept the idea that a specific concrete goal must be achieved at all costs.”\textsuperscript{345} This is the language of revolution, the reverberations of which can still be heard today: the French Revolution, Communism, Nazism, etc.

Actualization—Here, the ideology moves from conceptual to actual; it “becomes real flesh and blood…the sole object of its disciples is to reorient society entirely according to the fundamental pattern of the end.”\textsuperscript{346}

Reconstruction—The focus turns to restructuring a new society based on the proposed end. As the previous society is dismantled, a new society is created, based on a vision of the end. Because values have been redefined based on the

\textsuperscript{342} This theme is carried out in Chapter 3, “Lovers in a Dangerous Time,” of Smith’s \textit{Desiring the Kingdom}. See below.

\textsuperscript{343} Goudzwaard, \textit{Hope}, 27.

\textsuperscript{344} Goudzwaard, \textit{Hope}, 33.

\textsuperscript{345} Goudzwaard, \textit{Hope}, 52.

\textsuperscript{346} Goudzwaard, \textit{Hope}. 
end vision (a redefinition of evil; all who are opposed to the vision are evil), all
who stand in opposition of the cause can justifiably be exterminated.

Domination—Here, the ends has become enlivened to such an extent that the
means used in achieving it take on a will of their own. Instead of the visionaries
controlling the means in service of the ends, “the means appear to coerce their
users.”347 So, for example, the vision for human flourishing in the communist
revolution (a classless society) demanded a particular means by which to achieve
the ends (the State). In this phase, the idol/savior exacts demands (violence) in
the pursuit of the goal. The State, in other words, rises above all else and requires
sacrifice.

Terror—When the means of achieving the end take on a mind of their own
(“the new gods thrown down their masks”348), terror reigns. “The power
invested in the forces and institutions of compulsory progress rave on because
they have reached a point of no return…the demonic becomes visible in its most
ghastly form.”349

Dissolution—Because it so grossly conflicts with reality (and because of the
destruction it leaves in its wake), no ideology can be perpetually maintained. It
eventually fades away into history books.

I felt it important to include this trajectory of ideology for two reasons: 1) it
reveals a dynamic of power that cannot be divorced from the powers, and 2) it

347 Goudzwaard, Hope, 54.
348 Goudzwaard, Hope.
349 Goudzwaard, Hope.
affords us the opportunity to observe contemporary ideologies at play under this same matrix.

It was suggested to me some time ago that the idols of our age are that of security and comfort. Violence, as the manifestation of all power, is unleashed on the world as a means of realizing these ends—sacrifices made to our idols. How many people in Haiti have died because of the economic policies of the United States that devalue both currency and markets in the Latin world? All so that we in the United States can live in comfort! How many citizens of rogue nations live in perpetual fear of being annihilated by our drones as they have been identified by our government as evil threats to our national security? All so that we can live securely!

In the United States, we have made freedom an end, an overarching goal and aim of society. This began as a concept (hope) of those emigrating from Western Europe seeking a new life. The vision was actualized in the period leading up to and resulting in the Revolutionary War. Reconstruction took place in the formation of a nation and the ensuing formation of the U.S. Constitution. It could be argued that we have entered the Domination phase: is there anything we wouldn’t do to ensure the maintenance of our national freedom? The reality of drones, Guantanamo, nuclear armament, and a very aggressive (bullying) foreign policy suggest a negative answer. This progression is evident in

350 Dr. Anthony Bradley tweet, January 20, 2013.
everything from the war on terror to the war on death (healthcare reform); from same-sex marriage to youth sports.351

To be sure, freedom is a good thing. Life is a very good thing. But in making these ideas ultimate, and utilizing the same mechanized notions of progress to achieve a desired goal, idolatry emerges. Idolatry always leads to depravation and exacts on human life an immense toll as all forces are put to use in achieving the goal and all opponents to such ends are made evil.

Gouzdwaard et al acknowledge this tension, stating, “We could be accused of deliberately trying to make the improvement [of life]…morally and legally suspect by definition.”352 They are not damning all (or any) means of improvement. They are unflinching in their diagnosis, however, of ideology as a corrupting force. In writing about material progress, they are quick to point out, “We are not saying that each market is an institution that by definition ought to be mistrusted. A market has no inherent power to mislead…[yet] people can elevate even good institutions like the market and beneficial forces like economic growth into artificial saviors.”353 As has already been suggested, no –ism or –ology is inherently evil. In our tendency toward idolatry, however, humans invest created things with ultimacy—an ultimacy they were never intended to bear—

351 Jonathan Rauch, “How Not to Die,” The Atlantic, Vol. 311, No. 4. Rauch suggests that the debate on healthcare reform is tied to an ideology that has made life the ultimate ends, no matter the cost.
352 Goudzwaard, Hope, 85.
353 Goudzwaard, Hope, 95.
and we find ourselves abused by it until the idol is finally crushed under the weight of our expectations. 354 Psalm 115:5-8, once again, rings unnervingly true.

Is it possible to avoid ideology when pursuing a goal? More specifically, how can Christians avoid the pitfalls of ideology (and ultimately idolatry) as we seek the One who is ultimate, who is the goal and aim of the world—Jesus Christ. In the Church, generally, and at First Reformed Church, specifically, in what ways are we following the path of ideology, and in what ways are we following the path of “genuine truth, justice, and the love of God and neighbor”? 355 These questions will be considered fully in chapters four and five.

Goudzwaard et al write, “The spiritual battle in history…revolves around the hearts of people, nothing else.” 356 Here are echoes of James Davison Hunter’s call to faithful presence: the hope of the world rests on the faithful presence of God’s people, empowered by the Spirit and resisting the mesmerizing lure of power. We are a people constantly called to the cross of Jesus Christ, as the cross “represents the only genuinely anti-ideological stance…[all] efforts to survive and maintain life at any cost must be crucified, following Christ’s example.” 357 At both the macro- and micro-level, we must listen carefully to the Spirit for the paths to take. We must resist power, and find that God’s power will be made manifest in our weakness.

354 This was the primary thesis of Berkhof’s Christ and the Powers, see above. “By no means does Paul think of the Powers as evil in themselves,” 29.
355 Goudzwaard, Hope, 127.
356 Goudzwaard, Hope, 172.
357 Goudzwaard, Hope, 176.
James K.A. Smith

In his book *Desiring the Kingdom of God*, philosopher James K.A. Smith sets out to consider the ways in which humans engage in and are formed by, willingly or unwillingly, cultural practices. These cultural practices, or liturgies, “shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world.” Smith asks three important questions: What are these liturgies? What are they aiming us towards? What must the church’s practices look like in order to form us into people who desire the Kingdom of God?

The basic premise upon which Smith rests is that we are constantly being formed via secular liturgies. Education is not limited to what takes place in the church or classroom. Smith uses the term *liturgy* interchangeably with worship, to express not only the practice of formation that is taking place in the culture (cultural liturgies), but also to show that, ultimately, we love what we worship. So, we are being formed by the cultural practice of shopping, for example. Being formed as “consumers,” we become certain kinds of people (consumerists). More subtle is the formation that is taking place in us subconsciously, whereby we are shaped to love what we worship (things). This is, at its heart, a formula for idolatry.

358 James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25. Culture is simply the power to define reality (Hunter), while culture-making is the work of humans to make stuff or sense (cultural artifacts) out of the world (Crouch). Cultural practices points to our participation in the products of culture or culture-making process.

359 To worship is simply to ascribe worth to something, and to make it the object of veneration.
This thesis only has traction if we are to accept that Christianity is more than intellectual assent to particular beliefs. For example, I can affirm the basic tenets of the Christian faith, on the one hand, and deny capitalistic consumerism, on the other, and yet if I am not engaged in Christian worship but instead spend my Sunday mornings at the shopping mall, am I not being formed as the very thing I deny while I live antithetically to the one thing I espouse? At a very basic level, the suggestion is simply that “What we do matters.” Smith posits that humans are not “thinking machines” or even “believing animals.” Smith’s claim is that we are, above all, desiring creatures. We love. Furthermore, our love is directed toward a vision of the kingdom: “that hoped-for, longed-for, dreamed-of picture of the good life—the realm of human flourishing. While what we do matters, what we do is determined by what we love; and vice-versa, what we love is also shaped by what we do. This certainly includes thoughts and ideas, but also takes into consideration our hearts, hands, and the very viscera of our humanity.

Sin speaks to our tendency to distort either our love or the aim of our love. The inclinations of our hearts are, regrettably, misdirected. Why does this happen? To respond by saying sin is correct, but does not help much in recognizing the forces at work in us that cultivate alternative visions of human flourishing. There are forces at work shaping our love. What are these and from where do they emerge? It is this component of formation that I find most

360 Smith, Desiring, 43.
361 Smith, Desiring, 55.
362 Smith, Desiring, 54.
363 I am writing, of course, under the belief that the teleological goal of humanity that results in true flourishing is union with Jesus Christ.
compelling, especially in consideration of the powers and principalities. Smith relegates the language of powers and principalities to a footnote, but saturates his larger argument with the language of idolatry. This is certainly worth exploring in more depth. Smith writes:

“Though Reformed confidence in the goodness of creation tends to be quite allergic to such language...this fails to take seriously biblical language of ‘the powers.’ Cultural institutions and practices are ‘charged’ not only with an implicit telos, but also by spirits or the Spirit.”

What is behind the implicit aim of human flourishing we find at the shopping mall? Is it only the corrupt inclination of our hearts, or are there demonic forces at work? Who or what these forces are may be less important than recognizing simply that there is something at work, and then engaging in the means of resisting those forces.

If secular liturgies do indeed train “our hearts and loves,” it is the work of the church to expose those liturgies, develop patterns of resistance against them, and shape our aims and loves rightly. Smith very capably and winsomely exposes various secular liturgies in his book. An urgent task for First Reformed Church (and the focus of this project) is to engage in the work of exposing the liturgies that most influence us in our community. There are certainly embedded cultural practices in our church and in our larger community that shape us. Smith has gone a long ways in articulating general cultural practices (i.e. consumerism, the military-entertainment complex). More unnerving questions are, “What vision of

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364 Smith, Desiring, 93, footnote 5. Interesting is Smith’s use of the word “charged” regarding cultural practices by spirits.
365 Smith, Desiring, 94.
the kingdom of God is implicit in our worship here at First Reformed Church? How are we developing patterns of resistance against both cultural and distorted Christian visions of human flourishing? How can we better shape the aims and loves of our people at FRC?” These questions will be explored in earnest in the next three chapters.

Worship is the pedagogy of desire, and the church has the urgent task of forming disciples of Jesus Christ through worship. “The church’s worship is a uniquely intense site of the Spirit’s transformative presence.” Understanding that we worship what we love and love what we worship, and that worship is more than a cognitive exercise, the action of Christian worship is critical. Chapter 5 of Smith’s work is a wonderful explanation for why each component of Christian worship is important cognitively, materially, theologically, and as action embedded with formational meaning.

Necessary in this project is an assessment of the worship practices of FRC, to see how and whether they conform to Smith’s thesis. Theologian Marva J. Dawn is helpful in succinctly communicating the importance and urgency of worship as pedagogy:

“Christian worship is crucial. Scriptures and sermons name the powers and expose their perversions. Offerings overthrow money's power. Prayers mobilize believers into their ministry of God's reconciliation. Faith confessions remind disciples of Christ's victory and commit them to living it with resurrection power. Sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper confer signs and seals of participation in Christ's triumph and the assurance that principalities have no ultimate control over anyone.”

366 Smith, Desiring, 150.
We are daily confronted with cultural practices that are antithetical to the kingdom of God. Unless the church can get serious about confronting and resisting the powers, any attempts at Christian formation are going to get swallowed up whole.

Amidst its goodness, the world is overflowing with “misdirected cultural formations…the perversions and distortions of [existence] that characterize fallen humanity.” Christ-centered worship is the necessary action of restoration, that we would practice and aim our love at Jesus Christ, and attain to the shalom of God as his kingdom is realized.

Conclusion

Based on these readings, it is evident that there are forces in the world shaping us to be certain kinds of people. The proposed identity and source of these forces varies from author to author—secular or theological; human or divine; activated from the inside or from the outside. The point is that the forces are real and have an effect on the world. Whether malevolent spiritual forces or simply the pursuit of efficiency through systems, power is at work in shaping humanity, often in ways we don’t understand and cannot control. It would further seem that no one and nothing is exempt from this power. It is simply the way the world is. Socially, we are driven by forces beyond our control.

And yet, there are means of resistance: rejecting power over others and instead espousing a culture of power with; faithful presence oriented toward the sovereign

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368 Smith, *Desiring*, 189.
reign of Christ; the reshaping of the human heart in resisting ideology, being wise to its often subtle manifestations; and ultimately the simple, subversive action of Christian worship. The theological and sociological conclusions find consensus in the reality of idolatry and power at work in the world to shape humans in ways that ultimately lead to suffering, despite intentions otherwise. Particularly in sociological circles, without naming it specifically, each author points to the reality of sin within the created order, and the world’s typically unintentional tendencies towards it own demise.

Idolatry is a persistent and pervasive concern for creation, and affirms the fallen human tendency to “[worship] and [serve] created things rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25). Distorting reality, we embue created things with ultimacy, absolutizing them and making them lords over us. While this, in itself, is problematic, the insidious nature of idolatry is that when we elevate created things to the place of god, those things assume the place of god, overstepping their bounds in rebellion against the one true sovereign of heaven and earth. The force behind this animation is power; namely, the powers and principalities described by the authors of Scripture.

There is significant disagreement to who or what these powers are, but it is generally acknowledged by all that there are forces at work in the world, somehow animating our idols and working in ways that are antithetical to God’s intended purposes for creation. In summary, the conclusion of this literature review on idolatry and the powers is that, 1) the powers are created good by
God; 2) the powers are fallen, and work in ways to animate human idols; 3) Christ has triumphed over the powers; and 4) the church, by its existence and witness, is obligated to resist the powers and live fully into God’s intended purposes for the world; a future that points to human flourishing.

The following chapters will explore the presence of idolatry and the powers at First Reformed Church and in Sioux Center, and the means of resistance against them.
Chapter Three: Ministry Project Methodology

Introduction

My D.Min. project involves both a literature survey and a more practical component. The practical component involved my use of a method called “Appreciative Inquiry,” a method specified in the book *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses.*[^369] I used this method in the context of my own ministry at First Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa, a Reformed Church in America congregation. The ultimate goal of my D.Min. project is to explore the practices and skills needed to live against idolatry and toward faithfulness. As the previous chapters indicate, idolatry is pervasive in the broader Christian church and in the world. This chapter identifies my use of a praxis model to identify how idolatry is present and resisted in the context of parish ministry; namely the church I serve in Sioux Center, Iowa.[^370] In this chapter, I will describe the methodology of my research, explaining and justifying my use of surveys, cultural analysis, and interviews as a part of Appreciative Inquiry and the 4-D Cycle.[^371]

Description of Appreciative Inquiry

My D.Min. project has primarily focused on broadly identifying the potential idols in our midst and naming the powers that drive this idolatry with an eye on resistance against idols and the powers and faithfulness towards God. Identifying

[^369]: Sensing, *Qualitative.*
[^370]: Sensing, *Qualitative,* xix. Sensing identifies this model as “action-reflection-action” activity.
[^371]: Sensing, *Qualitative,* 170-173. See below for a full description of the 4-D model.
broad categories and potentialities have little bearing, however, on the life of the local congregation. It would be irresponsible at best, and damaging at worst to blast people in our congregation with accusations of, “You are idolaters!” While likely true, if limited to an academic exercise and blanket condemnation, this proclamation will fall on deaf ears and not present the congregation with a way forward. After all, the point of my D.Min. project is to explore the practices and skills needed to live against idolatry and toward faithfulness.

My choice of utilizing Appreciative Inquiry is based on a desire to avoid shaming accusations and fear, but rather to shepherd the congregation on a process of “organizational learning and change emphasizing building on an organization’s assets rather than focusing on problems.”372 First Reformed Church has a deep and rich history of faithfulness. FRC is also identified by a particular language and culture rooted in the Dutch-reformed tradition and rural heritage. FRC, like many churches, is a church founded on stories, and “[these stories] are essential to our faith and social well-being.”373 Instead of trying to fix the problem of idolatry at FRC, I have focused on “the best and most valuable narratives and qualities of [FRC],” drawing upon our past in order to move forward into God’s preferred future for his church.374

Therefore, the inquiries identified in this chapter begin with the premise that FRC has a good story, and all God created is good (Genesis 1:31a). Idolatry is a distortion of what is good, as humans elevate created things into ultimate

372 Sensing, Qualitative, 168.
373 Branson, Memories, 20.
374 Branson, Memories, 23.
sources of hope and happiness. By identifying first the goodness, doors will be
opened to consider distortions and thus the identification of idols in our midst.
This opens the door further still to consider Christ-centered worship as the
necessary action of restoration, that we would practice and aim our love at Jesus
Christ, and attain to the shalom of God as his kingdom is realized. Mark Lau
Branson summarizes this Biblical practice well (and with remarkable pertinence
to my subject!):

“[The Biblical authors] specify such problems, point to particular causes, and
name them for what they are—forces of darkness. They know that
congregations will become malformed, lifeless, or even deviant if these
narratives continue. But it does little good to list threats, specify sins, and
name demons unless we have adequate resources for countering them. In the
midst of such real dangers, these authors display great confidence: They
know that the churches just need to reconnect with the saving story that God
offers. They know that these congregations have already tasted such
salvation. Because God has provided them with narratives large as well as
local, they face a choice regarding their own receptivity.”

God has provided FRC with many stories, and through those stories has shaped
a unique culture in the church and community. While good, these stories also
reveal hidden idolatries, and it is those idolatries this section of the ministry
project seeks to identify. Our stories will help us to not only identify and resist
idolatry, but shape a shared future consistent with God’s will. Thus the ministry
project affirms the purpose of AI: “The work of pastors and other leaders is this:
bringing a people together around texts (their own stories, biblical stories, the

375 Branson, Memories, 44.
stories of the church’s context) so the congregation can become more available to the narrative of God’s reign.”\textsuperscript{376} Amen.

The 4-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry

The process of my ministry project takes the shape of the 4-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny.\textsuperscript{377} Through these cycles I identify the working idolatries of FRC and the practices that lead to faithfulness from an appreciative perspective.

The format of this section of the ministry project is an intervention comprised of many components in the discovery stage.\textsuperscript{378} In the discovery stage, I identified the potential idols of FRC through the use of a survey with age-based groups within the church, followed by analysis identifying themes for each age group. The questions of the survey were intended to be appreciative or benign, drawing upon the experiences of respondents in identifying those things that give life, meaning, and happiness (appreciative) and the general shape of our unique cultural context (benign). Cultural analysis of practices within the community supplements the survey in order to witness meaning-making events or environments in the church and community. The focus was in answering, “What gives life, hope, and happiness?”\textsuperscript{379}

\textsuperscript{376} Branson, Memories, 54.
\textsuperscript{377} Sensing, Qualitative, 168-179.
\textsuperscript{378} Sensing, Qualitative, 64. Intervention is the term used to describe the action taken to “address a particular problem that needs addressing,” in this case the problem of idolatry. The particular action taken to address this problem is laid out in the pages that follow.
\textsuperscript{379} Sensing, Qualitative, 171.
In order to produce thicker interpretation, I supplemented the survey with small group interviews. Survey respondents were invited to gather at a conference room in the church to further discuss and elaborate on those good features of life at FRC and in Sioux Center that may present distortions that lead to idolatry. This was explored through three questions, the first two of which are pertinent to the discovery stage: 1) What are the good things that shape life, hope, and happiness for us here at First Reformed Church and in Sioux Center? And 2) of all these good things mentioned...how might these good things turn into ultimate things? What has that looked like? How has it affected your life and the life of the church? Beyond asking the questions and additional clarifying questions, my intent was to let the interviewees talk and share their stories.

In the dream stage, I asked each of the small groups what FRC is doing or could do to better resist tendencies toward idolatry and develop practices of faithfulness. Based on the surveys and interviews, I wrote a sermon series envisioning how we might live and worship more intentionally in resistance to idolatry and the powers. The focus was on dreaming, “What would the Kingdom of God look like at FRC if...?” A weekly Sunday school class at FRC immediately following worship more deeply explored the content of the sermon, invited questions, and gave broader voice and ownership to considering how we might
resist idolatry and move toward greater faithfulness. The purpose of this dream stage was to “[help FRC] create images of their most desired future.”

The fifth and final chapter of this project is a product of the design stage, identifying the practices needed to resist idolatry and the powers and develop means of faithfulness. To supplement this material, I produced a series of worship orders used for worship during the sermon series, to better equip the church to practice faithfulness and resist idolatry and the powers. What are the means of developing practices of faithfulness in resistance to the idolatries? What does faithful practice look like at FRC and how do we live it out intentionally? This final chapter will focus primarily on worship and mission, self-giving directed toward loving God and loving our neighbor.

The destiny or “do” stage looks like the people of FRC being equipped and empowered to engage in deep change: embodying distinct values shaped by Word and Spirit and not by the competing forces of power and idolatry; instilling different values in our children, wisely shepherding them in the ways of Christ and not the ways of the world; and as a community creating a new future of discernment and Spirit-fueled power that compels us to willingly and lovingly exist for others. This might look like an increased interest in understanding and enacting worship that explicitly rejects the powers and focuses on the true source of our life and witness—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This might look like a shared and thoughtful critique of popular culture (Fox

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380 Branson, *Memories*, 37. “Our futures will be shaped by our imaginations. Rooted in our own narratives, the biblical and traditional narratives, and the ‘what ifs’ of our conversations, our sanctified imaginations give us courage and direction” (40).
News, for example, or, alternatively, MSNBC; film, television, magazines, shopping) and the way culture shapes us antithetically to the Kingdom. This might look like an increased awareness of those marginalized in our community, and thoughtful ways of reaching out in love and service to our neighbor.

Ministry Project Intervention Description

The discovery stage afforded me the opportunity to survey a small cross-section of FRC in order to determine where idolatry might be present in our church and community. The survey was comprised of the following twenty questions:

1) What is it I most deeply crave? (I.e. happiness, health, military protection, wealth, etc.) Why?

2) Do I feel that the amount of money and possessions I have right now is sufficient for my security, or do I feel I’d really be better off with more? Why?

3) If I had to live without __________ I would experience withdrawal, feelings of deep insecurity, and/or “end-of-the-world” vulnerability.

4) What is most important to me? Why?

5) Where and when do my concerns about possessions, power, or relationships kidnap my attention and eclipse my concern for:

--love of God?

--love of others?

--love of self?

6) Name three symbols of power in…
Do I view these symbols positively or negatively? Why?

7) Name three symbols of weakness in…

Do I view these symbols positively or negatively? Why?

8) Is my sense of power and control sufficient, or do I feel I need more? Where do I look first to provide me with the power and control I think I need?

9) The most powerful people in my community are (position or titles...NOT NAMES!):

Power in my community is measured by…

Power in my country is measured by…

10) What television shows do you watch?

11) Who provides the news you watch on television?

12) Which musical artists do you listen to most often?

13) What is your newspaper of choice?

14) Where do you shop for food? For clothes? For housewares?

15) What words describe a vision of the “good life”?

16) Who is the most influential person in your life and why?

17) What do you ordinarily do on a Saturday night?

18) How often do you attend Sunday morning worship services each month?
20) How many hours do you spend each week reading/studying the Bible?
These questions were asked in order to get a feel for the general ethos of the FRC community. Some questions were largely superfluous, but were helpful in describing more fully the culture of Sioux Center and FRC.

The survey was mailed along with a letter of invitation and explanation to fifty-five members of FRC. In order to get a wide representation of the church, the survey went out to ten persons from each of five age groups.381 Group 1: 13-18 years; Group 2: 19-30; Group 3: 31-45; Group 4: 46-70; Group 5: 71+. Age and active membership were the only criteria for participation. Completed surveys were submitted as follows:

- Group 1: 1 respondent;
- Group 2: 3 respondents;
- Group 3: 3 respondents;
- Group 4: 7 respondents;
- Group 5: 9 respondents.

This forty-two percent rate of return reflected approximately two percent of the congregation.

The surveys themselves were anonymous. Any survey submitted that contained a name was discarded. Each anonymous survey was numbered and categorized based on gender and age group (for organizing purposes only). After an initial survey of responses, I listed summary responses after each question,

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381 Because of an initially tepid response, an additional five persons were extended invitations, resulting in a total of fifty-five invitees.
color-coded based on age group. After listing responses, I was able to code the material based on common words or ideas. The following chapter will describe my findings from this survey.

As results emerged from the survey instrument, I completed brief, informal cultural analyses of three distinct environments, identifying practices within the community in order to witness meaning-making events or environments in the church and community. This was done to supplement and flesh out the findings of the survey. The cultural analyses pieces are included in the appendices of this dissertation.

Group interviews followed the surveys, and focused more deliberately on the appreciative nature of my inquiry. The group interviews comprised the third component of my data collection and discovery, providing a “thicker interpretation” of the available data. Furthermore, the interviews served as a segue into the dream stage. These interviews were comprised of three questions that bridged discovery and dreaming:

1) What are the good things that shape life, hope, and happiness for us here at First Reformed Church and in Sioux Center?
2) Of all these good things we’ve mentioned...how might these good things turn into ultimate things? What has that looked like? How has it affected your life and the life of the church?

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382 Sensing, *Qualitative*, 72. Sensing notes that multiple data-collection techniques “provides breadth and depth to your analysis and increases the trustworthiness of your research.” In consideration of the highly subjective and somewhat nebulous nature of inquiry, I deemed this triangulation to be vital.
3) What do we do here in church to help us resist this tendency to turn good things into ultimate things? What do we need to start doing? (Make three wishes for the church!)

Interview invitations were sent to all those who had been invited to participate in the survey. Because of a slight response from particularly the youngest group, the first two groups were consolidated into one group comprised of participants aged 13-30. A total of sixteen individuals participated in the four interview sessions. Each session lasted just over ninety minutes, with a brief introduction, thirty minutes devoted to each of the three questions, and a short time for additional questions from the interviewees. Each session took place in the conference room of the church. As part of my brief initial explanation of each session, I instructed participants that their responses would be recorded in written form without citation. In other words, their responses were anonymous.

Like the surveys, I transcribed responses into one document per group. My analysis and coding of these documents produced certain trends that solidified the values of our church and community, the distortions that manifest themselves within each, and how the church might resist the tendency of distortion that can lead to idolatry. The interviews, in particular, produced enthusiastic and positive responses. Furthermore, the questions and responses stoked imaginative discussion on how FRC could more fully and faithfully live into the reality of God’s kingdom on earth.
The dream stage concluded with my presentation of a sermon series based on the survey and interviews. The identification of potential idolatries gave me focus and a foundation from which to build. The interviews brought participants into a collaborative dreaming of what might be as a result to resistance against idolatry and toward faithfulness. The question undergirding the sermon series was, “What would the Kingdom of God look like at FRC if...?” Answering this question began with identifying the good things in our church and community— for example, family, work ethic, and wealth. Each are, of course, Biblical themes presented positively: God loves families (Genesis 1:27-28); the imago Dei is reflected in the dignity of work (Genesis 1:26-27); wealth ultimately comes from God’s hand (1 Chronicles 29:12).

The sermons I presented began with the premise that all God has created is good. Because of sin, however, these good things assert themselves as idols (powers and principalities-driven) or are made into idols (human-driven). The Gospel proclaims that Jesus has conquered the powers. Everything is subject to the Lordship of Christ. Our response is to consider the means by which we acknowledge, proclaim, and live into the Lordship of Christ to the effect that all idols, and every power and principality, is relegated to its proper place in the created order. We engage in the response through the action of worship and mission, which will be more fully elaborated upon in chapter five. The trajectory of each of the sermons, therefore, was as follows:

Goodness → Distortion → Christ → Response.
The response is our shared vision of the Kingdom of God at First Reformed Church and in Sioux Center. This five week topical sermon series (January 4-February 1) was presented as follows (Text/Thematic Title/“Sermon Title”):


January 11—Ephesians 5:3-10/ Mammon: The Idol of Wealth/ “What More Do You Want?”

January 18—1 Samuel 2:1-10/ Hybris: The Idol of Pride/ “The LORD is a God Who Knows”


Transcripts of the sermons are included in the appendices to this dissertation. A weekly Sunday school class at FRC immediately following worship more deeply explored the content of the sermon, invited questions, and gave broader voice and ownership to considering how we might resist idolatry and move toward greater faithfulness.

The sermon series and corresponding Sunday school sessions segued into the design stage as we sought to identify the practices needed to develop resistance to idolatry and the powers and means of faithfulness. The means by which we construct what should be in the life of the church focuses on worship and mission.
To compliment the sermon series, I produced a series of worship orders intended to equip the church to practice faithfulness and resist idolatry and the powers. The worship orders present the practices of worship as the means by which we name and resist the idols in our midst. Because idolatry and the powers is ultimately a result of misdirected love, resistance involves the redirection of our love: directed toward God in worship, and directed toward others in self-giving service. Addressing the latter, I also included in the dream stage a missional hermeneutic that identifies the action of resistance to idolatry and faithfulness to God through self-giving love of neighbor.

The destiny stage will be the ongoing work of FRC to embody practices of faithfulness in worship and life: embodying distinct values shaped by Word and Spirit and not by the competing forces of power and idolatry; instilling different values in our children, wisely shepherding them in the ways of Christ and not the ways of the world; and as a community creating a new future of discernment and Spirit-fueled power that compels us to willingly and lovingly exist for others.
Chapter Four: Ministry Project Findings and Results

Introduction

This chapter will present the results of my research as interpreted through the lens of my thesis, while also presenting a redemptive view of how we live with God in this world. My thesis is worth repeating: we are surrounded by idols in our communities and in the local church, and as Christians must find ways of developing patterns of resistance against the powers that entice us into idolatry. My ministry project intervention identified the idols in our church and community along with the powers enlivening these idols, and then turned its attention to dreaming what it might look like at FRC if we were to resist idolatry and cultivate patterns of faithfulness.

My ministry project intervention took the form of four tools of inquiry: an anonymous survey; independent cultural analysis; small group discussions (comprised of survey respondents); and large group discussions (with the congregation). The purpose of these interventions was the “systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of information” from the church community regarding a) the good things about our church and community, and b) how these good things are distorted and made into ultimate things: potential idolatries in
our midst. My use of these four tools of inquiry enabled a “thicker interpretation” of the available data.

Discovery Stage—Survey, Interviews, and Cultural Analysis

A. Survey

The format of my initial ministry project intervention was comprised of two primary components in the discovery stage. In the discovery stage, I identified the potential idols of FRC through the use of a survey with age-based groups within the church, followed by analysis identifying themes for each age group. The questions of the survey were intended to be either appreciative or benign, drawing upon the experiences of respondents in identifying those things that give life, meaning, and happiness (appreciative) and the general shape of our unique cultural context (benign). Independent cultural analyses of practices within the community supplement the survey and enabled me to personally observe meaning-making events or environments in the church and community. I was led by early results from the survey in choosing my environments/subjects of inquiry for the cultural analyses. The focus was in answering, “What gives life, hope, and happiness?”

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383 Sensing, Qualitative, 70.
384 Sensing, Qualitative, 72. Sensing notes that multiple data-collection techniques “provides breadth and depth to your analysis and increases the trustworthiness of your research.” In consideration of the highly subjective and somewhat nebulous nature of inquiry, I deemed this triangulation to be vital.
385 Sensing, Qualitative, 171.
The following represent the top three responses to each question as codified from the survey, occasional responses provided verbatim as specific examples from respondents, and brief summaries:

1. What is it I most deeply care about? (i.e. happiness, health, military protection, wealth, etc.) Why?
   
a. Health
   
   i. “Without it, not much else matters”;
   
   ii. “In order to remain active and independent”.

b. Happiness

   “Enjoy life and be someone people want to be with”.

c. Wealth

Additional responses included: Security, family, significance, freedom, and purpose. Generally, the responses were broad and focused on personal well-being.

2. Do I feel that the amount of money and possessions I have right now is sufficient for my security, or do I feel I’d really be better off with more? Why?

Quite remarkably, every response indicated contentment/satisfaction with the amount of money and possessions. Rationale included:

- “God has taught me a lot about contentment and trusting Him to provide—I don’t think I need more to be better off”;

386 See Appendix B for the full survey and responses.
• “Yes, I have been blessed and have more than I ever imagined”;
• “Sufficient, I feel we have enough for our retirement and still can be generous toward others”.

3. If I had to live without ____________ I would experience withdrawal, feelings of deep insecurity, and/or “end of the world” vulnerability.
   a. Faith
      “If I had to live my life without faith and the unknown of the future…”
   b. Family
   c. (Tie) Spouse/Technology

The responses provide a picture of the FRC culture; a culture marked by strong trust in God and deep connectedness with family.

4. What is most important to me? Why?
   a. Jesus
      i. “My relationship with Jesus, he is the giver and sustainer of my life…I believe life is meaningless without faith in Christ”;
      ii. “My relationship with Him…He is everything to me”.
   b. (Tie) Friends, Family, God
      i. “My friends are always there for me…”
      ii. “Love of family”
      iii. “Knowing that God is in control…”

5. Where and when do my concerns about possessions, power, or relationships kidnap my attention and eclipse my concern for:
a. Love of God?
   i. “Things”
   ii. Additional responses were very personal and no particular patterns emerged.

b. Love of others?
   i. Work/time/busyness
      1. “We get carried away with our work...”;
      2. “I don’t say no very well...”
   ii. Lack of generosity
      “I don’t extend [hospitality].”
   iii. Loyalty
      “When I am frustrated by disloyal self-seeking associations with others.”

c. Love of self?
   i. Busyness;
   ii. Self-focused;
   iii. (Tie) Comparison to others;
      Never.

Possessions and time seem to be the greatest impediments to love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self. There appears to be a significant amount of guilt in these areas: an understanding or expectation of the way things should be, but a tacit failure to live accordingly.
6. Name three symbols of power:

a. In Sioux Center:
   i. Success/Wealth/Money;
   ii. Job/Work;
   iii. House.

b. In the United States:
   i. Wealth/Money;
   ii. Power/Authority;
   iii. (Tie) Popularity (Hollywood/Media/Fame);
      Military;
      Possessions.

c. Do I view these symbols positively or negatively? Why?

   i. Negative (9)
      “The above symbols like to use their power over the weak”

   ii. Depends (8)
      “How I view these symbols depends on how they use the privilege of having power. If they use their power that causes oppression, bondage, and poverty by unfair treatment, I view them negatively. If their power is used for building up and improving, I view them positively.”

   iii. Positive (4)
      “They don’t seem like bad things”.
Material possessions and cultural capital (job/status) appear to be the primary symbols of power in both Sioux Center and the country. These symbols are largely viewed with some degree of skepticism, but respondents very thoughtfully distinguished between positive power and coercive power.387

7. **Name three symbols of weakness:**

   a. In Sioux Center:
      
      i. Less money/Fewer possessions;
      
      ii. No church;
      
      iii. (Tie) Immigrants/minorities;

      Poor work ethic/unemployment

   b. In the United States:
      
      i. Poverty;
      
      ii. Minorities/Immigrants/Social classes;
      
      iii. (Tie) Christianity;

      Unemployed;
      
      Lack of friends;
      
      Dependence on government.

   c. Do I view these symbols positively or negatively? Why?
      
      i. Negative (14)

      “Life is about relationships”.
      
      ii. Depends (5)

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387 See Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*. 
“For symbols in Sioux Center, they may or may not be considered positive or negative. It depends on how one handles them. For me not having a lot of money or possessions is not a part of my life, [but] others view [this] lack of wealth as a sign of weakness”.

iii. Neither (1)

“View people as people”.

iv. Positive (1)

“I view them as positively—often times people and groups viewed as weak have to be strong just to make it through their days…”.

Generally, the symbols of weakness is both Sioux Center and the country are the antitheses of previously noted symbols of power. Some understood weakness to refer to moral or spiritual weakness, and therefore viewed it very negatively. Others understood weakness to refer to marginalized people groups, and correspondingly viewed these symbols negatively from a compassionate perspective of, “It shouldn’t be this way.”

8. Is my sense of power and control sufficient, or do I feel I need more?

a. Yes (15)

b. No (4)

c. NA (3)

Where do I look first to provide me with the power and control I think I need?

d. God;
e. Self;
f. (Tie) Others;

Bible.

The respondents to the survey revealed themselves to be, generally, well-adjusted and self-aware followers of Christ. Their responses to these questions were surprising and encouraging. These are not social, political, or economic climbers. There is contentment with what God has provided. The respondents were from very similar socio-economic backgrounds, and this is surely reflected in the responses.

9. The most powerful people in my community are:
   a. Wealthy;
   b. (Tie) Business leaders;
      City officials.

10. Power in my community is measured by...
   a. Wealth;
   b. Popularity/Role/Status;
   c. Authority/Ability to influence and control.

   Power in my country is measured by...
   d. Wealth;
   e. Role/Title;
   f. Government.
The responses locate sources of power in wealth, prestige, title, or government. This is affirmation that power is something tangible and noticeable. It has a presence that is discernable.

11. **What television shows do you watch?**
   a. News;
   b. Sports;
   c. Game shows.

12. **Who provides the news you watch on television?**
   a. Local;
   b. Fox News;
   c. CNN.

13. **What musical artists do you listen to most often?**
   a. Christian (Gospel/contemporary);
   b. (Tie) Indifferent/None;
   c. Classical;
   d. Country.

14. **What is your newspaper of choice?**
   a. (Tie) *Sioux City Journal*;
   b. Local (*Northwest Iowa Review/Sioux Center News*);
   c. None.

15. **Where do you shop for food?**
   a. Hy-Vee
b. Fareway

**Where do you shop for clothes?**

c. (Tie) Sioux City;

Sioux Falls;

d. Online.

**Where do you shop for housewares?**

Wal-Mart

These questions, however superfluous they might appear, give a better glimpse into cultural landscape of Sioux Center, Iowa. People here are not worldly, but instead maintain an almost parochial commitment to their immediate community.

16. **What words describe for you a vision of the “good life”?**

a. Contentment;

b. (Tie) Health;

   Family;

   God’s will.

17. **Who is the most influential person in your life and why?**

a. Spouse

   i. “He’s smart and he loves Jesus”;

   ii. “My wife…most intimate relationship I have”.

b. (Tie) Parents

   “They sacrificed and served the family by loving us…”
God/Jesus

“He died to save me”.

18. What do you ordinarily do on a Saturday night?
   a. Eat;
   b. Watch television;
   c. Stay home.

19. How often do you attend Sunday morning worship services each month?
   a. Four or more (19)
   b. Three (2)
   c. Zero (1)

20. How many hours each week do you spend reading/studying the Bible?
   a. Less than one hour (4);
   b. (Tie) One hour (3);
      Five hours (3);
   c. Two respondents noted this qualifier: “Not enough.”

These last questions reveal that personal piety are important components of individuals’ lives at FRC.

B. Small group interviews, part 1

In order to produce thicker interpretation, I supplemented the survey with small group interviews, the first two questions of which sought to flesh out the good things of Sioux Center and FRC (the third question will be considered in
the next section (Dream Stage)). Survey respondents were invited to gather at a conference room in the church to further discuss and elaborate on those good features of life at FRC and in Sioux Center that may present distortions that lead to idolatry. This was explored through three questions, the first two of which are pertinent to the discovery stage: 1) What are the good things that shape life, hope, and happiness for us here at First Reformed Church and in Sioux Center? And 2) of all these good things mentioned...how might these good things turn into ultimate things? What has that looked like? How has it affected your life and the life of the church? Beyond asking the questions and additional clarifying questions, my intent was to let the interviewees talk and share their stories.

The interviewees were excited to talk about the good things of their church and community. Responses indicated many good features of life in Sioux Center and at FRC. In coding the responses, however, five distinct clusters emerged, indicating the following primary “good” features: community/community pride; work ethic; family/children; faith; and prosperity/affluence/generosity.

The interviews suggested that community was valued from the standpoint of concern and care for others. It was noted that a spirit of Christian concern, cooperation, geographical proximity, sharing, and love of neighbor drives shared commitment to “look out or each other.” Numerous examples were provided detailing what this looks like in the church and community: fundraisers for families buried under medical bills; farmers sharing time and equipment to help out a neighbor in need; meals and comfort provided upon the death of a loved
one; and support for sports teams and bands. This community care is best summarized in the statement, “People care…”

This community commitment also takes the form of community pride: “pride in how the school is run, how the buildings in town look, how the town is kept up.” There is a shared value in “being your best,” presenting an aesthetically pleasing physical environment, and prizing the Dutch heritage of the community. Interviewees noted a genuine pride in the accomplishments of the community.

Work ethic was noted as a feature of the community and church, as well. FRC, in particular, was noted to be a “church that can get things done,” while Sioux Center, in general, was noted as being a “community that gets things done.” Three of the four groups specifically identified “work ethic” in the church and/or community. This work ethic is connected to the general value system of the community and, according to respondents, results in affluence.

Every group interviewed noted a commitment to family and/or children. “An exceedingly large focus on kids” toward a “solid upbringing” drives the community. This commitment is reflected in the quality and appearance of schools, a shared commitment to education and moral development, and a general sensibility of care towards the next generation. Family systems are a

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388 Appendix C, Group 4 interview response, Tuesday, November 18, 2014.
389 Ibid.
390 Appendix D, Group 1 interview, Tuesday, October 21, 2014.
391 See Appendix G, Cultural Analysis #1.
392 Appendix E, Group 3 interview, Tuesday, November 4, 2014.
393 See Appendix I, Cultural Analysis #3.
394 Appendices C, D, and E.
valued institution in the community and church, and operate according to a unique dynamic.395

Faith is a critical component of life in Sioux Center, according to the interviews: “people try to do what is best for the church”; “people honor the Sabbath”; the community is marked by “active church participation”; “preaching the Word of God…has been strong”; “[We] live in a Christ-filled community.”396 Faith is important to the people of FRC.

Finally, the groups noted prosperity, affluence, and generosity as positive features of the church and community.397 “[This is] an affluent community…Sioux County is the most affluent [county] in Iowa and Sioux Center has a lot of old money.”398 “[There is] a certain economic prosperity in Sioux County that you don’t see elsewhere in the Midwest.”399 This affluence allows a unique generosity. Churches, non-profit organizations, and school functions are supported generously by individuals and the business community. This generosity is also evident in care for those in need in the community: upon the diagnosis of a congenital heart defect in a daughter of FRC (and subsequent medical bills faced by the family), “people [in the community] raised $35,000 for her.”400

C. Small group interviews, part 2

395 See Appendix H, Cultural Analysis #2.
396 These are sample quotations taken from each of the interview groups.
397 Appendix I.
398 Appendix E.
399 Appendix C.
400 Appendix C.
While there were additional responses to the initial question, these particular responses were most abundant and consistent. The second question posed to each group followed on the heels of the first, asking, “Of the good things we’ve mentioned...how might these good things turn into ultimate things? What has that looked like? How has that affected your life and the life of the church?”

Identifying the five primary themes that emerged from the initial inquiry, this second question sought to uncover potential distortions of these good things, to the point where these good things might become ultimate things that manifest themselves in unhealthy ways in the church and/or community.

Community care and pride, while certainly good things, have a shadow side when given primacy. Even in regard to care, it was noted that, “Because everyone feels so connected to others they have an easy time getting involved when it is not theirs.”401 Care is distorted into “control [...] manipulation,” and “turns quickly into gossip.”402 The shadow side of community care is an over-connectedness that to the recipients felt less like care and more like invasive and unhealthy nosiness.

This distortion is also evident in regard to community pride. While great effort is expended in creating an aesthetically pleasing environment (manicured lawns, well-designed buildings, etc.), idols emerge in a preoccupation with appearance and judgmental attitude towards other individuals and communities.

401 Appendix C. This same group even noted, somewhat surprisingly, that “the need for information can turn to an idol quickly…word gets out quickly!”
402 Appendix E.
that don’t meet implicit standards.403 “People take care of their lawns…some of it is an obsession. It becomes an idol in needing it to be perfect.”404 The good in the community stirs deeper idolatries that reveal judgmental attitudes towards others or a feeling of being judged. “Pride eventually turns into reputation…if you don’t have the reputation, then you judge others (if you are on one side) or covet (if you are on the other).”405

The same tendencies are operative when it comes to work ethic.406 Where work ethic is valued and prized, it soon takes over life: “identity is tied up in what they do…when my husband is done farming, he won’t know what to do or even who he is”; “[that] amazing Dutch work ethic gets carried away…the job rules.”407 The job or career soon takes over, creating imbalances in life and breeding various dysfunctions. “[There are] lots of workaholics in church.”408

A preoccupation with family and children leads to the creation of unhealthy family and community dynamics.409 “People move in and have no relatives in the community, and feel like outsiders…we don’t reach out to outsiders.” This idea of in-or-out fuels the emergence of cliques and divisions within the community and church. Within the family, certain expectations develop and are then enforced through coercion and shame. An illustrative example was provided: “Expectations can develop (i.e. going to the grandparent’s house every

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403 Appendix G.
404 Appendix D.
405 Appendix C.
406 Appendix I.
407 Appendix D.
408 Appendix E.
409 Appendix H.
week for dinner and it is expected [of you])...resentments set in. We need
space.” Another person in the same interview group noted, “a lot of times we
use it as an excuse to not get involved with outsiders.”

Unhealthy emphases placed on matters of faith lead to a host of dysfunctions,
from the compartmentalization of religion, to the abuse of church staff. “People
take [discipleship] too seriously...too much pride in the system.” Religious duty
and adherence to the way things have always been done take precedence over
the call of the church to obediently “listen to the Spirit and follow the Son.”

Finally, the prosperity, affluence, and generosity exhibited and valued by the
church and community finds its distortion realized in pride (“We are more
generous...”), competition, and cliques based on wealth. Generosity becomes
an impersonal way of physically serving, and trust in God is soon replaced by
“trust in our bank account.” It was noted that affluence “brings on
competition...greed, covetousness, [and] unhealthy pride.”

D. Cultural analyses

Triangulation was produced by my own observations through cultural
analyses of three different community events that had touch points with the
good things of the survey and interviews: a high school football game


410 Appendix E.
411 Appendix E.
412 The vision statement of FRC articulates a commitment to equip people to “Listen to the Spirit,
follow the Son, and exalt the Father.” See my February 1 sermon transcript and cultural analysis of FRC’s
Thanksgiving Eve service in the Appendices for more on traditionalism.
414 Appendix E.
415 Appendix C.
(community/community pride); a Sunday night family gathering (family); and a Thanksgiving Eve worship service (faith/wealth/work ethic).416

In the cultural analyses, I personally observed three meaning-making events in the church and/or community, identifying good things—features that give hope, happiness, and life to people and lend to the unique character of the church and community in positive ways. All three events were notable for being almost caricatures of Americana-esque goodness. Each represented a unique feature of life, and exhibited the kind of values prized in the church and community.

An early fall high school football game revealed a remarkable sense of community unity, pride, and support of young people. As many as one thousand fans packed the local football stadium for an early season tilt against a neighboring rival: the Sheldon High School Orabs.417 A beautiful Friday night was filled with the smell of popcorn, cut grass, and cigarette smoke. The redolence of early fall colors was matched by the ubiquitous colors of the Sioux Center Warriors football team: orange and blue. Families and friends gathered in the stands to cheer on their team while younger kids played their own game of touch football beside the bleachers, and middle school students prowled the track. Adults talked, swapped stories, reminisced about their own (likely embellished) athletic prowess, and encouraged their representatives on the playing field.

416 These essays can be found in Appendices G, H, and I.
417 An Orab is an orange-black (the school colors), and thus may very well qualify as the most ridiculous and non-sensical school mascot name ever conceived.
The only blatant evidence of potential idolatry came in the general gestalt of the environment at the stadium: it was almost palpably evident that the Sioux Center fans felt themselves superior to the people of Sheldon; Conversely, it was almost palpably evident that the Sheldon fans felt themselves inferior to the people of Sioux Center.\textsuperscript{418} It could be that even the attire of the Sioux Center fans could be viewed negatively, as a sign of superiority over their neighbors. The nature of football is, of course, power—asserting yourself (and your team) as superior to your opponent. The superiority is awarded with a higher place in the standings, and the measurement (marked by the final score) affirming that superiority. This leads to a certain degree of community pride, and more than a mere suggestion that “we are better” than our neighbors.

There is an adage in Northwest Iowa (and particularly Sioux County) that says, “If it ain’t Dutch, it ain’t much.” A community like Sioux Center, with its heavy concentration of Dutch people, finds that adage affirmed in its prowess on the football field. So, football Friday night shows its shadow side in affirming what is already believed in the community: we’re better than you.

What was revealed under the Friday night lights was a strong sense of community that subtly seemed to morph into pride. It was a distortion of all that is good about community, exaggerated to a belief that that very community-mindedness, unity, and civic/school pride translates into actual superiority. 

Upon leaving the stadium, I overheard a fan from Sheldon remark, “They think

\textsuperscript{418} \textit{Gestalt} refers to the “general quality or character of something,” in this case the sociological phenomena of community gathered around a high school football contest (Merriam-Webster.com).
they’re so much better than us.” This could certainly have been a throwaway line from a frustrated fan upon a woodshed beating on the gridiron. My sense, however, is that this is a part of a script affirmed over the course of many years: Sioux Center arrogantly believes that is actually is better.

Weeks earlier, our family accepted the invitation from another family at FRC to attend a gathering at their home on a Sunday evening. This was a gathering of likable, hospitable people to enjoy a beautiful fall night of conversation and food. The gathering also represented a tight-knit connectedness of family, as four of the five families there were biologically related, with the host family serving as a *de facto* member of the larger family.

The distortion revealed in this gathering was simply that of over-connectedness. There was the appearance that these family gatherings marked the very identity of this group: familiar, easy, scripted, and done nearly by rote. It seemed as though this was a closed group. We were graciously let in for an evening, but it was also clear that we were temporary guests. It was clear that the demarcation was *family* (with the host family having ingrained itself as an adopted family member over the course of years) and *not-family*. We felt like outsiders, and while I don’t know that this was intentional, I can’t say that it was *not* intentional.

Evidently, this routine gathering of families was but a snapshot of more frequent gatherings that happen on a weekly basis. I was told by one of the family members that this particular larger family (the descendants of the
patriarch and matriarch, octogenarians who are physically healthy members of
the congregation, and their numerous kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids)
meets every other week for Sunday dinner after worship at the patriarch’s farm.
By observation, I had also noticed that even before and after Sunday worship,
this family gathers in a large huddle in the fellowship hall. Other individuals and
families come and go in and out of this huddle, but the core remains intact, and
is consistently comprised of family members.

Back to the Sunday evening gathering: my role in this gathering was rather
complex, to be sure: I am pastor. But it gave me pause to consider how any new
family might feel at FRC in light of such high valuation of family. The feeling of
being on the outside was palpable in this gathering. Family had elevated itself to
the point that it was ultimate.

The third analysis I completed was that of FRC’s annual Thanksgiving Eve
worship service. Thanksgiving is no superficial exercise for the people of FRC.
People take this service very seriously, and looked forward to celebrating it with
great anticipation. For the last fifteen years, farming has been a tremendously
lucrative business for farmers in Sioux County, Iowa, a unique place in which a
single acre of land can sell for upwards of $25,000. Many farmers at FRC are
millionaires, at least in terms of the value of their land and implement assets.419
These same farmers also remember the farm crisis of the late 1970’s and early
1980’s, a period that swallowed up many family farms. Most of the farmers at

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419 Though because of the exceptionally high capital demands of 21st century farming, most of these
farmers are cash poor.
FRC remember these days vividly, and are quick to point out that the threat of it happening again is neither unrealistic nor far from their minds at any time. Furthermore, many of the farmers at FRC come from family farms, and know well the stories of their great-grandparents who originally farmed the land in a hardscrabble existence that was measured by survival, not profit.

The wealth generated by crop and cattle farming in recent years is certainly cause for thanks. FRC also tells the story, and in fact considers its central Thanksgiving story, the story of 1936. That year, amidst the agony of the depression and Dust Bowl, the Reverend Brunsting gave each school-aged child in the congregation a pencil and asked them to write down what they were thankful for. They submitted these papers to the Reverend Brunsting at the Thanksgiving Eve service, and received in return a shiny red apple. This was no small gift in light of the economic hardships of that year! It is said that the winter of 1936 produced more snow, cold, and blizzard conditions that any previous year remembered. The brutal winter gave way to a dry, scorching summer in which corn withered and died, locusts depleted acres of crops, bringing to mind Biblical devastation, cattle expired from thirst, and dust covered everything. And yet, the people of FRC gave thanks. Reverend Brunsting preached a sermon on Habakkuk: “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (3:17-18).
In November 2014, the people of FRC again gathered in genuine thanks for God’s provision, and noted in the worship service was a sincere spirit of dependence on God’s continued gracious action. There were only three possible distortions that became immediately identifiable in this worship service, each one related to a cherished value:

Faith—There was a prevailing sense that much of what we did that night, particularly in the way of the apple story, was a celebration of the past history of the church. The love and reverence for that story seemed nearly to trump anything we did in worship. Even in preparation for the service, as I attempted to get the history right, many older members of the congregation who were present at worship in 1936 took great pains in telling me how it really went down (each story with a slight divergence from all the others!). I had one octogenarian who later upbraided me for getting the story wrong: “It was pencils he gave out, not apples!”

Work ethic—It was impossible to ignore a certain pride in the worship service. People in Sioux Center do work hard, and an undercurrent of the general ethos of the evening was that, “We work hard, therefore God blesses us!” Work ethic is placed as an ultimate value in imperceptible ways (however also articulated by folks in the interview groups), and as such distorts the true nature and meaning of the gospel.

Wealth—FRC is a wealthy church. With just over 1,000 members, the church operates on an $822,000 budget while also designating another $650,000 for
missions, nearly $225,000 of which is received at the special offering of this special worship service. This is extraordinary. The families of FRC, generally, have done well financially and are remarkably generous to the church in their altruistic giving. Here, too, like work, pride is subtly evident. I have overheard the comment, “Can you believe how much we give?” and have even thought that myself!

Faith, work ethic, and wealth are all good things: gifts from God for our benefit. However, there are glimmerings of distortion in each of these that must be acknowledged.

E. Discovery results

The findings of the survey and interviews, combined with the cultural analyses, suggest that the good things of the church and community are indeed good things. Such things lend to the church and community a uniqueness that is prized, and lead to vibrancy and health. These same things, however, are distorted in ways that lead to brokenness (i.e. pride in those who have, covetousness and feelings of being judged in those who have not). Based on the survey results and small group interviews, I determined that the primary good things of Sioux Center and FRC are the very same things that become our idols: family, wealth, community, work ethic, and religion.

Dream Stage—Small Group Interviews, Sermon Series, and Large Group Sunday School
In the dream stage, I followed the initial small group interview questions with a third question “to creatively cast a positive vision for the future”—in this case, to resist idolatry and develop patterns of faithfulness. The sermons that emerged from the Discovery Stage looked to this positive vision of the kingdom, and focused on dreaming, “What would the Kingdom of God look like at FRC if...?” A weekly Sunday school class at FRC immediately following worship each Sunday during the sermon series explored the content of the sermon, invited questions, and gave broader voice and ownership to considering how we might resist idolatry and move toward greater faithfulness. The purpose of this dream stage was to “[help FRC] create images of their most desired future.”

A. Small group interviews, part 3

The third question of the interviews specifically asked, “What do we do here in church to help us resist this tendency to turn good things into ultimate things? What do we need to start doing? (Make three wishes for the church!)” This question afforded each of the groups an opportunity to consider what we are already doing to resist the distortions identified in the first two questions. It also provided a forum in which to dream what could be.

I grouped the responses into five categories based on the primary responses discerned in the discovery stage: family; wealth; community (pride); work ethic; and faith (church/religion). Responses in the groups were generally varied and,

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420 Sensing, *Qualitative*, 177.
421 Branson, *Memories*, 37. “Our futures will be shaped by our imaginations. Rooted in our own narratives, the biblical and traditional narratives, and the ‘what ifs’ of our conversations, our sanctified imaginations give us courage and direction” (40).
interestingly, during this portion of the interviews the conversation invariably slowed. It was evidently difficult to identify how we are currently resisting idolatry, and more difficult still to imaginatively consider new ways of resistance.

The tendency to idolize family, which was noted to be manifest in the cliques of FRC to the exclusion of “outsiders,” is resisted in the church by intentionally engaging people not included in their immediate sphere of family and/or friend. While acknowledged to be part of what many individuals do, it was also noted to be a dream for something we could do more intentionally and better. An interviewee noted, “I wish we could created more ways to intentionally mix families and get us out of our familiar groups.” Currently, FRC is endeavoring to implement LiFE Groups, focused on this intentional “mixing” and multiplication. This commitment to LiFE groups addresses the needs and dreams of the community, encouraging God’s people to “be open to new people coming in; [being] welcoming and hospitable…it’s the only way we are going to grow, and if we are a closed society, people will think it is not worth the effort.” The consensus of all groups was that while FRC is engaging in some ways of practicing faithfulness, we can do more to present people with opportunities to resist the idol of family and more fully engage our broader community.

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422 Appendix F.
423 The name LiFE is an acronym reflecting our commitment to making disciples who “listen to the Spirit, follow the Son, and exalt the Father.”
424 Appendix C.
The tendency to idolize wealth is resisted in the church through our basic worship, and specifically the time each week when we pass the offering plate. The offering is a reminder that “our help is in the name of the Lord,” and it all belongs to him (Psalm 124:8). The challenge and dream noted in one of the groups was simply that we “continue good giving at the church.” This topic received the least amount of treatment in the interviews, but will be covered more thoroughly below.

The tendency to idolize community, particularly in distorting care for one another and in making our community into a source of arrogant pride, is resisted in many of the same ways as noted above regarding family. The family, in fact, could be regarded as a sort of microcosm of the broader community, marked by exclusivism, protectiveness, and pride. The dream for the groups focused on openness and engagement with strangers. “We need people…to be outgoing and wish to interact with other people.” “To actively engage in caring for people and be intentional/deliberate about it (forced opportunities)” was noted as a dream for FRC. One of the things FRC is doing is participating in a monthly Community Unity meal at a neighboring church, while also hosting a weekly meal. These meals are marked by a commitment to “sharing, togetherness, and equality.”

425 Appendix F.
426 Appendix F.
427 Appendix E.
428 Appendix D.
The tendency to idolize work was given most heavy treatment in lament (see above), and far less in terms of necessary correctives. It was noted that we must strive to “[learn] our identity based on who God is and how he sees us…and not by extraneous things like [what we do for a living].” Service and participation in the life of the body was suggested as a goal in order to “get people out of their comfort zones” and challenge their priorities in life.

The tendency to idolize faith/church/religion was, again, noted in more nebulous terms that focused on general intentionality: for example, one interviewee noted, “the head and the heart must connect.” FRC was noted as a church that has historically kept solid catechesis and Biblical teaching as central. While clearly a good thing, the implicit suggestion was that the church had adhered to an anthropology of humans as “thinking machines,” as opposed to being “desiring creatures.” The dream for FRC was that the knowledge of faith make its way into people’s hearts and hands, that we might be the visible, tangible kingdom of God in Sioux Center and wherever God sends us.

With that noted, teaching on idolatry was commended: “not ignoring it; being informed about the threat.” By being made aware of the threat of idolatry, many in each of the groups acknowledged that diligence could then be practiced to recognize the threat and determine ways of resistance. So, while knowledge-only was cautioned, the need for knowledge that would eventually result in

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429 Appendix E.
430 Appendix E.
431 Appendix F.
433 Appendix C.
action was lauded. Many activities of the church were thus noted as critical components of knowledge-building: Awana, LiFE Groups, Sunday school, and Bible studies.

Two telling responses given by individuals regarding the threat of idolatry, and how we practice resistance: “Make sure your worship doesn’t become an idol…make sure you are worshiping the Lord, and not the worship.” 434 There is a general tendency in our area to focus on worship styles and/or theology in either/or paradigms: organ versus drums and bass; choir led hymnals versus praise team led choruses; reformed theology versus a general American evangelicalism. However general, a sentiment offered by one interviewee is helpful:

“The community is changing, and as more and more of our members are not Dutch family extensions, you start bringing in more Baptists, Lutherans…how do you envelop them into FRC? Focus on change, but keeping the main thing the main thing. The negotiables are negotiable [and] unity [possible] with disagreement and opposing viewpoints. The ultimate goal is eternal life.”435

The point of this person’s statement was that tradition, the way it’s always been done before, is probably not going to work anymore. Tradition can be valued—and, in fact, one interviewee suggested that we spend more time talking about FRC history—but it easily asserts itself as a idol. That must be resisted, and deliberate change is a way to resist.

B. Sermon series

434 Appendix C.
435 Appendix C.
The Discovery Stage produced five primary idols in the church: good things that were distorted into ultimate things. Based on this discovery, I wrote a sermon series identifying these idols, envisioning how we might live and worship more intentionally in resistance to them and towards greater faithfulness to God. The sermon series was engaged topically as follows:


January 11—Ephesians 5:3-10/*Mammon: The Idol of Wealth*/ “What More Do You Want?”

January 18—1 Samuel 2:1-10/*Hybris: The Idol of Pride*/ “The LORD is a God Who Knows”


Each of these sermons took on an Appreciative Inquiry format: identifying the good things of our church and community as the good things of God’s creation; noting the distortions of these good things which ultimately lead to idolatries; and then presenting a vision of the Kingdom of God. For this kingdom vision, I

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436 Originally scheduled for February 1, a winter snowstorm resulted in this sermon’s postponement to March 1.
deferred to the Scriptures and what the interview groups suggested in the third question of the interviews.\textsuperscript{437}

The trajectory of my initial sermon on the idol of family set the tone for every one of the sermons preached over the course of the series. My section headings were as follows: 1) \textit{The Good – God Loves Families}. This principle is rooted in the creational mandate of Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth…” and in the fifth commandment, “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12). My foundational statement was simply that “God made families and he loves families.”\textsuperscript{438} 2) \textit{Distortions – Making a Good Thing Into an Ultimate Thing}. My focus here was to consider how we make the good thing of family into an ultimate thing we believe will give us life, hope, and happiness. I noted examples of distortion: coercion and shame; sacrificing time, relationships, and even integrity for the sake of family; and marginalizing others who are not in our family. This opened the door for the Gospel, 3) \textit{Redemption – A New Vision of the Kingdom}. This vision is rooted in the radical new vision of the Kingdom of God, and is perhaps best articulated in the words of Christ as recorded by Matthew:

“While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ He replied to them, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:46-50).

This vision afforded me courage to preach my final point: \textit{Developing Practices of Faithfulness}:

\textsuperscript{437} Full transcripts of each sermon can be found in the Appendices.
\textsuperscript{438} Travis Else, “Who is My Family?” January 4, 2015, Appendix J.
“You might think that your family is limited to those blood relatives who you have lunch with every Sunday. Your family is much, much larger. This [congregation] is your spiritual family. We are called to be brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers to each other.”

The practices of faithfulness we are called to cultivate in light of this kingdom vision were identified:

• Gathering faithfully and regularly for worship together;
• Acknowledging your brothers and sisters in Christ as your true brothers and sisters;
• Opening your home to those not in your biological family;
• Being a part of a LiFE group and cultivating a genuine sense of family with your siblings in Christ;
• Lastly, praying for those in your biological family who do not yet know and follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, that they too may be part of this spiritual family.

The second sermon in the series focused on the idol of wealth. Once again, I began by noting the goodness of God’s creation, 1) *Wealth is a Good and Necessary Thing:*

“It is okay to enjoy and appreciate good things: your home, your car, your clothes, your toys, your IRA, your bank account. You don’t need to feel guilty. God has given you these things: to enjoy the utility, craftsmanship, or beauty of artifacts like clothes, cars, architecture, art, boats, or whatever; to appreciate the complexity of economics and finance. Again, all that God has made is good, and we can certainly say of money, banks, wealth, and possessions that these are good things that God gifts to us out of his loving

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439 Appendix J.
care. And all of these things not only allow us to live and enjoy life, but they provide structure and order in what would otherwise be a chaotic world.”

The distortion that leads to idolatry, 2) *Making a Good Thing Into an Ultimate Thing*, emerges out of the extraordinary power of wealth: “Jesus said…’You cannot serve God and Mammon’” (Matthew 6:24). Humans have a remarkable propensity for greed, and according to the Apostle Paul, “greed is idolatry” (Eph. 5:5), because “greed allows something other than God to order our lives.” The 3) *New Vision of the Kingdom of God* is embodied by Jesus who, “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

“Greed is sin, and greed is ultimately contrary to God because it is the opposite of who God is. Greed looks to self, and uses money to acquire identity, purpose, and happiness. God demands that identity, purpose, and happiness come only from him….That opens the way for us to enjoy the things of this world as good gifts from God, but in a way that doesn’t deify it. It also opens the way for us to give it away…to be generous and share with people in need.”

Christians respond to this gospel and engage in 4) *Developing Practices of Faithfulness* by being generous. “We are freed from the grip of idolatry, and so the money, wealth, and possessions God has blessed us with can be held lightly, both for our own enjoyment and for the benefit of others.”

The third sermon in the series focused on the idol of community, and particularly those distortions that lead to lack of care and pride.

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441 Appendix L.
442 Appendix L.
443 Appendix L.
444 Appendix L.
445 Travis Else, “The LORD is a God Who Knows,” January 18, 2015, Appendix N.
pointing to specific examples of community done well in Sioux Center and at FRC—love of neighbor, sharing, and the general beauty and order of our community—as articulated by interviewees in the small group interviews and my own observations. I noted that 1) God Loves Community, exists in community, and has ultimate designs for us to share in the eternal community of Father, Son, and Spirit. Jesus said, “I pray also for those who will believe in me…that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:20-21a). Again referring to quotes from the small group interviews, I noted how community can be 2) Distorted when care turns to gossip and unhealthy curiosity, when our Dutch heritage and affluence become the means by which we suggest, both explicitly and implicitly, that we are better or superior. Finally, distortion takes place when care for appearances leads to obsession, and the general ethos of the community and church are that we are the center of the universe. The 3) New Vision of the Kingdom is actually articulated by an Old Testament Hero, Hannah, who upon Eli’s pronouncement of blessing prays,

“My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn (my strength) is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed” (1 Samuel 2:1-3).

A child is a created thing. Putting our hope, happiness, or life in things is the way of idolatry and death. The vision of the kingdom is not that we would discard these things, but that we would humbly receive these things from the hand of God and therefore love Him more. The cure for a prideful heart is
humility—acknowledging the lordship of God and his great goodness in caring for us. The 4) Practices of Faithfulness we engage to resist idolatry are worship and service.

The fourth sermon in the series focused on the idol of work. The 1) Goodness of Work is revealed in the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:27-28, noting that God worked in creation, and as human beings created in God’s image, we are given the command to work, also. 2) Distortion occurs when we use work to shape our identity, when work captures our heart, when our work becomes the basis by which we judge others, or when we believe that we earn God’s favor based on our work. These distortions are confronted by the gospel, which presents us with a 3) New Vision of the Kingdom. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Christ shapes our identity; Christ captures our hearts; Christ leads us to love others; and Christ earns God’s favor for us. 4) Practices of Faithfulness and resistance to idolatry are formed through worship, prayer, and rest. As we continue to come to Christ, God redeems our work so that it becomes the means by which we love and serve others.

The fifth and final sermon in the series focused on the idol of religion. I began by defining the church and then noting the 1) Goodness of the Church, offering specific examples of how FRC lives into its calling well. Using Amos

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446 Travis Else, “Working for a Living.” January 25, 2015, Appendix P.
447 Travis Else, “Taking the Religion Out of Church,” March 1, 2015, Appendix R.
5:18-27 as my primary teaching text, I noted the 2) *Distortion of Making Church Into an Ultimate Thing*, pointing out three specific threats: narcissism, consumerism, and traditionalism. God presents us with a 3) *New Vision of the Kingdom* through love; specifically, the love he showed to us in offering his Son as propitiation for our sin. “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). In Christ’s action, we actually know what true love is. As he washed his disciples feet, and in anticipation of what he would do on the cross, Jesus gave his disciples a command and he gives us a command: “Love one another” (John 13:34). We develop 4) *Practices of Faithfulness* through love: worshiping, serving, and engaging in intentional, loving community where we seek to love God and love each other.

C. Sunday school debriefing

Each week of the sermon series, I invited the congregation to join me from 11:00-11:45 a.m. in the Chapel at FRC to engage in a broader discussion of the sermon: addressing questions, concerns, and salient issues related to the weekly topic. The primary focus of this gathering, however, was to dream: “What would it look like at FRC if we were to resist idolatry and cultivate practices of faithfulness?” Undergirded with the proclamation of the Gospel as articulated in the sermon, the group had a foundation by which to engage in an informed and open time of sharing.
The group was reticent to discuss the idol of family, I believe, because idolatry is not something they had thought of before—at least outside of Biblical references to golden calves. It took a bit of explanation to dial them into my thought processes around idolatry, particularly in how we idolize concepts and institutions (as opposed to objects). So, much of our discussion was a reiteration of my sermon, exploring the basis for idolatry and the powers that animate our idols. In the short time we had to dream together, our discussion focused on FRC becoming a place of true hospitality, where all people, particularly those not connected to a local family, felt welcome and embraced. The family meal our church hosts on Wednesday nights was upheld as a great means by which to love people and envelop them into our spiritual family.

Perhaps the most illuminating comment made during our second session together was this comment regarding the idol of Mammon:

“Sometimes around here it is not so much the evident idol (Mammon), but the idol on the opposite side. For instance, my mother knew about Mammon, and wanted to be sure not to fall under its spell. But her idol then became frugality. It works both ways...anything that takes our eyes off of God and onto things (either the thing or the thing opposite the thing).”448

This comment seemed to open the door for the group to more fully participate in the discussion, perhaps revealing that most of the people present were well aware of the dangers of greed and wealth, but had seldom considered how anything that captures our heart and imagination, even frugality, can become an idol. The suggestions offered following this epiphany were myriad: practicing contentment, simplicity, generosity, and good stewardship of God’s gracious

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provision. The group also acknowledged how tithing can become legalistic, and wisely sought to steer away from creating more sanctified idols at FRC in the way we teach and practice our faith.

Our third session focused on what it would look like at FRC if we were to resist the idol of community pride, and engage in practices of faithfulness. Again, the initial comment of our discussion set the tone for the rest of our time together: “If the kingdom is fully realized here it would look like heaven!” (I asked, “What do you mean by that?”) “It would look like love. Instead of pride, our church would embody selfless care for everyone. Acts 2:42-47 provided the paradigm for this vision: a community marked by the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. Everything was shared according to need. This is a marked contrast to the culture of scarcity that is engendered in systems founded on hierarchy and power. A long discussion ensued on what love truly is. Some in the group associated this emphasis on love with a secular-cultural free-for-all (“love could be whatever I define it to mean”). We then talked about how Jesus gives a face and focus to love. The Christ is love-made-flesh, as “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Love, therefore, looks like this. We need the Gospel to show us what love looks like, and then pattern our love on God’s love for us in Christ. This love then shapes the way we engage the broader community. We love people. We are open and welcoming. We are not driven by the protectionism that comes from pride, but the openness driven by true Christ-like love.

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Further comments lent weight to the vision: “It would look like worship and service. True worship leads to service as an expression of gratitude to God”; “Every program of the church would align with the Kingdom of God both inside and outside of the church. We would be flooded with people who desire to serve!”; “It would look like everyone believing in the Gospel, knowing they are forgiven. Knowing Jesus Christ.” The vision articulated was of a Gospel-saturated community of self-giving for the sake of the other.

Our fourth session focused on what it might look like at FRC if we were to resist the idol of work and live more fully in faithfulness to God. The tone of our discussion was set by a question posed by one of the participants: “All of these idols seem to be grounded in a lack of significance: ‘I’ll look for significance in my family, in wealth, in my community, or in work.’ How do we get people to feel significant?” Another participant’s response earned consensus in the larger group: “People need to hear the Gospel every week (day?), and know that their significance comes from God, and not from the world.”

This was our best discussion yet, and people seem to be dialed into how we make idols out of the good things in life (family, wealth, community, work). They were starting to more imaginatively articulate what it might look like here at FRC if we were to resist these idols and cultivate patterns of faithfulness. The focus was on general ideas of encouragement and welcome/hospitality to

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450 Appendix Q, Sermon debriefing, January 25, 2015.
451 Appendix Q.
combat the problem of idolizing status and work and revealing it in the church culture.

One hypothetical that we did discuss revolved around a potential opportunity to welcome a small Guatemalan house church into our facility for worship. Could we provide an open, welcoming space to these brothers and sisters who would otherwise (and have otherwise) been marginalized in our community? People in the group were excited about this prospect, though it was evident that some were skeptical (at least based on my reading of their facial expressions).

The fifth and final session provided the forum by which to discuss the idol of religion: how might we resist that idol, and what would it look like at FRC if we were to practice faithfulness? This was the best attended and most broadly engaged of the subjects covered to date. The group presented a remarkable humility in their willingness to acknowledge the ways in which perhaps FRC has bowed down to the god of church/religion. Their dreaming focused on creating a community where all people are welcome—particularly those who look different from us (i.e. those who don’t know the culture and/or routine of FRC; those who are of a different nationality/culture). Ideas were presented to make FRC a more welcoming community—a witness stand to share stories of the way God has been at work throughout the week; more open and spontaneous prayer; and movement away from preoccupation with comfort.\footnote{Appendix S, Sermon debriefing, March 1, 2015.} A significant portion of the discussion focused on our tendency as a church to do things “the way
they’ve always been done before.” Listening to the Spirit of God (which is a part of our vision) requires risky, prayer-saturated faith that recognizes God’s movement, our fear, and the identity and purpose of the church.

Summary

The discovery stage positively presented the features and values of life at FRC and in the broader community, while also identifying distortions of these good things that result in idolatry: family, wealth, community pride, work, and religion. This list of five, while not comprehensive, represents a primary sampling of current pressing idolatries at FRC. The feedback I received on the sermons preached affirmed that these are idols in the church and community; the congregation resonated deeply with the messages, and recognized their complicity in making these good things into ultimate things.

Recognition is one thing; what to do about it is another. By presenting a vision of the Kingdom of God and dreaming about patterns of resistance against idols and faithfulness toward God, the congregation began to think imaginatively about what it could look like at FRC if we were to live into this kingdom vision. In the next chapter, I explore how FRC might go about living into this vision.
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications

Introduction

So far, I have offered that the powers, however we understand their being, are ubiquitous. Various forces are at work in the world at all times, seeking to usurp God’s authority and establish themselves as gods. This reality, coupled with the proclivity of humans toward idolatry, results in humans bowing down in allegiance to any one of a number of good things that are made into ultimate things. In the discovery stage, I engaged in a process to identify the idols of FRC, finding and naming five primary idols—family, wealth, community pride, work, and religion. All of these things are created things, and by virtue of their createdness, must be acknowledged as good things. As a result of the fallenness of creation, however, these good things are distorted and made into ultimate things that people look to for life, hope, and happiness.

In the dream stage, I worked with the congregation to dream about what it might look like at FRC if we were to resist these particular idols and practice faithfulness towards God. The church was remarkably engaged throughout the series, as many comments were made in resonance with the findings. Through the series, I presented a Gospel-based vision of God’s action to rescue us from idolatry. This chapter explores the means by which we live into the dream, considering how FRC can be empowered to live into God’s vision for our church and community. What are the means of developing practices of faithfulness in resistance to the idolatries? What does faithful practice look like at FRC and how...
do we live it out intentionally? This final chapter lays out a vision of faithfulness that is rooted in worship and mission. The design of this vision is the construction of intentional worship at FRC, and a missional ethos that focuses on loving and serving others.

The destiny or “do” stage is the conclusion to this ministry project intervention and my D.Min. project as a whole. It presents a sustainable vision of action for the people of FRC to be equipped and empowered to engage in deep change, based on the dream to be all who God has called us to be as the body of Christ in Sioux Center and the world.

Reiteration of Thesis, Findings, and Design

The thesis of this project is that we are surrounded by idols in our communities and in the local church, and as Christians must find ways of developing patterns of resistance against the powers that entice us into idolatry. My ministry project intervention identified five idolatries in the life of First Reformed Church: family (marked by biological sectarianism), wealth (marked by a preoccupation with either accumulation or frugality), community pride (marked by arrogance and exclusivism), work ethic (marked by significance as determined through work), and religion (marked by traditionalism). The intervention also identified a vision of what could be: instead of idolizing family, a vision emerged of welcoming the outsider and practicing hospitality to the marginalized in our community; instead of idolizing wealth, the dream of practiced generosity emerged; instead of succumbing to the idolatry of
community pride, a faith community of sharing, togetherness, and equality was envisioned; instead of the idolization of work, the church dreamed of participation in a gospel-saturated community where a person’s identity is based on who we are in Christ, leading to a life of service; instead of the idolization of religion, the dream for FRC was that the very presence of Christ would make its way into people’s hearts and hands, that we might be the visible, tangible kingdom of God in Sioux Center and wherever God sends us.

As the purpose of my project is to identify the practices of faithfulness that will enable us to confront and resist the powers, this chapter will show how Christian worship and mission, fueled by Holy Spirit power, are vitally important means by which patterns of resistance are developed to resist idolatry and the powers, and faithfulness is formed.

Design Stage—Worship and Mission

According to Calvin, “man’s nature…is a perpetual factory of idols.”453 In the words of Gerald May, “Addiction…makes idolaters of us all.”454 We are all guilty and, to make matters worse, there are invisible forces that lead us to love and worship created things instead of the Living God: the powers. Ideas, concepts, and things assert themselves as gods, seeking to usurp the Sovereign Lord’s authority and lead us in ways antithetical to his ways. The result of idolatry is misdirected love: worshipping that which is not god (predicated on coercive power), and ultimately a failure to live for others (narcissism). It is surely one

453 Calvin, Institutes, 1.11.7.
454 May, Addiction, 3-4.
thing to recognize the latent idolatries in our midst, as we did at FRC. It is another to resist those idols, seeking to live into God’s preferred future and the fullness of his kingdom reign.

How do we resist idolatry and develop patterns of resistance? How does the church operate out of the Holy Spirit’s power instead of succumbing to demonic power that leads to idolatry? Christian worship and mission vital means by which we learn to resist idolatry and cultivate practices of faithfulness. This section explores both worship and mission as the church’s action in resistance and faithfulness.

Worship as Resistance

Christian worship is a means by which we learn to ascribe worth to the one true God: learning through practice how to aim our desire to the only one who is worthy of our worship and adoration; who is, in himself, the ultimate source of life, hope, and happiness. But here it is necessary to distinguish between a generic form of worship and a robust Trinitarian worship. By “generic form of worship,” I am referring to a broad category of worship that may be God-directed. However, in acknowledging the human tendency to distortion, I am referring specifically to the threat of worship that inverts the creation story: instead of worshiping the God who created us in his image, we worship the god created in our own image. This form of narcissism was identified in the distortion of religion and the church at FRC. By “Trinitarian worship,” I mean

\[455\] In the Discovery Stage, we identified the idols of family, wealth, community, work, and religion.
worship that is focused on Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as expressed by theologian James B. Torrance. My argument is that Trinitarian worship, as defined by Torrance, is an important practice of the church against idolatry and the powers, and its deliberate teaching in the church is foundational for our formation in Christ.

In his book *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, Torrance points out a functional reality in many churches today: “the dominance of the unitarian view of worship.”456 This view asserts that worship “is something which we, religious people, do.”457 Such a view is rooted in nineteenth-century theological liberalism, which insisted that Christianity is between “me and God”; Jesus was simply a prototype whose example we are to follow, the spirit one of brotherly love. Such an emphasis on “me and God,” which in evangelical circles today has heavy implications on morality, experience, and means and ends, is suggestive of Christian Smith’s diagnosis of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD).458 This theology holds that God wants me to be good (moralistic), happy (therapeutic), and to know that he will be around when I need him (Deism). This is an idolatrous view of God in that, a) this is not the God revealed to humans in Holy Scripture, and b) such a view ultimately makes humans the primary actors and focus of religion. Within this unitarian paradigm, tendencies toward individualism and sectarianism are given great freedom to reign. In essence,

such a view is indicative that we have succeeded in making ourselves into God; the focus is on me and what I do.

I see a great deal of this very practical, utilitarian sort of unitarianism in evangelical circles. While Jesus is certainly held forth as Messiah, his atoning work on the cross and subsequent resurrection are presented as simply the means by which we (individuals who may or may not be part of a church) achieve the ends (eternal life, cultural change). To take this train of thought to its logical conclusion demands that God is largely superfluous, as long as our kids don’t do drugs, our husbands don’t look at porn, and we all go to heaven when we die. Formation is taking place, but participants are being formed as consumers, commodifying God in order to achieve a particular end. The purpose of worship, in this unitarian model, is merely self-actualization or comfort. Therefore, so one might say, “I will go to church in order to be fed,” “because they have uplifting music,” or “because it’s fun.”459 At FRC, this tendency toward a form of worship that involves primarily “me and God,” has led to consumerism (making my needs an idol), narcissism (making me an idol), or traditionalism (making “the way we’ve always done it before” into an idol).460 There is a direct line between God and me, it is believed, and the purpose of Christianity is to ensure I get what I want, or attain some form of self-actualization, or to simply maintain a comfortable status quo at church. Such a view, directed on the self, seems to justify becoming sectarian — isolating one’s

459 These are true statements that have been made to me over the course of several years in ministry.
460 Appendix R.
self as lived out personally, or isolating the church as lived out collectively. In either case, it does little to recommend a life of self-giving service toward God and neighbor.

Contrast this to Torrance’s Trinitarian view, which suggests that God is central, and our fellowship with the Father is only afforded by the mediation of the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. Torrance’s view of Trinitarian worship suggests that all of worship, and all of life, is “the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father, a gift of grace.”461 Of note is the fact that this Trinitarian view is not concerned with function, morality, or means and ends, but rather with relationship—namely, our relationship with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit.462 Such a view presses hard against FRC’s tendencies towards individualism, selfishness, personal autonomy, and traditionalism—the unique ways in which we make our needs, our selves, or our traditions into little gods.

In stark contrast to a unitarian model of worship that makes the individual the primary player in faith—leading to consumerism, narcissism, and traditionalism—Torrance’s Trinitarian understanding of God affirms the mediating role of Jesus Christ, our priest, in presenting before God an offering that is acceptable to him. There is no room in this Trinitarian paradigm for boasting, as we recognize that our reconciliation and ongoing relationship with

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462 This recalls Goudzwaard argument regarding ideology and the need to push against any deliberate focus concerned only with the *ends* (Cf. chapter 2, pg. 105).
the Father is only fulfilled through the Son—not our faith, nor our finely honed prayer life, nor our pristine morality—and only the Son. Torrance writes:

“[The] human-Godward movement, in which we are given to participate (as in worship and communion), is given freely and unconditionally. Our response in faith and obedience is a response to the response already made for us by Christ to the Father’s holy love, a response we are summoned to make in union with Christ.”

As gift, the worshiper is encouraged to understand that we are always recipients of love and grace. So loved by God, mediated not with our intellect or strength of faith but only in and through Christ, we are freed to love in return—to love both God and neighbor with the same kind of selfless love that we are recipients of ourselves.

A central theme in Reformed thought is that faith and repentance are always understood to be a response to grace. The source of both is Christ, who joins us to himself by the Spirit. We find, then, that Christ has accomplished all on our behalf—condemnation (per our guilty verdict before God) and exaltation (per the righteous sacrifice of Jesus Christ, whom God vindicated through the resurrection). This is not our doing, but God’s doing, and we find like the Apostle Paul that God’s power “is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9)—first the weakness of Christ in submitting to God’s law in perfect obedience, but also our weakness as we humbly repent before that same guilty verdict which Christ bore on our behalf. Joined to Christ by faith, we share in his resurrection. To remove Christ or the Spirit is to truncate the Gospel, and the story of Christianity

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463 Torrance, Worship, 53-54.
464 See Dawn, Powers, in chapter 2.
becomes decidedly *bad* news, as it remains up to us to mediate a right relationship with the Father. If not for the sacrifice of Christ, prayers of Christ, and our joining to Christ by the Spirit, we would remain alienated from God.

The aim here is to contrast what seem to be typical ways of worship versus the Trinitarian way inspired by Torrance. Typical ways of worship have significant potential in fostering idolatries that focus on self—either personal or collective—leading to consumerism, narcissism, and traditionalism in the church. Exclusivism and pride were noted as tendencies by FRC, suggesting a distorted view of worship that has far more to do with tradition, worship styles, and musical preferences than it has to do with a rootedness in the sole priesthood of Jesus Christ. At FRC, worship may result in a deference to “the way it's always been done before” or an identity based on wealth and work (the way God ostensibly *blesses* people). As in so many churches, faith can be measured by what *I* know, what *I* pray, what *I* bring to the altar of God. Worship is too often a celebration of self, of tradition, of community blessedness, than it is a glorious celebration of the covenant mediated by the sole priesthood of Christ. Faith, in other words, is never about our offering, our obedience, or our prayers, but rather Christ’s offering, Christ’s obedience, and Christ’s prayers, of which we are made a part by the Spirit in worship. FRC has the self-awareness to acknowledge its tendencies toward consumerism, narcissism, and traditionalism, and desires to resist such tendencies. Such humility, rooted in God’s action in the Son by the Spirit, is a way forward in resisting idolatry.

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465 See Appendices R and S.
The Features of Worship

The specific action of the church in worshiping God contributes to the resistance of idols and toward faithfulness. Our assimilation into mainstream culture—marked as it is by competition, violence, consumerism, individualism, and dominance—is only countered by a gospel that calls us to communion, peace, redistribution of wealth, shared life, and mutual edification.

The idols of family, wealth, community pride, work ethic, and the religion of traditionalism seem always to bend toward exclusivity, security against, and power over others—particularly the marginalized. Theologian Paul Galbreath notes that, “The hunger for success and power by church leaders eroded the basic practices of caring for the unfortunate and neglected—practices that had been central to Christian identity throughout the early centuries of the church’s existence.”466 By practicing robust Trinitarian worship, our identities firmly rooted in God’s action toward us, we are positioned to live more fully into a vision of the kingdom, and against the power of idolatry.

Christian worship that leads us to resist idolatry and toward faithfulness must be subversive, contesting the competing claims of the powers and our own tendency to worship self:

“How ironic and tragic it is if worship practices foster self-idolatry instead of genuine praise of God! Only when worship brings us into the presence of the Jesus who called us to deny self can our character as his followers be truly nurtured.”467

466 Paul Galbreath, Leading Through the Water (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2011), 53.
467 Torrance, Worship, 111.
Theologian Marva Dawn writes, “If the Church’s worship is faithful, it will eventually be subversive of the culture surrounding it, for God’s truth transforms the lives of those nurtured by it.”468 It was noted in one of our debriefing sessions that the idolatry of church was shaped by our insistence on being comfortable.469 Worship, as a general practice, is no panacea.

What does subversive Christian worship that resists idolatry and leads to faithfulness look like? Dawn generally identifies the features of subversive worship that resists idolatry and cultivates faithfulness:

“Worship must center on God, glorify Christ, involve people, express praise, communicate the truth of the Bible, encourage faith, promise redemption, reflect the incarnation, build up the Church, instill vision, make an offering, nurture communion, and evoke an ‘Amen.’”470

More specifically, Christian worship that resists idolatry and cultivates faithfulness is identified in our practices that form us as God-lovers. Worship must take a particular form.471 The elements of worship actually work to shape us against idolatry and towards faithfulness. The elements of worship at FRC actually work to shape us against idolizing family, wealth, community pride, work ethic, and religion.472 The following section highlights the features of worship at FRC, and how these features shape us in resistance to idolatry, and towards faithfulness.

468 Marva J. Dawn, Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 57.
469 Appendix S.
470 Dawn, Reaching, 94.
471 Dawn, Reaching, 117. “If we want deep faith, we must be nurtured by deep experiences of its reality. That is why it is so essential to plan worship well, for we must be concerned with how every action in the process of the faith journey affects the development of our character.”
472 Detailed worship orders of my five-week series on idolatry at FRC can be found in Appendices J, L, N, P, and R.
Worship at FRC:

**Call to Worship & Welcome:** The call to worship is a summons to remember who God is—the Lord and Creator of heaven and earth—and who we are—a society of creatures who are being redeemed. We say, “Our help is in the name of the Lord” (Psalm 124:8). This call recognizes God’s power, our dependence, and our vocation: “The congregation gathers in response to a call to worship, which is the fundamental vocation of being human.” In establishing who’s who in worship, we hear God’s welcome—“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” God extends grace and welcome to his people.

**Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs:** The Apostle Paul instructs Christians to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (Ephesians 5:19). James Smith wonders, “Perhaps it is by hymns, songs, and choruses that the word of Christ ‘dwell in us richly’ and we are filled with the Holy Spirit.” The songs and hymnody of the church also teach us, situating God’s word in our hearts (insofar as the lyrics are, in fact, Biblical!). The true story of the world and us is revealed in the music we sing. “What we sing says something significant about who we are—and whose we are.” Gaining this sense of identity through song is critical in resisting against competing claims about who we are and whose we are.

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473 Smith, *Desiring*, 162. The call to worship encourages us to look upon ourselves and to gaze upon God, both of which Calvin suggests are required in order to gain knowledge of God (*Institutes* 1.1.1-2).

474 Smith, *Desiring*, 171.

475 Smith, *Desiring*.
The focus, placed squarely on the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all things establishes, rejects any claim that we are defined by our earthly family, our wealth, our community, our work, or even our church.

**Prayer of Confession:** Confession is an acknowledgment that we have not simply made mistakes or poor decisions, but have transgressed God’s law and offended him. Therefore, confession is a remarkable act of humility, owning up to God’s lordship over our lives. In our failure to follow his law, we ultimately acknowledge our failure to love God and love others. Confession is an action of self-awareness and humility that situates God in our individual and corporate lives. In this time of confession, we give voice to the reality that we have placed other things above God—family, wealth, community, work, and religion—and need him to reorient us to our true identity and purpose. We express our dependence on him to make us right, failing ourselves the ability, strength, or will do so on our own. While in this we claim our proclivity to idolatry, we are also making a claim that God, as creator of all things, can rescue us from our idolatries.

**Assurance of Forgiveness:** We receive assurance of pardon in the articulation of the good news: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). In the name of Jesus Christ, we *are* forgiven. Christ has overcome the powers and our tendency to make idols out of created things. In the prayer of confession and assurance of pardon, we are speaking our guilt, our need
for a savior, and the fulfilled promise of God to forgive us of our sin through Christ alone. Our identity as God’s adopted sons and daughters, freed from sin and death to love him and love each other, is the result of God’s gracious action in and through Christ by the power of the Spirit. It is the gift of God—we don’t earn it, can’t buy, and can find it nowhere else. In receiving this gift, we open ourselves to be sharers of the gift of love and grace to our neighbor.

**Sermon:** The preaching of a sermon speaks God’s word (scripture) and contextualizes it for the church. Marva Dawn dispels any notion of the sermon being for entertainment purposes or simple rhetoric:

> “In a society doing all it can to make people cozy, somehow we must convey the truth that God’s Word, rightly read and heard, will shake us up. It will kill us, for God cannot bear our sin and wants to put to death our self-centeredness…Everything that we do in worship should kill us, but especially the parts of the service in which we hear the Word.”

The sermon locates our faith in the action of God through Christ by the power of the Spirit. It is a story of redemption, as God affirms our identity as his special people called forth into the world to embody the kingdom through love—love of God and love of neighbor.

**Baptism:** Where the preaching of the Word tells us the gospel, baptism and the Lord’s Supper show us. Baptism is initiation into God’s family as it communicates to us, “This is who you are.” Our primary identity is not our biological family, as important as that is. Our primary identity is that

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of son or daughter of the Living God. Sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever, we go forth into life equipped with identity and mission that resists the comfort and security of our biological family and the ensuing tendencies towards exclusivism and biological sectarianism. In this way, baptism is key in our counter-formation against the powers of the world. As the powers seek to dominate and shape us according to a vision of the universe that is against its created purposes (i.e. family as ultimate), we are claiming an identity in a world crowned and governed by God alone. 477 Only in Christ, through his work on the cross, is the sovereignty of the powers broken. In this sense, baptism is our initiation and reference point for a new way of being as citizens of God’s kingdom. More generally, words of renunciation commit us to God’s ways, and not the ways of the world: “Do you renounce sin and the power of evil in your life and in the world?” 478 Renunciation of the way of the sin and evil (which may be represented by the powers, generally, and any idol, specifically) is an affirmation of the way of God, embodied in Jesus Christ. The follow-up question, then, is “Who is your Lord and Savior?” In pointing to Jesus Christ as the answer—the manifestation of God’s love for us—we are directed to grace, and the life-giving sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us. When baptism has lost its connection to a life of love and

477 This is the view most clearly articulated by John Howard Yoder, Politics, who demands the createdness, importance, and fallenness of the powers.
service, we have surely lost our way and begin to experience the
confusion of incongruent ways of believing and behaving.479 Any
suggestion that baptism (or the Lord’s Supper as ordinance, with its
emphasis on my obedient action) is something other than God’s working
is to be led by the powers in overstepping our createdness and entering
into consuming dependence upon the self. Humans make horrible gods.
This Christ-centered, Christ-mediated identity, conferred upon baptism, is
an antidote to the idolatry of work, for example, which we so often use as
the measure of our significance.480 Furthermore, it is an antidote to pre-
occupation with self and the narcissism it fosters. The waters of baptism
secure us in an identity granted by one who is stronger than us, whose
grace frees us to love and serve others.

The Lord’s Supper: The Lord’s Supper points us to Jesus Christ. Through
the bread and the juice, Jesus is represented physically to us—his body
broken for us, his blood shed for us; he is the host who welcomes us to eat
the food that nourishes us spiritually. He is source of our hope, stirring
our imaginations with a vision of the fullness of his kingdom and the feast
of love that is yet in our future. Of course, the meaning of the Lord’s
Supper is complicated.481 Do the elements represent the actual body and
blood of Christ (transubstantiation), the essence of Christ

479 The habitus of belief and action as shaped in worship is not given an opportunity to take root.
Incongruence leads to confusion and ultimately passivity/apathy. How do we teach the body? See James
K.A. Smith’s Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works.
480 See Appendices P and Q.
481 See Martha Moore Keish’s Do This in Remembrance of Me: A Ritual Approach to Reformed
Eucharistic Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
(consubstantiation), the participation in Christ (Calvin’s view), or is it simply a memorial? The purpose of this project is not to interpret the meaning of the Sacrament, but rather to point to the Sacrament as a means by which we resist the powers and cultivate faithfulness. We state each time we celebrate the Sacrament at FRC that the meal we celebrate at the communion table is a “feast of remembrance, communion, and hope.”

The meal points us to Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf, our communion with Christ who is our spiritual food, and our hope for the fullness of the kingdom. It is, as Torrance illustrates, the “wonderful exchange”:

“Christ took what was ours that he might give us what is his. He takes our broken sinful humanity and cleanses it by his self-sanctifying life of communion with the Father…[and] now he comes back to us in the power of the Spirit to give himself to us in an act where he gives us back our humanity, now renewed in him.”

This is surely self-actualization, but redefines what self-actualization even is: union with Christ. Such a union involves the very emptying of ourselves, which is a rather stark contrast to the way we are conditioned culturally (often in the church), and completely antithetical to the pursuit of dominance, power, and competition. The Sacrament, then, reorients us again to the self-giving love of God in Christ, who calls us to do the same as a new creation reborn in him.

**Prayers of the People:** Prayer finds its focus on our need and God’s provision. We give him thanks for all that we have even as we look to him.

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482 *Worship the Lord*, 11.
for all we need. We implore him to rescue us from forces too powerful for us. In prayer “we are training ourselves in a stance of reception and dependence, an epistemic humility.”\textsuperscript{484} Prayer suggests our dependence on God to cultivate in us a risky faith that does not resort to traditionalism, doing things “the way they’ve always been done before.”\textsuperscript{485} Rather, we come to God requesting the fullness of the kingdom to be embodied by the church in faithfully living for him. Prayer, in this sense, is a dangerous, subversive act that counters tendencies towards desiring what we want in exchange for seeking what God wants.

**Offering:** The offering is an act of worship expressing gratitude for all God has done, all God is doing, and all God promises. In our tithes and offering, we offer back to God a portion of what he has already given us in wealth. But these offerings are also an acknowledgement of greater gifts he gives—forgiveness, adoption, the Holy Spirit, and promise of resurrection. Again, this is not a payment in exchange for services rendered, but an act of response in gratitude. This act of worship also confronts our tendency to want to hoard. We acknowledge in the gift that all we have comes from our Father’s gracious hand. It all belongs to him. Through the command to give, God is rescuing us from idolizing money. Furthermore, it encourages us to be generous, again suggesting a way of

\textsuperscript{484} Smith, *Desiring*, 194.
\textsuperscript{485} Travis Else, “Taking the Religion Out of Church,” Appendix R.
being that focuses on self-giving service to others, and not pre-occupation with self.

**Benediction:** This good word that closes our worship is a reiteration of God’s promise to always be with us (Matthew 28:20). It is also a word of sending, conferring God’s grace and blessing on its hearers, along with an implicit message to carry out the gospel mandate to make disciples through the witness of our lives. In other words, there is a larger story at work beyond our own lives. It is the story of God’s redeeming action in the world that he is enlisting his people to participate in.

By engaging in these acts of worship on a regular basis, speaking intentionally into our proclivity toward idolatry and the specific idols erected in Sioux Center, FRC will become increasingly capable of resisting the pull of idolatry, and more faithfully live into its identity as God’s representatives and instruments for mission. Worship at FRC will equip the church to confront its tendency toward idolatry, recalling again and again the true nature of its identity and purpose as rooted in God’s covenant. The design of our worship at FRC is intentional in placing our focus on the one true God of heaven and earth: positioning us to name, confront, and resist not only the idols of family, wealth, community pride, work, and religion, but of any idol or power that would attempt to claim lordship over our lives.

**Faithfulness Cultivated Through Mission**
In the practice of intentional worship as outlined above, FRC will resist idolatry and cultivate faithfulness to the one true God. A movement toward this kind of worship, however, will be hijacked if the church as an institution operates through systems of worldly power: a culture of shame, domineering coercion (however aimed toward a legitimate end), or power over ideologies will emerge. Practices of resistance in worship will be eclipsed by systemic/institutionalized power that do not point to Jesus or operate on Holy Spirit power, leading to ideologies of coercion and the reassertion of various gods within the church community. The church must operate on Holy Spirit power if it is to truly resist the powers of ideology and domination. For instance, in its desire to establish systems and structures that lead to faithfulness, the church could defer to the Book of Church Order. This good and very useful part of our denomination’s constitution could, however, very well assert itself as a god, creating a rigid structure of rules. That is an example. The ministry project intervention already identified ways in which good things have led to the establishment of idolatrous structures and systems:

The idol of family—which leads to a culture of biological family sectarianism where protecting the family name may take precedence over loving neighbor.

The idol of wealth—which leads to the church potentially being guided by budget concerns instead of listening to the Spirit, following the Son, and exalting the Father.486

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486 This is the language of FRC’s vision: “The mission of FRC is to make disciples who listen to the Spirit, follow the Son, and exalt the Father.”
The idol of community pride—which leads to arrogance and apathy, leaving little room for humility and service towards the needs of others, particularly the marginalized.

The idol of work—which leads to the selection of elders and deacons based on their significance accorded by their work.

The idol of church—which leads to a deference to tradition, requiring no faith, no prayer, and no attentiveness to the ongoing work of God in the world.

God’s call to the church is to live missionally, operating according to its calling to love and serve others. To live missionally is the means by which a culture of faithfulness might be established in the church, as this is God’s will for the church:

“[A Pharisee]…tested Jesus with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:35-40).

By his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ defeated the powers and saves us from our idolatries. He frees us to truly love God and love each other.

“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13). The good news is to be lived out and practiced through the action of love and service!
This section provides a counter-measure to FRC’s tendency to become inwardly focused—resorting to an identity based on family, wealth, community pride, work, or religion—and provides a way forward in living faithfully to God’s intended purposes for his church for the sake of the world. The section begins by providing a theological framework in naming FRC’s identity, articulating the church’s calling as a missional people to fulfill God’s restorative purposes in the world. This is followed by identifying the characteristics of the church, generally, and FRC, specifically, as a contrast people who point to and embody the Kingdom of God in the world. The section closes with the trajectory of the church in living missionally, in self-giving service to others.

The church is intended to exist not for itself, but for the sake of the world as a light to the nations, called to live into its missional identity. The church lives out God’s mission to the world as a worshiping people. As a worshiping people called, gathered, and redeemed to be a light to the nations, our response to God in worship is a movement away from and against the idolatries of the nations and the powers of evil at work in the world—particularly those that direct us inward in self-centeredness. The purpose of the church is fulfilled insofar as the church lives into God’s mission. The end to which our Spirit-fueled actions point, and ultimately to which all of creation is destined, is the restoration of all creation and the full establishment of the Kingdom of God. Suffice to say, this is a huge vision for the church.
The question of mission and identity is of central importance to FRC: Who are we? Why are we here? What are we doing? There are many answers to these questions, and in the 20th and 21st centuries have vacillated widely between the three poles of “defensive against,” “relevance to,” or “purity from” the world.\textsuperscript{487} At FRC, tendencies range from cultural Christianity informed by generational membership in the church (a deference to the idol of family), to traditionalism, to various understandings of significance determined by forces outside of the church—i.e. wealth, community pride, work. Each of these various understandings of identity and purpose lead to distortions, establishing forms of idolatry and misdirecting God’s people from living into its missional identity.

In \textit{A Light to the Nations}, Canadian theologian Michael Goheen highlights his understanding of the central aim of the Bible: the mission of God. As opposed to existing for itself, being an isolated and pure community, championing some form of self-actualization, or purveying \textit{pie in the sky when you die by and by} salvation, the church in Goheen’s view exists \textit{in order to be missionally oriented to the world that God may be known and worshiped}. This is God’s mission; the church is called to participate in that mission in the world. Such an orientation to the world demands a self-understanding based on the role we “have been called to play in the biblical drama,” and counter-formation against the “idolatrous

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{487} Hunter, \textit{To Change the World}, 214-219. Hunter generalizes the Christian movement in the United States into three groups, representing theological/political conservatives, theological/political progressives and/or the emergent church, and neo-Anabaptists, respectively.}
[stories] of the dominant culture.”488 This self-understanding is informed and shaped by the Biblical narrative, which is the true story of the world and the true story of God’s work in the world to restore his creation. The implication is that the church does not exist for itself, but rather that mission is “the very essence and identity of the church.”489 Any accommodation to idols or the powers (alternative stories outside of the Biblical story that enliven actual forces inimical to God’s kingdom reign) threatens to derail the church in its identity and mission. Quite simply, the church is “called to bear witness to the kingdom of God in the midst of and for the sake of the world.”490 This is the identity of the church and the purpose of the church. This presses up against a tendency at FRC to suggest that the identity of the church is determined based on family, wealth, community, work, or tradition. The church is not formed by these things and does not exist to perpetuate these things.

An understanding of the church’s identity is rooted in the original calling of God’s special people, the people of Israel. Mission, then, instead of being a particular branch of ministry or simply one more thing that the church does in evangelism, is “what God is doing for the sake of the world: it is God’s long-term purpose to renew the creation.”491 This definition pulls together the entire Biblical witness: a world created by God; the rebellion of God’s creation; God’s mission to restore creation. This grand mission began as God’s response to the

489 Goheen, Light.
490 Goheen, Light, 8. Historically, specific types of idolatry have been formed out of enlightenment thinking, accommodationist tendencies, consumerism, etc.
491 Goheen, Light, 25.
Fall in the Garden of Eden, and the Biblical narrative describes God’s interaction with the world for the sake of the world in rescuing the world from its own rebellion.

The church is God’s instrument to accomplish this mission, beginning with God’s call to Abram (Gen. 12) and the formation of a people who were to serve as a counter-cultural society in the midst of an idolatrous world. This calling persists for FRC today — to be a counter-cultural society that exists in an idolatrous culture driven by family, wealth, community pride, work, and religion. The purpose of identifying a special people was not, then, for the sake of the people elected (Israel), but rather for the sake of a world alienated from its Creator and Lord, who live according to these forces. Writing of Genesis 12:1-3, Goheen notes, “Abraham is first of all a recipient of God’s blessing and then its mediator.” 492 Through worship and obedience to the Law, the people of Israel were to be always pointing to the Living God, embodying the created intentions for creation, resisting the idolatries of the nations, and previewing the Kingdom of God. By these means, the nations would come to know God and find their place in his Kingdom. “Fundamentally our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation.” 493 This legacy continues in the life of FRC as a people gathered to point to God, embodying his intentions for the

492 Goheen, Light, 31.
world, resisting the idolatries in our midst, and previewing the coming Kingdom.

Following this missional call, the people of Israel were to be an attractional “contrast people” in the midst of the nations. Goheen uses several terms to describe this contrast people: critical participants, prophetic-critical people, a contrast community, covenant people, holy people. The point being that by its values, moral code, and worship, the people of Israel would live out God’s original intent for creation in the world in such a way that the nations would see and be glad, finding its true identity and place in the story of the world. In the conversations held during Sunday school hour with members of FRC, we were able to articulate what this might look like in our own faith community: tangibly placing our hope not in the idols of our community—family, wealth, pride, work, and religion—but in the living God. FRC should look different than the rest of the community. The form such contrast might take at FRC, as articulated by the groups interviewed, was as an open community of hospitality, generosity, humility and welcome to strangers, Gospel-informed significance, and self-giving service to others.

In its worship, the people of Israel re-presented the story of the world, its gracious redemption from the slavery of idolatry by God’s powerful work, and re-affirmed its covenantal calling as a light to the nations. In worship, God’s people offered thanksgiving to God, remembered its own redemption,

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494 Goheen, 40.
495 Goheen, Light, 4,9,32,34,40,185.
acknowledged God’s special presence with his people, and affirmed the call to be holy among the nations as a representation of God’s holiness. By its worship, the people of Israel enacted the true story of the world and plan of redemption based on God’s covenant love, of which they had already been recipients. Important to note in this is the very purpose of redemption:

“The purpose of redemption is to create a worshiping people: God’s continuing presence with the people of Israel now calls them to the ongoing worship of their divine king. Worship is central to the identity of God’s people: ‘Mission is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t.’”

FRC’s role is the same. Ultimately, the destiny of all creation is to worship the Creator. The trajectory of the universe is moving toward the fulfillment of this destiny. FRC’s unique calling in the midst of the story is to serve as God’s holy priests, mediating the presence of God in the world and pointing the ultimate redemption of all creation.

The persistent threat to the people of Israel was that of idolatry and the false worship of the pagan nations according to a narrative placing humans or created things at the center of the story: the threat is the same for all people today, as already indicated specifically for the people of FRC. While the people of Israel were to challenge the idolatry of the nations, reframing the story of the world according to God’s restorative purposes, they instead were complicit in the same idolatry of the nations. The intervention of this project identifies the specific idols present at FRC and in our broader community. The people of Israel, like FRC,

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496 Goheen, Light, 46, quoting John Piper, Let the Nations Be Glad, 35-36.
failed to look backward to the original intent of creation; they did not confront, resist, and challenge idolatry; they did not, by their lives and worship, preview the coming Kingdom of God. Rather, they disobeyed God’s law, worshiped idols, and followed the narrative of the dominant (pagan) cultures of the world. In failing to live faithfully into their identity and calling, they became like other nations, failed to serve in their role as a light to the nations, and instead walked in the futile darkness of idolatry. The implications for Israel were significant—exile marked their faithlessness—but the implications for the nations was equally significant. While the implications for FRC may not be as profound, the greater concern is what our faithlessness might mean for the rest of our community, to whom we are offered by God as the signpost of his Kingdom.

Israel’s idolatry has resonance for FRC in terms of effect. Instead of being a blessing to the nations, the people of Israel “lost sight of its role and identity in God’s mission.” It became an insular, sectarian, vindictive community that, quite opposite from a missional leaning, distortedly envisioned the Kingdom of God as a purging of the impurities of the “unclean” nations. This is primarily why Jesus was so despised and rejected by the people of Israel: “[His] own mission is to restore an eschatological community that takes up that missional role and identity again,” remembering that the very purpose of God’s people is to be a blessing to the nations, an attractional “contrast community” to a world alienated by God for the sake of the world. FRC could be, and has been, regarded

497 Goheen, Light, 76.
498 Goheen, Light.
as an insular, sectarian community who distortedly marginalized those individuals or communities who are different.

Jesus himself embodies the Kingdom of God, and gives evidence of its presence in himself through healing, triumph over demonic power, and establishment of right structures of human society (knowledge, sex, family, wealth, weather, tradition, law, community, religion, etc.). Goheen presents Christ’s power in conflict and ultimate triumph over the “principalities and powers,” and not in generic notions of good over evil or shalom over chaos (though it is both of these, as well). In acknowledging the powers, Goheen highlights the reality of genuine distortions in the world. Loosely quoting Hendrick Berkhof (without citation), Goheen rightly states, “The ‘powers’ are those originally good parts of creation that have become absolutized—turned into idols—in human social life.”

Behind this is Satan and creation’s own tendencies toward idolatry: making gods or playing god. “As the Gospels tell the story, the cross ‘is the price paid for a victorious challenge to the powers of evil.’” In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus confronts and triumphs over the powers, to be sure. But even this has broader ramifications; namely, in reconstituting a “new Israel,” gathered and restored to its original mission to the nations.

FRC is the new Israel of Sioux Center along with its sister churches. It, too, has been victimized by and/or complicit in the formation of demonic power

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499 Goheen, Light, 79.
structures—family, wealth, community pride, work, and religion—that Christ has already defeated. The call to FRC is to again live into its genuine identity as conferred by Jesus Christ. The ongoing challenge of FRC is to be aware of our own tendency toward idolatry, those forces which seek to claim ultimacy in our lives and in the life of the church, and the distortions we oftentimes unconsciously make that result in the neglect of our missional calling.

With the advent of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, God’s kingdom is established, even as it awaits it fulfillment. Until the Kingdom comes, those who are in Christ are those who have been gathered, redeemed, and renewed to live into the calling as God’s special people, calling the nations to faith and repentance, and pointing towards the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. The story continues at FRC, a people now called to continue the mission of Jesus as a redeemed, sanctified, and Spirit-filled community. The church’s witness to the Kingdom of God is both centripetal and centrifugal. It is centripetal in that “the people of God are to ‘manifest God’s presence in [their] midst by [their] life together and [their] relationship to others.’”501 This means that, like Israel, FRC is to be an attractional community, by its life and worship drawing in outsiders and “living out God’s creational intentions as a sign of the future kingdom over against the idols of the nations.”502 FRC is called to the identification of family, but not based on biology; rather, based on covenant. FRC is called to generosity towards others, particularly those in need. FRC is called to be a welcoming community that seeks

502 Goheen, Light, 131-132.
to gather the outcast and marginalized. FRC is called to be a people who are confident in their worth and significance based on who God has made us. FRC is called to eschew self-directed, consumeristic religion and preoccupation with tradition for the purposes of welcoming the sojourner and inviting them to taste and see the goodness of the gospel.

The church is also called to a centrifugal orientation: expanding outward into those places where the Gospel is not known, and where the Kingdom of God will be lived out by God’s people in the midst of darkness, bearing light. “The missional church…looks beyond its geographical boundaries and asks how it might participate in taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.”503 The church must constantly look to the horizon in living out its call to be mediators of God’s presence to the nations. For FRC, this means paying particular attention to the people in our community who are excluded because they look different, or don’t speak English well, or don’t have the right family name, or don’t have the right job (or any job!).

Destiny Stage & Conclusion

So what does this mean for FRC moving forward? Through worship and mission, FRC will be equipped to resist idolatry and practice faithfulness: embodying distinct values shaped by Word and Spirit and not by the competing forces of power and idolatry; instilling different values in our children, wisely shepherding them in the ways of Christ and not the ways idolatry; and as a

503 Goheen, *Light*, 149.
community creating a new future of discernment and Spirit-fueled power that compels us to willingly and lovingly exist for others.

The focus on worship and mission will prevent the idol of family from taking root, as together we will strive to more fully engage our broader community, intentionally mixing families and multiplying our impact in the community. LiFE Groups will help us to do this, encouraging God’s people to worship the Lord in greater intimacy while being open to new people through invitation and hospitality; creating new families based on the Gospel, not biology. This focus will also afford freedom to offer ourselves in welcome and relationship with the growing Latino community in Sioux Center.

The focus on worship and mission will help the church to resist the idol of wealth, as we will intentionally engage in practices reminding us that God is the giver of all things. As our focus shifts to God’s generosity, our grip on money will decrease, opening the way to practice generosity in our community in love and service to others. This will be rehearsed in our worship weekly, but lived out more fully as we daily engage our community through acts of service and benevolence. The focus on worship and mission will prevent the idol of wealth of captivating us with its lure of significance and power as we are reoriented weekly to our true identity and purpose—both of which are conferred not by our bank account, but by God.

The focus on worship and mission will help the church to resist the idol of community pride, implicit as it is with the suggestion that there is a pecking
order and value based on appearance or geography, as we will be reminded again and again that we do not exist for ourselves, but rather for the sake of the world. In this, we will learn that our first identity is as a citizen of the Kingdom of God, which is based solely on his unmerited favor through Christ. Where idolatry is marked by exclusivism, protectiveness, and pride, we will increasingly become known for openness, generosity, and selflessness. The church is currently exploring how we can share space with a small group of Guatemala Christians who are meeting in a tiny unfinished basement in the community. We have room to spare, and FRC will be opening up to a whole new world of possibilities by welcoming in these brothers and sisters. In this simple act, we will be living into our missional calling to love and serve others.

The focus on worship and mission will help us to resist the idol of work, with its implicit demand that we are what we do. Through active participation in worship and service, we will be reminded of our true identity as a redeemed people, adopted as sons and daughters of the living God and freed to love and serve our neighbor. The focus on worship and mission will insist on the significance of each person based on who God says we are, and his great love extended to all people through the death and resurrection of his Son. Our work is also redeemed, becoming for us the means by which we engage the broader community with the love of Christ, participating in our community as a contrast people for whom work is the means by which we proclaim the Kingdom.
The focus on worship and mission will help us to resist the idol of religion, checking our natural tendencies to make worship about us. Freed from enslavement to the past and tradition, we will be unleashed outward as a people who listen to the Spirit, follow the Son, and exalt the Father. With Christ held forth as the subject and object of our worship and commander of our destiny, we will consistently be drawn to our purpose: to be the visible, tangible kingdom of God in Sioux Center and wherever God sends us. The focus on worship and mission will lead us to humbly, dependently, and riskily seek him and his greater intentions for the church and the world.

To be the visible, tangible kingdom of God in Sioux Center is FRC’s destiny and the aim of the church universal. I noted in the first chapter of the D.Min. project this goal:

“My desire is that men, women, and children would reject the false promises of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and find their true vocational calling as sons and daughters of the Father, joined to him through Jesus Christ the Son, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to live lives of wholeness, joy, love, worship, and service. Only when this happens will the true shalom of the kingdom of God be manifest. O, hasten the day!”

Jesus said, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Sent into the world as ambassadors of Christ to embody the kingdom of God, we must be wise, recognizing the threat of idolatry and the powers all around us. The good news of the gospel, and the very reason for joyful innocence, is that Jesus has defeated the powers and rescued us from idolatry. The church is free to love and serve! Rejecting the false promises of idols and the malevolent temptations of the
powers, FRC will live into God’s preferred future for our community and world.
As God’s people at FRC are shaped into this destiny—resisting idolatry and practicing faithfulness—the true kingdom of God will be manifest in Sioux Center.
# Appendices

## Appendix A

Summary of Biblical Texts
References to the Powers in the New Testament
(with limited reference to the Gospel texts)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word (NRSV (NIV))</th>
<th>Greek Term</th>
<th>Biblical Occurrences</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principalities (rulers)</td>
<td>archai</td>
<td>Matt. 9:34; 12:24; Mk. 3:22; Luke 11:15; 12:10; 20:20; Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10; 2:15; Titus 3:1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Powers (authorities)</td>
<td>exousiai</td>
<td>Luke 12:11; Rom. 13:1; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10; 2:15; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 3:22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Powers</td>
<td>dunameis</td>
<td>Acts 4:7; Rom. 8:38; Eph. 1:21; 1 Pet. 3:22; Rev. 13:2; 17:13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominions (powers)</td>
<td>kyriotetes</td>
<td>Eph. 1:21; Col. 1:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrones</td>
<td>thronoi</td>
<td>Col. 1:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angels/messengers</td>
<td>angeloi</td>
<td>Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 4:9; 6:3; 11:10; 2 Cor. 12:7; Gal. 1:8; Col. 2:18; 1 Pet. 3:22</td>
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<tr>
<td>World rulers (powers)</td>
<td>kosmokratores</td>
<td>Eph. 6:12; cf. Heb. 2:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual hosts (spiritual forces)</td>
<td>pneumatika</td>
<td>Eph. 6:12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rulers</td>
<td>archontes</td>
<td>1 Cor. 2:6,8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elemental spirits (basic principles)</td>
<td>stoicheia</td>
<td>Gal. 4:3,8; Col. 2:8,20; 2 Pet. 3:10; 3:12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Greek Word</td>
<td>Reference</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demons</td>
<td>daimonia</td>
<td>1 Cor. 10:20-21; 1 Tim. 4:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satan</td>
<td>satanas</td>
<td>Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 5:5; 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11; 11:14; 12:7; 1 Thess. 2:18; 2 Thess. 2:9; 1 Tim. 1:20; 5:15</td>
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<td>Devil</td>
<td>diabolos</td>
<td>Eph. 4:27; 6:11; 1 Tim. 3:6,7; 2 Tim. 2:26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evil one</td>
<td>poneros</td>
<td>Eph. 6:16; 2 Thess. 3:3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince (ruler)</td>
<td>archon</td>
<td>Matt. 9:34; 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Eph. 2:2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spirit</td>
<td>pneuma</td>
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<td>Belial</td>
<td>belial</td>
<td>2 Cor. 6:15</td>
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<td>The enemy</td>
<td>antikeimenos</td>
<td>1 Tim. 5:14</td>
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<tr>
<td>The serpent</td>
<td>ophis</td>
<td>2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 20:2</td>
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<tr>
<td>The tempter</td>
<td>peirazon</td>
<td>Matt. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The god of this world (the god of this age)</td>
<td>ho theos tou aionou toutou</td>
<td>2 Cor. 4:4</td>
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Appendix B

Date__________________
Gender (please circle) Male Female
Age__________________

Light Green – 13-30 year olds (3 males 1 female)
Blue – 31-45 year olds (3 females)
Purple – 46-70 years of age (3 males 4 females)
Red – Over 80 years (3 males 5 female one not marked)

Idolatry

1) What is it I most deeply crave? (I.e. happiness, health, military protection, wealth, etc.) Why?

*Freedom and a debt free country. Both of these important, what good is wealth if you are not free and you are not free if you have debt.
*Health without it not much else matters, 2.Happiness – enjoy life & be someone people want to be with, 3.Wellness – have my family have a bright future like parents have helped me start & working hard you can accomplish a lot
*Affirmation & Acceptance – I want to know I am doing what I am supposed to and am accepted for that. I would like to be able to say that this craving is satisfied by God alone, but know that there are times where I just want people to affirm me & accept me rather than trust God does.
*Significance, Security & a sense of purpose b/c I need them. I believe God given though
*Relationship with Jesus Christ – through Jesus we have everlasting joy & peace – his love & grace sustains our life here on earth striving for that daily relationship with Jesus is essential for me. 2. Family-share life with 3. Occupation-good job to provide for myself, do not have to be rich but able to live comfortably. 4. Health-speaking from experience it is hard difficult to keep a good attitude when suffering with health issue, when you are your only caretaker you do not recover quickly.
*Happiness & Health – health can be something we take for granted yet our health affects overall happiness
*Significance/impact I want to know my life is worth something and that I am making a difference
*Health – I want to see my family grow together
*I most deeply crave security found in happiness. I am filled with happiness when my family is content and conflicts are minimal.
*Health – I know how fragile our bodies actually are
*Family time – sense of togetherness & being with those most dear to me
*God’s peace – than I know where He wants me to be
*Health – as you grow older, you realize that without your health, you will not be able to accomplish the things you enjoy
*Love & relationships – make me feel worthy of other’s time & attention. I believe God craves those same things. Big difference is He deserves it
*Love – desire to be accepted & provide companionship
*I feel that if I am happy then I would be healthy
*Health – presently cancer is in remission & kids to be at peace with their Lord
*Contentment, to be content in whatever stage
*Happiness
*Health
*Health in order to remain active and independent
*National security – I think the government has done everything possible to weaken our military, destroy our borders and give more control to others more control over the US
*A godly testimony to others & living my life for God, & ever growing in Christ & listening to the Holy Spirit
*Health or uncluttered orderliness which produces peace & quietness

2) Do I feel that the amount of money and possessions I have right now is sufficient for my security, or do I feel I’d really be better off with more? Why?

*In the world today we always think we need more or something bigger & better, but I am at a position now where I feel very secure with what I have and thank God every day for is many blessings.
*Sufficient – God has taught me a lot about contentment & trusting Him to provide – I don’t think I need more to be better off.
*I don’t feel like more money is what I hunger for, but just more experiences, more learning, more accomplishments
*What I have now is sufficient for me more would be nice for extra security but feel thankful & blessed with what I have.
*For Security yes, I have home, job, clothes, food, vehicle however, it is always nice to have a little more for “wants”
*Can pay bills and I can afford what I need
*Sufficient – we have a comfortable lifestyle
*I am sufficiently secure
*Sufficient, I feel we have enough for our retirement and still can be generous toward others.
*It is sufficient because as I grow older, money & possessions lose importance. Riches in Heaven much more important
*It is sufficient, even more than sufficient, I am greatly blessed
*I believe that we have accumulated enough money to take care of ourselves until the end of our lives
*I have plenty only reason for more would be “in His service”
Yes, would like a little more. I do not trust the world right now.
*I feel I have all I need
*Money & possessions ok
*Yes, I have been blessed and have more than I ever imagined
*I am content with what I have
*I have enough the Lord will provide
*I am comfortable with what I have because I have learned to budget wisely
*I am financially secure I’m content with what I have
*No one knows what lies ahead! My security is faith in God & following His teachings. God is in control not me!
*Money & possessions are sufficient I do not need or want any more, I am satisfied as is

3) If I had to live without ____________ I would experience withdrawal, feelings of deep insecurity, and/or “end-of-the-world” vulnerability.

*Family & Friends
*If I had to live my life without faith and the unknown of the future after I die.
*Music – I don’t consider myself a musical person but this is probably my number #1 way of connecting with God – writing/processing. If I didn’t have those ways of connecting with God, I would feel very insecure & vulnerable.
*My abilities
*Family
*Spouse
*Job
*Jesus
*My Family
*Technology & electricity
*Family
*Children
*A sense of independence i.e. inability to drive & care for myself. I would experience withdrawal, feelings of deep insecurity and/or “end-of-the-world” vulnerability
*God in my life
*My partner
*My family
*A sound mind
*Family
*My wife
*Electricity
*My Bible
4) What is most important to me? Why?

*My friends they are always there for me, I know them and can relate to them. *I want to be successful without a lot of failure. Because in the farming world it would be very hard to lose everything and the lifestyle I live today. *Loving others and make them feel special – I need to be a good example and don’t want to be caught doing wrong. *I would like to say God & His glory because of His worth & my desperate joy met only by him *My relationship with Jesus, he is the giver and sustainer of my life I believe life is meaningless without faith in Christ. *Spouse & Friends, as long as I have people around me who can carry burdens, give encouragement even during tough times I can get thru them *My value to Jesus. It is the only thing that is steady it does not change in an ever-changing world *Faith – we trust in God *Peace – mainly because I see peace as an indicator of status of relationships between people. I don’t like conflict either. *That my family walks with Jesus – life is short and eternity is forever *Christian friends. Help guide me in my spiritual life & walk with Jesus *Relationships, because they are eternal *Family – desire that they know God & live lives that bring honor & glory to him * My relationship with Him, He is everything to me, humanly my relationships with others *Family – without them life would be hard *My Heavenly Father – he is my go to for all my needs *A sound mind to think, read & work *Family, Church, Friends, they are the satisfying factors in life and what matters most *First knowing Jesus/spend eternity with Him, Second love of family *My personal relationship with Jesus *My faith in Jesus Christ along with my health so that I can continue attending church and remaining active *Knowing that God is in control, nothing happens without the will of God *1. Personal faith & trust in Jesus as Savior & Lord for all my family members 2. That I share my journey of faith with them *My relationship with the Triune God – I need him to survive for this earthly life and eternity and I owe everything to His love, mercy & grace
5) Where and when do my concerns about possessions, power, or relationships kidnap my attention and eclipse my concern for:
--love of God?

*When I start valuing my things more than God and not letting God be in the driver seat of life
*I justify that I’m loving others & so it is ok not to take as much time to be with Jesus & know him
*Interconnected (all three categories) - Possessions – house needs fixing, projects - need for comfort – Power my ability to fit, to participate in hobbies, my mental capacity …. Seminary degree – Relationships my wife’s desires & needs
*More possessions, power or relationships, the more I acquire the more I need to manage and control them, therefore my energy is poured into these things instead of God.
*When I see others continue to go thru one struggle after another
*I become more concerned about the option of man than God’s opinion
*Too busy with life
*When I think God is not moving fast enough or when His plan is differing from mine. Those times I need reminder from Holy Spirit that I am loved and His plans are perfect
*When I fail to put Him first
*Wanting to accumulate possessions can limit one’s willingness to share what you have that could benefit others
*When I am in a competitive stance on a business deal
*Stress
*Never - have no desire to have more possessions then I have as to be powerful
*God has his time table for my life
*When I constantly feel the need for more, perhaps at tournament time in the basketball season with the local high school
*Never
*When I put all my trust in my possessions and forget that they are all God’s in the first place
*When I fail to give to God what belongs to Him
*When and if I make wrong choices which exalt things over God

--love of others?

*I feel us Dutch folks get carried away with our work sometimes and we don’t take enough time for our friends & family because we are striving to make a good life for ourselves by working more hours.
*I don’t say no very well & can maybe stretch myself too thin so I’m not loving others as well as I could
*I hate to admit it but I tend to compare my life’s situation with others around me. When I compare and feel they are well-off I don’t feel the love towards them, it is hard to be happy for others’ success when I don’t experience it.
*When I am in a hurry & others are standing in the way

*I don’t allow others to stay in my house or use my care
*Too busy with life or work
*On occasions when I try to force my opinions on others.
*In crisis
*Concerned about power, results in not treating everyone in a Christian way, those with less power, fall victim to the whims of those in power
*When I am frustrated by disloyal self-seeking associations with others
*Stress
*Never – have no desire to have more possessions then I have as to be powerful
*Wanting more for self will leave less for others
*Never
*When I see the mistakes of someone else and I fail to see my own
*When we neglect to provide for the poor
*When and if I make wrong choices which exalt individuals over God, family member, friend

--love of myself?

*I often get so busy with friends and working hard to have a good life and more of a social status that I feel that I am just being selfish and not even taking time to slow down and look at what God is doing in my life, because I often feel I am occupied with what I have planned to get done.
*Again, I don’t say no very well so I don’t love myself as well as I could as far as taking care of myself
*Love or respect of myself vanishes when I feel I don’t measure up to others. At times I am extra hard on myself for not meeting a set of “better” standards that are around me. I worry too much about what others think.
*When I compare what I don’t have to what others have.
*I allow my boundaries to be betrayed in order to please others
*Too busy with life or work
*For each of these – When my time schedule is so full that I don’t take time to spend with God – I can get lost from God others & myself I then lose sight of love.
*I can be hard on myself physically while working for the disadvantaged
*For all three – when I become overcommitted to job & other commitments that rob me of time for devotions & quiet time with God
*Try to impress others or feel pressure to
*It is all about me & we forget that everything that we have is ours to use, but all belongs to God
*When it becomes fully apparent to me that I am disloyal, self-seeking and insecure from a lack of attention
*Stress
*Never – have no desire to have more possessions then I have as to be powerful
*Selfishness
*Never
*When I have said something that I regret later on
*When I think only of myself
*Strangely the things of earth will grow dim in the light of His glory and grace
*I choose to be egotistic – exalt myself over God

The Powers

6) Name three symbols of power:
--in Sioux Center:

*Money, Athlete ability & Religion
*Job position, Farm Ground Family Name
*Church, schools, businesses
*House, car & job
*1. Wealth & Success 2. Right social circle 3. Displaying wealth (big homes, expensive cars)
*1. Last name 2. If they have the “perfect family” they have it all together 3. Occupation
*Big names, lavish vacations, successful children
*Moment
*City Council, houses (in regards to their size or elite design) * Pastors
*City Council, churches especially FRC and wealth
*Money, possessions, Name
*Money, possessions & status
*Large House, fancy cars & social circles
*Job title – large building – Wealth – expensive home & vehicle & toys – Influential – steeple – name on non-profit, Dordt, hospital, Center Mall, high school, All-seasons, Terrace View, The Ridge golf course
*Police, Church
*City Council
*Ownership of farm land, size of house, position of authority
*Wealth, social standing, authority
*City Government, Financial Institutions, Church
*1. Wealth 2. Too much emphasis placed on out-of-home activities 3. Facebook: Adults & children daily spend hour after hour checking up on all their "friends" when they could be doing more useful activities (so I am told)
*Police force, Fire Department, Health Care
*High paying jobs, Buy a new car every year, Live in a large home with all the latest furnishings
*Wealth, Political, Pride,
*Selfishness, Greed, the devil
*Sports, wealth, fame

--in the United States:

*Money, talent & popularity
*Freedom, house, job
*President, social organizations, military
*Extravagant lifestyle positions of authority, people’s opinions
*Government, Rich people
* Popular in media (TV etc.), big fancy homes
*Money
*Military, wealth & oil
*President, Supreme Court, Lobbyists
*Money, possessions, beauty
*Money, power, possessions
*Wealth, possessions & position in the Community
*Titles – public office, Wealth – possession, - Popularity – movie stars
*Military, Church
*Should be our President
*How does it benefit “me” or the person
*Wealth, authority, military
*Big government/News Media
*Wealth, race, congress
*Homeland Security, Armed Forces, National Security
*Money, pride, possessions
*Wealth, Fame, Name

Do I view these symbols positively or negatively? Why?

*Positively because they don’t seem like bad things
*I would look at it negatively if I valued these things more than God. But if I always have God as number 1 and I have all this stuff and always think of it as a blessing from God then it can be positive symbols. We live in a free country we just need to handle it in the way God wants us to.
*I view SC positively because I’m happy with where I live & I trust them that they are making decisions that benefit the greater good. I view the US negatively because I don’t trust them
*Both, are they good gifts (positive) from God or are they ultimate things (negative)
*Categorize most of these as negative they can take the place of God. Sometimes these symbols can provide security that we try to control on our own rather than having faith God will provide. Sometimes the symbol of money can be used for good or bad it is how you utilize once you have it.
*Negatively – the above symbols like to use their power over the weak
*Negatively – I know all these things bring only temporary happiness
*Either – depends on how money is used
*How I view these symbols depends on how they use the privilege of having power. If they use their power that causes oppression, bondage & poverty by unfair treatment I view them negatively. If their power is used for building up & improving I view them positively. How they use & perceive their power is dependent on the spiritual personality at their core.
*I view them in the light of my belief system – if their actions align themselves with the Christian ethic – it’s positive.
*Negatively – not God’s priorities
*Negatively, life is about relationships
*Negatively when we forget from whose hand that everything is provided. When we think that it is because of our own doing, the symbols become a stumbling block
*Actually – neutral it is more about your attitude toward them
*Positive
*City Council – positive – they are very diligent and concerned for the welfare of our community
*Negative - Question of “right or wrong” not considered
*Negative, wealth never satisfies, you always want more – Authority is often acquired by wealth – Military should be only for the protection of a nation, not for aggression
*Positively – they give me a sense of physical security
*Negatively – for some it is a status symbol giving no thought as to its affordability
*Negative – replaces fiving Glory to God

7) Name three symbols of weakness:
--in Sioux Center:

*Judgmental, prideful, narrow-minded
*Youth, elderly, minorities
*Lack of work ethic, Vulnerable, sharing struggles dependence, Nonconformity
*1. Not having a lot of money or possessions 2. Not having a certain status or being a part of the right social circle 3. Not having a family that consists of father, mother & children

*Powerful dominate weak – expectations on people – lack of acceptance

*Minority, lack of education, no church

*Money, possessions, social class

*Afraid to exhibit weakness or failure or vulnerability or not winning or being #1

*Immigrants – a lot of stuff in S.C. is based on wealth so I believe weakness and power follow a line

*Laziness, poor work ethic, unemployment

*Poverty, lack of education, lack of citizenship

*Having to take advantage of Government programs, not having reliable transportation & unwillingness to better one’s self

*Atlas, CFE, Family Crisis Center

*Isolatronism, eliteism

*Pride in our possessions, pride in church

*Wealth, Lack of law enforcement, complacency or lack of respect

*Lack of interest in church/prayer

*Accumulation of land & dollars (greed)

*Materialism, large home building, lack of church attendance

*Pride, lack of church attendance, Greed

*Failure to keep God first place, failure to hold church services

*Poverty, uneducated, deformed appearance or “different”

--in the United States:

*Poverty, intelligence, few friends

*Liberal not God fearing, accountability

*Youth, elderly, minorities

*Narrow-minded or conservative, dependence, moralistic

*Abandonment of traditional marriage values 2. Entertainment industry 3. Slow dissolution of our core Christian values that this country was founded on

*Using our power to influence other governments being the world’s police

*Poverty, homelessness, no following or fame

* Money, possessions, social class

*Poverty, Christianity, Honest & fair treatment

*Immigrants, mentally ill and Christians

*Lack of education, unable to pay bills, no job – unemployment

*Poverty, lack of education, addictions

*Abuse of the welfare system, inconsistent leadership – doing what the leader wants vs. the constituents’ desires and international focus vs. tending to those at home

*Unemployment, poverty, prison population
*Liberalism, moral decay
*US President today – negative – he is not a leader, he is making a horrible mess of our country
*Positions in gov’t & how it benefits me personally
*Lack of respect, Wealth, Large Government
*No strong leadership
*Forgetting about God
*Religious freedoms being taken away
*Lack of Christianity, greed, lack of consideration for others
*Poverty, uneducated, deformed appearance or “different”

Do I view these symbols positively or negatively? Why?

*Negatively, they don’t seem like things you would want
*I do look at these negatively because I know we who live Sioux Center and the US as a whole can do better. We just need to stop putting on the mask and take ownership of ourselves and look for things that we could help do for someone else.
*Negatively in the sense that I feel compassion for them & want them to have a voice
*I see laziness as negative but content spirit as a positive. Vulnerability, nonconformity & dependence a positive b/c they each get authenticity. Narrow-minded is negative b/c it doesn’t create welcoming space for others. Moralistic is a negative b/c it fringes on freedom.
*For symbols in Sioux Center, they may or may not be considered positive or negative. It depends on how one handles them. For me not having a lot of money or possessions is not a part of my life some others view lack of wealth a sign of weakness.
For symbols in US, I definitely view these as negative. There is a growing movement in Hollywood, media and some government to abandon this country’s moral & Christian foundation. Traditional marriage & basic moral values seem to be attacked more so then encouraged. This country was founded by Christians who were under religious persecution, it is ironic that very same foundation is being mocked & challenged.
*Negatively – they put burdens on me as a part of the “weak”
*Depends on the person or situation
*Neither – view people as people
*Once again it depends on how these symbols are used – if they us their weakness as a means to gain something – such as a “handout” I view it negativity. If they use vulnerability & honesty as a means to build another up or to empathize w/someone I view it positively. I do tend to fight or go to work for the underdog though.
* I view them positively - often times people & groups are viewed as weak have to be strong just to make it through their days and lives
* Negatively because laziness, unemployment, poor education can be improved if the individual desires to work for it
* Negatively, life is about relationships
* Depends on whether the individual is interested in trying to help themselves, give a hand up vs. a hand up
* In Sioux Center – positively that they are here – negatively that we need them
* U.S. – negativity
* Very negative
* Sioux Center? President – very negative
* We have lost our ability to live & know the 10 Commandments – practice life
* Negatively – Lack of respect begins at home & destroys many things. – Wealth allows people to think they are able to buy everything including friends, respect & security – Large Gov’t has the tendency to give people a false security and also too much control over local matters as well as the religious life of people
* Negative I think we are in an age where church attendance is not important
* Negative – President has too much power
* Negatively it shows where priorities are
* Negative – if we could change these things the world would be a better place to live
* Negative – Bible teachers vs. to Love our neighbor and Jesus is our example

8) Is my sense of power and control sufficient, or do I feel I need more? Where do I look first to provide me with the power and control I think I need?

*I’m content look first to friends and money
*I feel God has given me a sufficient amount of power, and I don’t feel I need more. In today’s world I feel power comes with having more money.
*I think it’s sufficient. I want God to have control of my life because He has proven to me that His ways are way better than mine. So I look to him
*My source of power & control is often not sufficient; need more/ I often look to my own abilities & capabilities for accomplishments
* It is hard to admit there are times that I want more control especially when things are not going well. It is easy for me to slip into the mindset I can control my circumstances and make things better on my own. I like the quick fix, I know better and go to prayer or the Bible when I need him to provide control & guidance that I lack.
* Yes – within myself worth found in being a child of God
*Sufficient – I try to find my worth & identity in Christ. - My “go to” is in the praise of man (people liking me & approving me). I recognize how fleeting
that is so I work hard to find my power/control in the fact that I know the one in control.
*I am not a power person. Look for leadership in others
*My sense of power & control is sufficient but it is important to remember (for me) that the power and control I hold w/anyone or in any situation is a gift. I go first & foremost to God the Father, God the Son & God the Holy Spirit. Perfect example of communion & unity co equal
*I usually look within – and how that turns out is in direct proportion to how closely I’m listening to the Holy Spirit. I usually feel my sense of power and control is sufficient.
*Sufficient – the Bible
*Sufficient – don’t desire power or control
*I feel that I have enough power & control over my own life. If I were to need more, then I would develop alliances with others in the community/work who are like-minded & lobby to create change
*It is sufficient – to the Holy Spirit for wisdom, power & guidance
*Ok
*I control only myself – that is sufficient
*Our life styles are changing rapidly – Ethics are not honored
*I should be satisfied with the control & power I have, everyone seems to want more control, respect for others etc. should be a factor of how much control I need. One should really look to God for his authority & control
*To God’s word
*Jesus Christ
*Sufficient – Provide me power – go to God in prayer
*Sufficient – I do not or need to be in control of others
*Prayer to God & daily think on God’s word, make sure the Word controls my walk as a witness
*It is sufficient – I do not want more – I ask God for strength when He puts me in the limelight

9) The most powerful people in my community are (position or titles…NOT NAMES!):

*Wealthy families
*They are the people who put others before themselves. I think they can have a bigger impact in a community than a very wealthy man that just writes checks.
*Pastors, teachers, business leaders, elders
*Business men, big farmers, Pastors
*People with money
*Some business owners – some with certain family names
*Bank presidents, business owners, city officials
*Mayor, Pastors, Leaders of companies
*Bankers
*Pastors, success, business people
*Wealthy, those with right “name” – heritage, status
*Those in leadership positions and who have the resources to bring about change
*City Council, S.C. land development, intuisional leaders – churches, hospital, schools etc.
*City Council
*Powerful people are those with money to give them their desires. Money does not give wisdom & compassion
*Perhaps in the City Gov’t, especially in people with wealth, we need more common people in the City Council etc. less of the wealthy. Sioux Center Land Development seems to have a lot of control, it supposedly is separate from the council but the influence is great. Some of the control or popularity in the schools is a very frustrating form of control, bullying is alive and well in Sioux Center
*City Council
*City Manager
*Mayor & City Council
*Bankers, CEO’s, Land Owners/Farmers
*Personal wealth speaks loudly, spiritual practice in business & church
*Mayor, College President, Hospital Superintendent, Pastors, Corporate Presidents or Presidents of Boards, Wealthy individuals

10) Power in my community is measured by…

*Wealth
*By what they have done in the community, from helping others to funding a new hospital with their generous gifts or by being a sponsor for a school event.
*Role/status
*Integrity, morality, & a combo of wealth & influence also work ethic
*Wealth & Possessions
*Which family you belong to
*Money, decisions
*Success
*Wealth a person holds
*Leaders have the most power – city council, bank, hospital & school officials, college leaders, ministers
*Money
*Wealth, status
*Ability to influence/control others
*Ability to influence outcome and have individual lives
*Money, sports
*Authority in our community that makes & affects all of us
*Size of your bank account or house
*Popularity & wealth & the ability of sports, sometimes family names carry weight, even in the church. I had a Chaplain in the service that said when you enter my chapel I don’t care who you are (even the general) you leave your rank outside the door
*Wealth
*Whoever makes the laws
*Wealth
*Personal
*Position, Wealth, Fame

Power in my country is measured by…

*Wealth
*What title or job they have and how much money they make.
*Role/status
*Fame, wealth, ability
*1. Wealth 2. Being in power (big government) 3. Fame/Recognition
*Wealth
*Media fame, money
*Wealth
*Wealth & Status
*Leaders have the most power – city council, bank, hospital & school officials, college leaders, ministers
*Money
*Status & wealth
*Those who are involved in the political system – House & Senate
*Ability to influence outcome and have individual lives
*Wealth
*Congress should be but not doing so well
*Money gives you gov’t position
*Wealth, look at the presidency or most government positions (senator – representative) it takes wealth to get those positions, they are no longer statesmen
*Who or what can control what people think
*Whoever makes the laws
*People in control - i.e. Presidents, Senators, etc.
*Personal advantage
*Selfish greed is very strong, pride must be dealt with
*Position, Wealth, Fame
Cultural Formation

11) What television shows do you watch?

*Castle, Big Bang Theory, Super Natural
*Duck Dynasty, Shark Tank, Undercover Boss
*None
*Fox News, Survivor, Longmire, Everybody Loves Raymond
*CSI series
*Survivor, Big Brother, Amazing Race (realty programs)
*News, ESPN
*CSI, Cold Case
*History Channel and Football
*NCIS, Andy Griffith, Some game shows & old time shows
*Seldom watch, news a few times a week, HGTV occasionally
*HGTV, Food Network, Jeopardy, Wheel of Fortune & NCIS
*Drama – serials, Oldies/westerns, news, sports
*Sports, Action Shows
*Lets Make a Deal, Jeopardy, Wheel of Fortune, Fox News
*News, some home funny videos, Public TV, some sports, a number of religious programs especially the local churches etc.
*News/sports
*Animal Planet HD
*News & game shows
*News Broadcasts, Wheel of Fortune, Dr. David Jerimiah, James Merrit, Charles Stanley, Hour of Power
*Wheel of Fortune, Price is Right, Animal Kingdom, Sports

12) Who provides the news you watch on television? (I.e. CNN, Fox, MSNBC, local, etc.)

*Local, multiple internet news sites
*Local & Fox
*None
*Internet – CNN & Fox News & local
*Fox News & Local
*Local
*Fox News, NBC
*KELO – Sioux Falls
*Local
*Fox
*Local, CNN, Fox
*Local
*MSN & Local newspaper
*All of the ones listed
*Local stations & Fox
*CNN or Fox
*Cox, local
*Fox
*None, I check the Internet to pick & choose what I want. No bad stuff or depressing
*Fox & NBC
*Local & Fox
*Local & Fox
*NBC, Local Channel 4, Fox

13) What musical artists do you listen to most often?

*Florida Georgia Line – Country
*Lots of them mostly Country
*Anyone on IHOP Prayer Room, Byran McCleary, Misty Edwards, Philip Wickman, Ben Rector
*Jon Foreman, Coldplay, One Republic, Mumford & Sons
*Christian music artists
*Country music artists (not picky)
*Worship artists
*No favorite
*Christian mainly, Mercy Me, Casting Crowns, Chris Tomlin & some oldies
*Any Christian artist on Spotify or what KNWC is playing
*Gaithers, Legacy 5, other gospel artists
*Christian
*None in particular
*Oldies – popular, jazz, classical & gospel
*Listen to KNWC & KSOU – really pay no attention to who is singing
*Enjoy classical, organ, band & voice
*Mostly religious – example National Christian Choir also old time like Lawrence Welk
*Gaithers
*Classical
*Tennessee Ernie Ford & Daniel O’Donnell
*Classical
*Lawrence Welk, National Christian Choir, Gaithers
*Christian
14) What is your newspaper of choice?

*Local & USA Today
*Sioux Center News, North West Review
*None
*N/A
*I don’t get a newspaper
*I don’t read newspapers
*None
*No favorite
*Local, Sioux City Journal & Sioux Center News
*Multiple sources online
*Sioux Center News
*Sioux City Journal, online 0 ABC news and Headline news
*Sioux City Journal
*Wall Street Journal
*Only get Sioux Center News
*Sioux City Journal
*Sioux City Journal
*Sioux City Journal
*Sioux Center News
*Sioux Center News, Northwest Iowa Review
*Sioux City Journal
*Don’t get a newspaper
*Sioux City Journal or Northwest Iowa Review

15) Where do you shop for food? For clothes? For housewares?

*Food - Fareway & Hy-Vee – Clothes - Center Sports, Kohls, Scheels
Housewares - N/A
*Food – Hy-Vee Clothes – Buckle, American Eagle, Younkers
*Hy-Vee, Clothes – consignment shops mostly for clothes, housewares just depends
*Fareway – Clothes - my wife – Housewares – Target Menards
*Food – Hy-Vee or Walmart Clothes – Sioux City or Sioux Falls Housewares – usually Walmart
*Food – Hy-Vee – Clothes – Cheap shops in Sioux Falls or via internet
*Hy-Vee & Walmart – Clothes online – Housewares – Athleta
*Fareway – Clothes – Kohls – Housewares - Walmart
*Fareway – Clothes – Eddie Bauer & Kohl’s – Housewares – Walmart, Bed, Bath & Beyond, Target
*Hy-Vee – Clothes – Kohls – Housewares – Walmart
*Fareway & Hy-Vee – Clothes – JC Penney Schwesers – Housewares – Walmart
*Locally for food – Clothes & Housewares in Sioux City or Sioux Falls
*Fareway & Walmart – Clothes – Sioux Falls & online – Housewares – Sioux Falls
*Fareway – various for clothes – various for housewares
*Hy-Vee, Fareway – Clothes – Sioux City & Sioux Falls – Housewares do not need these often
*Fareway or Hy-Vee – Clothes – Sioux City
*Fareway, Hy-Vee, some Walmart – Clothes – Sioux City or Sioux Falls – Housewares – some local stores some in the cities
*Most local
*Food – local grocers – Clothes – JC Penney online – Housewares – Amazon.com
*Sioux Center for food – Clothes – Sheldon, Rock Valley & LeMars – Housewares – Sioux Center
*Local stores if merchandise is available
*Fareway – Clothes – JC Penney – Housewares – How To Store or Walmart
*Hy-Vee – Clothes – Chico – Housewares – How to Store

16) What words describe for you a vision of the “good life”?

*Wealth, marriage & kids
*Faith, Family & Friends, Farm
*Knowing that I’m doing what God wants me to be doing
*Great, grandkids, faithfully loving & following Jesus
*Liberty, Freedom to Worship, Love of Family, Comfortable home, Peace with oneself
*Health, job security, contentment in life
*I feel like I’m living the good life
*Have a positive influence on people
*Good life is a life grounded in God! When tough things & joyous things happen God is the Rock, the shelter, the Anchor I cling to & go to
*Simple pleasures – camping, bike rides, family games
*Family & friends, church family
*Healthy, content, debt-free, loved
*Good health & being content with what you have vs. competing with others
*Comfortable, challenging, laid back but active
*Be healthy & happy
*Try to be content with what I have – sooner or later the kids must take care of our possessions
*Contentment, at peace with God and a family that feels the same
*Contentment
*My faith in God, good health & friends
*Contentment
*Obedience to the Word of God
*Freedom from fear, hunger, thirst, pain and Hope for Heaven

17) Who is the most influential person in your life? Why?

*Jerry Keift he has been my mentor in football
*Grandpa D.H. because he is always up-lifting and pushing me to do new things
Mark DY never had a person so supportive and intentional with helping me grow in my faith in my everyday life.
*Jesus because I love the way that He loves & works & I want to be like that for others
*Travis Else & my wife (most intimate relationship I have)
*My parents, their desire to live for & serve Jesus Christ is evident in their day to day life. It does not matter what comes their way they give God the glory. They have taught me respect for others and show others the love of Jesus Christ and at the end of the day the most important things in life is our relationship with Jesus Christ and family. They sacrificed and served the family by loving us. Even in sacrifice they provided in return. Little did I know when I was younger how much of their influence made an impact of what kind of an adult I want to be.
*Husband – share burdens, celebrate good things, share life
*My husband, he’s smart & loves Jesus
*God – Son died on the cross
*My spouse – he is the one I can share anything and all things with. He prays with me and for me – we share in each other’s lives
*My husband, he is a servant leader
*My Husband
*Jesus Christ – he died to save me
*My Father – he was diagnosed with Lupus when he was 31 years of age – Rather than feeling sorry for himself, he taught us to look around and you can always find someone who is less fortunate than you
*Jesus Christ and my wife, I trust them
*Maurice Te Paske – futurist
*I guess I would say Jesus Christ that is the way to life I really have no other person that I idolize – Howard Lubbach was a very good example to follow
*My dad was
*My mother, my father was very laid back
*My niece – she is always willing to listen & help
*Parents they gave me a faith in God
*A godly pastor and leader of faith
*At the age of 90 many have already died – Christian women mentors and Prayer Partners
18) What do you ordinarily do on Saturday night?

*Hang with friends, movies, buffalo wild wings & bonfires
*In the summer I am either golfing or at the lakes with friends
*I don’t have an “ordinary” sometimes I work, sometimes I’m with family, sometimes I’m with friends and sometimes I hang out with my boyfriend
*Play with my son, talk with my wife, hang out with family
*Go out to eat, movies, watch sports, being with family or staying in
*Go out for pizza as a couple & talk about life
*Stay home 50% of the time
*Family Activities or Events
*Sometimes take a movie in or eat out – sometimes stay home & relax
*Go out to eat, play cared or go to a movie
*Go out to eat
*Go out to dinner or have guests over
*Stay home and occasionally take my wife out on a date
*Eat out or visit and watch TV
*Read, watch sports
*Make certain my Sunday School lesson is in order – to share that God loves & cares for each one
*If the yard work etc. is finished, watch L. Welk, Hour of Power and some old B. Grahams at times
*Go out for dinner/or stay home and watch TBN
*Pickup 2–pc chicken box at Pizza Ranch, watch Hour of Power, read on my Kindle, watch Internet television on Roku
*Stay home
*Watch TV, Charles Stanley, Billy Graham, Hour of Power
*Go out to eat, watch TV (Billy Graham)
*Stay home – Prepare for Sunday – Early to Bed

19) How often do you attend Sunday morning worship services each month?

*6 times including the evenings
*Every Sunday
*90% (10% do not attend b/c of travel, sick etc.)
*Every Sunday morning
*Approx. 2 or 3 times
*4 times a month
*Every Sunday morning
*Every Sunday
*Weekly
*Every Sunday
*Every Sunday
*Attend 3 out of 4 Sundays for sure
*Almost always
*Every Sunday
*At least 4 times
*Every Sunday – we even try to hit church if we are on vacation or out of town. I’m a firm believer that church attendance should be mandatory
*Every Sunday
*Never for health reasons I watch Channel 77
*Every Sunday in the month
*Every week
*Every Sunday
*Every Sunday

20) How many hours do you spend each week reading/studying the Bible?

*Only church – we do read devotions @ breakfast & supper
*2 hours.
*I’ve spent more in the past, but in this season of my life maybe 10 minutes
*8 to 10 hours
*Devotions and or read the bible about ½-1 hour a day
*3 or 4
*5 in the Bible and another 7 listening to sermons
*1.5 hours
*Generally 7 hours a week
*2-3 hours
*4-5 hours
*5-6 hours
*Not as much as I should
*Around 3 hours – not including prayer time
*Daily devotions 10-15 minutes daily
*Church year, at least 15 hours, my enjoyment & responsibility to the children
*Not enough, perhaps an hour and a half. I do read quite a bit of Christian periodicals etc.
*Six
*1- 1 ½
*Approximately 6 hours
*Five to six hours
*Approximately 7 hours
Appendix C

Small Group Questions

Group 4 (18-30), 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, November 18, 2014

1. What are the good things that shape life, hope, and happiness for us here at First Reformed Church and in Sioux Center?

- Friends have your back; Grant Vietor’s struggles with cancer and the way people rallied around him.
- Congenital heart defect in daughter and people raised $35,000 for her.
- Certain economic prosperity in Sioux County that you don’t see elsewhere in the Midwest; 1.2 million pigs in Sioux County; ag industry is supported by infrastructure (water, land, space, workers); people get ag; smart people
- Hard work;
- Pride in how the school is run, how the buildings in town look, how the town is kept up;
- Family is held high;
- People honor the Sabbath day; general population tries not to work on Sunday; this has something to do with our prosperity;
- At FRC…people try to do what is best for the church, ie. Roger K trying to change things up with Sunday school to make learning more fun, trying to do what is best for kids;
• Exceedingly large focus on kids—Sunday school, Kidzone, Awana, Xmas program, Logos and SENT;

• Good job of accommodating to all generations and does of good job of saying “If you don’t like it here, go somewhere else”; making everyone feel important and like everyone has a place; contemporary and older; for all people;

• People care; if you have a problem with something you can go to them and help you out and do their best for you—genuine community; people looking out for each other.

• I like that there is a full team of leaders and no one person;

• Messages are very Biblical and are tied to the Scriptures; not just thematic (not preaching on what other people say or just want to say or other people’s books).

• Worship leaders are genuine; worship for most people here needs to be taught; people seem to be a little self-conscious;

• Taking the worship leader job in this church…you gotta be a glutton for punishment; genuine…best that we could hope for.

2. Of all these good things we’ve mentioned…how might these good things turn into ultimate things? What has that looked like? How has it affected your life and the life of the church?

   In community
• Pride—in how things look; pride eventually turns into reputation; if you don’t have the reputation, then you judge others (if you are on one side), or covet (if you on the other); leads to a keeping up with the Johnsons.

• Visitations—tougher to be connected to people in the long haul.

• Because everyone feels so connected to others they have an easy time getting involved when it is not theirs;

• Need for information can turn to an idol quickly…word gets out quickly;

• Medium to large sized businesses turn out information quickly???

• Affluence—brings on competition; brings on greed; covetousness; unhealthy pride.

• Whatever defines you determines who you are…and I am often defined by things of this world (hard work, affluence).

FRC

• Discipleship—people take too seriously; too much pride in the system; beat up Roger K in the process;

• Kids—hold them up too highly and forget about the old people, who are just as important;

• Leadership—traditionalism of deferring to the past;

• Generosity—can be distorted by being a cop out for helping; I gave my money and now I’m off the hook of serving
3. What do we do here in church to help us resist this tendency to turn good things into ultimate things? What do we need to start doing? (Make three wishes for the church!)

- Talk about it; can’t correct it without addressing it;
- Create more opportunities to get people out of their comfort zone (force it on ‘em!)…so that they will serve and participate in the life of the body;
- To actively engage in caring for people and be intentional/deliberate about it (forced opportunities).
- Team structure flattens hierarchy and avoids making pastors/leaders idols
- Learning identity based on who God is and how he sees you and not by these extraneous
- Being more mindful about what we are putting into our brains; asking, “What is this show saying about the world? About me?” Recognize it more.
Appendix D

Small Group Questions

Group 1 (31-45 age group), 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, October 21, 2014

1. What are the good things that shape life, hope, and happiness for us here at First Reformed Church and in Sioux Center?

• A lot of pride in what we do…we care how our place looks, about doing a good job at our place of work, and about other people. We take care of each other.

• Faith and upbringing mean a lot to people here.

• People outside of these areas work on Sundays…there is simply a different set of values in other places.

• People try to do the right thing, and are blessed.

• Dutch culture: sense of community; work ethic; community pride; right and wrong valued; how people are groomed is a part of the culture, and borne out of a desire to bless God, honor God (you wear dresses to church, comb your hair); respect for self, others, God;

• Sioux County is better than anybody else.

• There is pride in how we grew up and how we were raised. Part of the Dutch heritage is strong work ethic and that leads to success.
• Work ethic: white folks don’t work very hard (from outside the area), they think they are too good for it; we have six Hispanics, but they work harder than anyone.

• Everyone is focused on what needs to be done around here; people understand the bigger picture (“Be your best!”). People have a purpose around here, and there is friendly competition (keeps you accountable).

• Say somebody has a serious injury…there will be 20 combines in their field the next day.

• When people get sick, people will bring meals. When death, people will reach out to help.

• People are genuine; not fake.

• There is accountability around here. You get tired of everybody knowing your business, but it keeps you accountable.

• It’s a small town…people know you and you know people.

• Education, family, and safety are values here.

• You live in a Christ-filled community…and that is a big plus. You don’t have to worry about other people judging you on your faith. How we practice our faith is different, but we are all on the same road.

• Pizza Ranch.
2. Of all these good things we’ve mentioned…how might these good things turn into ultimate things? What has that look like? How has it affected your life and the life of the church?

- People taking care of their lawns…some of it is an obsession. It becomes an idol in needing it to be perfect.
- Businesses are terrific in Sioux County, including the farms. But, it gets to the point where the farm comes first. All decisions are made around the farm.
- When it is fall, everything is subservient to the farm. My husband will miss our grandkids thing at school (Grandparents Day) because he needs to get the crop out.
- When my mom passed away…I needed my husband, but he worked all week.
- People own their own business…their whole life revolves around making that career go.
- Amazing Dutch work ethic gets carried away. The job rules.
- My wife’s family gets together every other week for Sunday dinner. We got to see my family 1% of the time.
- Getting together…my husband says sometimes we should go to his folks, but we always go to my folks. Its what you do.
• Thinking of sports…my kids were all involved in sports in high school. It got to the point where we don’t miss a game. Daughter started playing at Dordt; son played at NWC. It got to the point where when the kids were done playing, and…ugh, now what do I do? Life revolved around the games, and then it stopped, and we didn’t know how to be normal again. It took so much time and consumed us.

• You live for sports around here. If it were to end…ugh!

• We both cried when sports were done. You love watching your kids and cheering them on. We put too much into it.

• Now, you have to go to every basketball camp if you want to play. They are wearing pads earlier and earlier each year.

• You push it (athletics) so hard…and parents use the excuse that, “It keeps them out of trouble.” You have to involve them in something, but…

• The expectations on these kids are going up exponentially.

• Identity is tied up in what they do…when my husband is done farming, he won’t know what to do or even who he is.

3. What do we do here in church to help us resist this tendency to turn good things into ultimate things? What do we need to start doing? (Make three wishes for the church!)

• Tell us what we should do; tell us what we shouldn’t do.
• The Community Unity means and Wednesday night meals turn community into something good—sharing, togetherness, and equality.

• We used to have church potlucks on Sundays. That was a great thing for the church to help people get to know each other.

• Our church can be really clique…there are people involved in everything, but I’m more on the outside.

• I won’t probably volunteer, but if somebody asks me I will. Those who do it all tend to stick together, and because I’m not physically involved in the church, judge me for not being a good Christian.

• The largeness of our church makes it easy for the cliques to do what they want to do.
Appendix E

Small Group Questions

Group 3 (46-70), 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, November 4, 2014

1. What are the good things that shape life, hope, and happiness for us here at First Reformed Church and in Sioux Center?

• Sense of caring of congregation—death in the family or operation or children need taken care of—people step up and show the love of Jesus that way;

• Preaching of the word of God over the many years has always been very strong;

• We need our toes stepped on and need to get out of our comfort zone every once in awhile; it holds us accountable and helps us to live consistently with God’s intentions for us;

• Fellowship here at church;

• Great caring in the community—if farmers need crops out and there is a problem, there are people to help;

• The music in our church (and choir) makes us happy; pro’s and con’s to praise and traditional; not about preferences;

• Educational program here at FRC; “My son learned more here in one year than he had in several years before”;
• Community as family structure—more people at the game last night in Clear Lake than anyone would have thought; friendship that is deeper than a lot of places;

• Strong sense of community;

• Community pride…it is a nice, neat, clean town; people have pride in trying to keep things looking nice;

• Sioux Center folks are willing to give of themselves; contributing money to various groups like Katelyn’s Fund or Bethany Christian Services or the school; people are willing to open up their pocketbooks and support; generous;

• Family systems—solid upbringing, stability, generational, supportive, developing moral character, values systems;

• Work ethic—falls into community pride thing; FRC known as a church that can get things done (Sioux Center known as a community that can get things done);

• Maury Te Paske’s “Progress Through Cooperation” was a mainstay of Sioux Center;

• Without support group I would have been sunk (family).

• Affluent community; Sioux County is most affluent community in Iowa and Sioux Center has a lot of old money;
2. Of all these good things we’ve mentioned...how might these good things turn into ultimate things? What has that looked like? How has it affected your life and the life of the church?

- Family—expectations can develop (i.e. going to somebody’s house every week for dinner and it is expected; resentment sets in; need space); a lot of times we use it as an excuse to not get involved with outsiders; it is hard to come into this church because family units are so tight; we’ve got cliques here; a good friend of mine felt lonely because she couldn’t break in; same in community;
- Not something we do on purpose...we just focus on family because that is natural;
- Can be a closed community; control; manipulation;
- Care turns into gossip; curiosity about others that is unhealthy;
- Work ethic—it is good to have a good work ethic, but people tend to overcommit and pretty soon you are away from the things you like to do;
- Lots of workaholics in church;
- Work and family balance is hard to find and hard to do;
- Church can become compartmentalized; separation of Sunday from Monday through Saturday;
- Music—churches split over these things; something that is supposed to bring people together is tremendously divisive;
• FRC pride in our place as a flagship in the RCA; would take it to the next step...I’d take it to the next step: “Where FRC goes, there goes the community”; can be a great thing, but depends on how we view it; if it becomes prideful, then we’ve distorted it; “Gold, Girls, and Glory”;

• When we develop a “Look at us...how cool are we?”

• We are one of the few churches with money in the bank account...do we protect that a little bit as opposed to living by faith and giving it away; do we in God or do we trust in our bank account; how much of your talent did you share?

3. What do we do here in church to help us resist this tendency to turn good things into ultimate things? What do we need to start doing? (Make three wishes for the church!)

• Teaching and talking about idolatry...not ignoring it; being informed about the threat;

• Offering—“if you are not a member of the church, don’t feel obligated”...this helps provide a welcoming atmosphere and takes the pressure off.

• LiFE groups might help this...takes away the tendency to be anonymous; biggest value is doing life together; accountability; preventative so we don’t sink to our worst;
• I think of how we’ve changed leadership structure; realizing that one person can’t do it all; realizing that the times we are in are changing; the community is changing, and as more and more of our members are not Dutch family extensions, you start bringing in more Baptists, Lutherans, etc. …how do you envelop them into FRC? Focus on change, but keeping the main thing the main thing. The negotiables are negotiable. Unity with disagreement; acceptable of opposing viewpoints, and realizing that the ultimate goal is eternal life.

• FRC always needs a vision-caster or else we do have a lot of moving parts and we will splinter;

• Trying to be open to new people coming in; welcoming; hospitable; only way we are going to grow; if it is a closed society, people will think it is not worth the effort;

• Worship service in the chapel—Gathering Grounds—it appeals to those who would rather come in and drink coffee; hospitable; providing a place for those who have little children;

• How can we include those people who don’t do anything in the church; can we make people commit?

• Awana participation and Kidzone is fantastic; a lot of people have stepped up with those.

• More of what we do can be community-focused than FRC-focused;

• Anything you think of more than God is an idol…
• Make sure your worship doesn’t become an idol...make sure you are worshiping the LORD, and not the worship.
Appendix F

Small Group Questions

Group 2 (71-90 age group), 2:00 p.m. Tuesday, October 28, 2014

1. What are the good things that shape life, hope, and happiness for us here at First Reformed Church and in Sioux Center?

- Economic status—financial status of community, affluence; helpful in sharing for those in need;
- Tradition—faithful church attendance;
- Family—connectedness of family that compels certain behavior;
- Ways of ministering to people in the community;
- School systems here are good;
- Friends and acquaintances…you often meet up with and visit with people you know; sense of community and comfort;
- Sports—leadership comes out of it, getting along with people, time-management, discipline;
- Community pride;
- Diversity;
- Active church participation—a lot of people involved in music programs;
- Excellent stewardship at FRC;
- Cultural opportunities—drama, music, the college, NWISO, art;
2. Of all these good things we’ve mentioned...how might these good things turn into ultimate things? What has that looked like? How has it affected your life and the life of the church?

- Thanksgiving offering that became a source of pride (we are better, we are more generous, etc.);
- Affluence — pride; competition, comparison, keeping up with the Jones’; controls the friends we chum around with (social circles dictated by wealth); school friends determined by this; church attendance determined by this; size of homes.
- Sports — dictates the calendar for a lot of families;
- Recreation — bigger and better boats, RV’s; how do you justify the reality that some people in the world are so poor and needy and then adults here spend massive amounts of money on toys; toys are a symbol of acceptance and status;
- Customer could not pay his bills but rolled into church in new car;
- Family — for the people who have all their children here, you hear often about how much time they spend with one another...we sit and listen to this and feel bad because our kids don’t live here. It makes us feel jealous. People move in and have no relatives in the community, and feel like outsiders. We don’t reach out to newcomers. Cliques established and comfortable in the way it is.
3. What do we do here in church to help us resist this tendency to turn good things into ultimate things? What do we need to start doing? (Make three wishes for the church!)

- Coffee on Sunday night brings people together; people come together after church and share coffee…mostly not families;
- Wish we could create more ways to intentionally mix families and get us out of our familiar groups;
- Wish we could do “Suppers 8”;
- Bible studies that multiply;
- Intergenerationality and engagement in community and school activities;
- Wish church history would be highlighted;
- People have to be outgoing and wish to interact with other people;
- More hospitality; served by people; seek out loners;
- Sunday night huddle over the Sjaarda’s;
- Continued good giving at the church; Sioux County is an excellent giving area; we may be rich, but we are also giving;
- Connect and heart must connect…
Appendix G

Cultural Analysis—High School Athletics in Sioux Center, Iowa

September 26, 2014

Introduction

Amanda Ripley, writing for The Atlantic, tells this story in her October 2013 cover story on high-school sports in America:

“Every year, thousands of teenagers move to the United States from all over the world, for all kinds of reasons. They observe everything in their new country with fresh eyes, including basic features of American life that most of us never stop to consider. One element of our education system consistently surprises them: ‘Sports are a big deal here,’ says Jenny, who moved to America from South Korea with her family in 2011. Shawnee High, her public school in southern New Jersey, fields teams in 18 sports over the course of the school year, including golf and bowling. Its campus has lush grass fields, six tennis courts, and an athletic Hall of Fame.”

From suburban New Jersey to rural Iowa, sports are a big deal here. Perhaps particularly in small-town Middle America, where the local schools provide a focal point for the community, sports are a very big deal.

The focus of this cultural analysis essay is to reflect on a potential area of idolatry in the community of Sioux Center, Iowa—the local public high school

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football field. Football in America is an institution—its symbols are ubiquitous on Sunday afternoons: the NFL logo itself; sunny stadiums filled with vociferous fans clad in their team colors; and the cultural artifacts themselves (ball, referees, uniforms, field of play, etc.). The artifacts are not limited to the televised images of the game played in stadiums across the country, but cover the cultural landscape of the entire week: high school games on Friday nights; college games on Saturdays; and countless games played in backyards and school playgrounds the remaining days. Remembering that idols are good things made into ultimate things, this essay will consider first the positive elements of a Friday night football game in Sioux Center, followed by an exploration into how this good event might be distorted and reveal idols in the community.

The Good of Football Friday Night—September 26, 2014

Arriving at Open Space Athletic Complex on the north side of Sioux Center on a Friday night, my wife, kids, and I exit the car to the sound of the marching band practicing in a nearby practice field. The air is filled with smoke from men enjoying one last cigarette before entering the stadium, and smoke from the grill: a local bank has set up an area just inside the fence of the football field, serving grilled burgers and brats, chips, Coke, and homemade pie. While the meal is offered free-of-charge, most patrons (including me) put a twenty-dollar bill in a basket as a sign of appreciation and to support the high school athletic booster

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506 U2 captures this ethos brilliantly in their song “Promenade,” from The Unforgettable Fire (Island, 1984).
club. A line-up has already formed at the ticket booth. We proceed with a wave of our annual athletic passes, stopping every few steps to say hello to friends. Almost everyone is dressed in Warrior-wear: Under Armor apparel with the Sioux Center Warrior logo in school colors of orange and blue. Many younger female students (late-elementary and middle school-aged) have SC written on their cheeks with face paint, again in the school colors. Most of the adults carry their food along with a blanket and game program to the stands, some standing in a grassy area south of the home bleachers, visiting, eating, and enjoying a beautiful early-autumn evening.

It is unseasonably warm, though the sun is setting quickly in the western sky (to our backs), promising cooler temps as the game proceeds. Conversation in the stands revolves around the harvest, the high school girls’ volleyball team, and the football teams’ performance the previous weekend against a vastly inferior squad from LeMars. We are seated among members of our congregation, many of whom have children playing, cheering, or marching this evening. Immediately to the south of where we are sitting on the bleachers, on the grass which moments before was filled with adults eating their dinner, a game of tackle football (soon to be amended to touch, at the not-so-subtle behest of the elementary school principal) is forming among the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th graders. This group includes our youngest son, Isaiah.

Their dinner finished, our older children (ages 14, 11, and 8) scatter to meet up with their friends on the north section of the bleachers. As they leave, the
team takes the field to the applause of the home crowd. Moments earlier, the visiting team (the Sheldon high school Orabs) took the field, which elicited slight applause from the home bleachers, and only slightly more robust enthusiasm from the small gathering of Sheldon supporters on the opposite side of the field. Referees and team captains gather at mid-field for the coin-toss, determining who will receive the opening kick-off and take the offensive. Sioux Center wins the toss, but defers: they will begin the game on defense, strategically opting to begin the second half on offense. As the captains reunite with their teams on the sidelines, the PA announcer directs our attention to the American flag flying behind the north endzone. People stand, remove their head-ware, and a high school student from Sioux Center sings the national anthem, accompanied only by slight static on the microphone and the occasional laugh or yell from the north end of the bleachers. A palpable energy flows through the stadium as the song concludes and the lights shine more brightly in contrast to the ever-darkening sky.

Upon the drawn out and crescendoed conclusion to the song (“And the home of the brave!”), the crowd erupts in applause. The teams take the field in formation, and the game begins. What follows on the field is the struggle of offense against defense—the tension of an unstoppable object meeting an immovable force. This contest is, in fact, rather one-sided: Sioux Center is physically and schematically superior to its opponent. The score quickly turns to 28 points for the home team, 0 for the visitors. Interest in the action on the field
subsides for fans (excepting, of course, the parents of those playing).

Conversations once again turn to work, church, health concerns, and upcoming events. I engage in a conversation with two individuals: a member of our congregation regarding my upcoming marathon in Chicago; and the local superintendent of schools regarding our shared interest in the American West (particularly the late-19th century Indian Wars...an appropriate study of power run amok!).

Upon the conclusion of the first half, attention is once again focused on the field, as the marching band (including two of our older children) takes the field. A respectful attentiveness accompanies the performance, and wild applause greets the efforts of the musicians as they conclude their final song and march off the field. The stands clear briefly for refreshment and restrooms, but are filled again as the second half begins. Conversations continue in the stands, and as the score continues to swell lopsidedly, extra attention appears focused on the cheerleaders.

Latino families, while few, are scattered throughout the crowd, and appear to mix in with their mostly white bleacher-mates. While race on the field of play is largely homogenous, one of the better players for Sioux Center is African-America, while one of the better players for Sheldon is Latino. The Sioux Center cheering squad is comprised of three Caucasian girls, and three Latino girls. They mix together easily, and it is evident from their peers that these six girls are held in high regard. With obvious differences in skin color, they are more similar
that different, as each of the cheerleaders is clad in the official cheerleader uniform, and face paint indicates their shared identity as Warriors. The same could be said of the players on the field (with skin color hidden almost completely by helmet and facemask), and the fans in the bleachers. Here, in this venue and on this night, it seems that race and ethnicity are superseded by the greater identity—Sioux Center Warrior. This identity is affirmed by place (west bleachers), attire (Warrior-wear), and preference (the Warriors as opposed to the Orabs). It is a remarkable picture of unity.

Altogether, the scene is of almost Norman Rockwell-esque purity. To even the more critical observer, this is Americana with a 21st century twist: football, apple pie, and mom, with the addition of technologically advanced clothing (Gore-Tex, moisture-wicking technical fabrics), audio and video equipment (many of the adults and most of the children consult their smartphones throughout the game or take pictures of the action), and racial diversity. It is a brilliant picture of a community: “the geographic confluence of people and the businesses, schools, neighborhoods, organizations, and practices that emerge out of such a gathering.”507 This community crystallizes and exhibits its unity in this unique place—Open Space Football stadium on a Friday night in September. The positive attributes of the community are evident: family, community pride, love of sport, racial harmony, neighborliness, a shared meal, support of the local school, appreciation of music, patriotism, generosity, respect, sportsmanship, and play.

507 Else, 9.
Distortions Observed

There was little I noted on this night that could be considered conspicuously idolatrous. Accepting that the features of football Friday night were and are good things, the question emerges, “How are these good things made into ultimate things?” Do any elements of Friday night exhibit a tendency of the participants to make football or the culture surrounding it to be an ultimate thing? Is there evidence of people deriving their ultimate source of hope and happiness from the institution of high school football in Sioux Center? Specifically, how might this beautiful showing of community unity reveal distortions of community in ways that might be or become idolatrous?

My analysis of the environment suggests that while the potential is certainly present, strong evidence of idolatry was lacking. Idolatry is usually quite subtle, of course. Positively, while families arrived en masse, they quickly dispersed, indicating a good connection without the over-connectedness that often leads to isolation. Respect and discipline were evident, but not in an overtly controlling way. For example, while the elementary principal kept a presence overseeing the tackle-cum-touch football game on the grass south of the east bleachers, he generally let the kids play, using most of his time to engage parents standing near him.

Very subtly, it appeared that while Latino families mixed in with the crowd, they were not numerous, and seemed to huddle by family groups in small pockets or islands separate from the rest of the crowd, and notably distinct from
the larger group. This was less evident for the students playing or cheering. It should be noted that the perspective of the white families in the stands was surely quite different from the perspective of the Latino families in the stands.

While patriotism was evident, it was not dramatized and the singing of the national anthem received no more enthusiastic of a response than did the marching bands’ performance of the “Theme from Rocky.” Players from both teams exhibited sportsmanship of the highest caliber (though I was, admittedly, out of ear-shot of any trash-talk).

The only blatant evidence of idolatry came in the general gestalt of the environment at the stadium: it was almost palpably evident that the Sioux Center fans felt themselves superior to the people of Sheldon; conversely, it was almost palpably evident that the Sheldon fans felt themselves inferior to the people of Sioux Center. It could be that even the attire of the Sioux Center fans could be viewed negatively, as a sign of superiority over their neighbors. The nature of football is, of course, power—asserting yourself (and your team) as superior to your opponent. The superiority is awarded with a higher place in the standings, and the measurement (marked by the final score) affirming that superiority. This leads to a certain degree of community pride, and more than a mere suggestion that “we are better” than our neighbors.

There is an adage in Northwest Iowa (and particularly Sioux County) that says, “If it ain’t Dutch, it ain’t much.” A community like Sioux Center, with its heavy concentration of Dutch people, finds that adage affirmed in its prowess on
the football field. So, football Friday night shows its shadow side in affirming what is already believed in the community: we’re better than you.

What is revealed under the Friday night lights is a strong sense of community that subtly morphs into pride. It is a distortion of all that is good about community, but exaggerated to a belief that that very community-mindedness, unity, and civic/school pride translates into actual superiority. Upon leaving the stadium, I overheard a fan from Sheldon remark, “They think they’re so much better than us.” This could certainly have been a throwaway line from a frustrated fan upon a woodshed beating on the gridiron. My sense, however, is that this is a part of a script affirmed over the course of many years: Sioux Center arrogantly believes that is actually is better.

Pride is simply the idol of self. It appears possible, and in fact quite likely, that community pride has been made into an idol: the ultimate source of identity, happiness, and hope for denizens of our town.
Appendix H

Cultural Analysis—Sunday Night Family Gathering

September 14, 2014

Introduction

Upon moving to Sioux Center, Iowa, in December 2013, my family quickly found that it is a community of families. Both church and community are marked by generations: three and sometimes four generations living with a few miles of each other. This was not entirely surprising to either Julie or I, as Julie grew up in the area, and we spent four years together early in our marriage in a neighboring community with similar values. The uniqueness of family as a primary feature of the area is due to several factors: 1) Dutch heritage and a shared desire to preserve that heritage; 2) an agrarian society in which farm land is passed down from generation to generation; and 3) a Christian culture in which family is prized as a blessing from God.

First Reformed Church is a rather large microcosm of the broader community, and the same commitment to family is seen in the congregation. Great-grandparents who were baptized into FRC delight in seeing their progeny come to the water, as well. Lineage, in both family name and in faith, is prized in the church and community. One of the four primary values of FRC reflects this reality: FRC is committed to being an intergenerational congregation. This speaks to the congregation’s desire for age-diversity in the congregation as a reflection
of the Kingdom of God, but is equally a sign of what is already present as a characteristic of the congregation: FRC is a family of families.

Sunday morning at worship, Julie, the kids, and I were invited by a family at FRC to join them for dinner after our evening worship. I determined that this would be a good opportunity for me to witness a meaning-making event in the church that both reflects the church’s and community’s values while also revealing possible distortions.

The Good of Sunday Night

After worship, we made our way out to the family farm north of town, a century farm that had been passed down from generation to generation since the first generation of Dutch immigrants arrived in the Upper Midwest in the early twentieth century. The acreage on which the home and barns are located is beautifully kept, with many updates to both home and surrounding buildings. It is a picture of a 21st century farm, with millions of dollars of high-tech implements and machinery scattered around a yard that is likely unchanged since the 1930’s.

The house itself is a large, two-story traditional Iowa farmhouse with a wrap-around porch. Outside of the house is a large yard with a fire pit and ample green space for badminton and a beanbag toss (which occupied the kids’ attention immediately). Adults gathered around the fire pit in lawn chairs. The gathering was comprised of four families in addition to my own family. Three of the four families are immediately related (siblings). All four families are
evidently familiar with each other, and appear to engage in such gatherings weekly.

The conversation is light (school, church, weather, sports), and we enjoyed a simple, relaxed time by the fire drinking cider and marveling over a spectacular sunset. The kids played nearby. It is a perfect late-summer/early-fall evening. Interestingly, men are grouped to one side of the fire pit; women are on the other.

After an hour or so, the women retreated to the house. (I barely notice this, so engaged am I in the conversation outside.) Soon thereafter, we are all called into the house. The women are busily engaged in the kitchen preparing a meal. We pause to pray. Then, in an evidently well-rehearsed procession, we gathered plates and made our way through the buffet line for barbecued pork, cheesy potatoes, fruit salad (mostly whipped cream), and lemonade. The kids go first; the men second; the women last.

Women stayed in the kitchen and dining room with the children; the men retreated to the living room, where on a flat screen television the Chicago Bears are playing the San Francisco 49ers in an NFL game. The food is delicious; the conversation is light (mostly football). Children occasionally saunter into the living room to watch part of the game or ask a question.

At approximately 9:30 p.m., I called the kids in preparation to leave. This is met by some surprise amongst the others gathered. Evidently, they will continue on into the late-evening hours. We expressed our thanks, say goodbye, and left.
Distortions Observed

This family gathering is a good thing. We have a great time, and thoroughly enjoyed the deepening relationships forged over conversation and a meal. Our hosts are hospitable, gracious, open, and easy-going.

One observation strikes me: they do this all the time. There is a remarkable familiarity amongst all four families, and particularly the three who are related. There is a routine, what appears in fact to me as a sort of unscripted play that is performed weekly. Each person has a role and seems comfortable in their role. There is even some evidence that the topics of conversations may not deviate from week to week, though of course that is speculation, and it is equally possible that conversation was kept light only because of my presence (an outsider!).

The distortion that is revealed is simply that of over-connectedness. There is the appearance that these family gatherings mark the very identity of this group: it is familiar, easy, scripted, and done nearly by rote. Perhaps the word that comes most to mind is safe. This extended family has been doing this for years. While they genuinely seem to enjoy each other, I do wonder how conflict is handled.

Furthermore, it seems as though this is a closed group. We were graciously let in for an evening, but it was also clear that we were temporary guests. It was clear that the demarcation was family (with the host family having ingrained itself as an adopted family member over the course of years) and not family. We
felt like outsiders, and while I don’t know that this was intentional, I can’t say
that it was not intentional.

Evidently, this routine gathering of families is but a snapshot of more
frequent gatherings that happen on a weekly basis. I was told by one of the
families that this particular family (the descendants of the patriarch and
matriarch, octogenarians who are physically healthy members of the
congregation, and their numerous kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids) meet
every week for Sunday dinner after worship at the patriarch’s farm. By
observation, I have also noticed that even before and after Sunday worship, this
family gathers in a large huddle in the fellowship hall. Other individuals and
families come and go in and out of this huddle, but the core remains intact, and
is consistently comprised of family members.

Back to the Sunday evening gathering: my role in this gathering was rather
complex, to be sure: I am pastor. But it does give me pause to consider how any
new family might feel at FRC under such high valuation of family. The feeling of
being on the outside was palpable in this gathering. Family had elevated itself to
the point that it was ultimate. This is idolatry in the making.
Appendix I

Cultural Analysis—Thanksgiving Eve Worship

November 26, 2014

Introduction

Faith is a critical part of life in Sioux Center. Naturally, faith is a critical part of life at First Reformed Church. The survey indicates that Christian faith influences many areas of life. God, Jesus, church, and the Bible factor into much of what people feel is good about the culture of Sioux Center and FRC. This short analysis pulls together three good things that distinguish life in Sioux Center and at FRC: faith, work ethic, and wealth.

Briefly, a note about work ethic and wealth: people in Sioux Center work hard. People spend long hours in productive work, whether starting and running a business or working in a cattle yard. Citizens of Sioux Center are proud of this work ethic, and amongst the congregation of FRC, it is evident that work is valued, prized, and often determinative of a person’s status in the community (again, regardless of the job…the question is, “Do they work hard?”).

The fruit of this hard labor is evident in what appears to be a relatively high standard of living, even among those who work at more menial jobs. Homes, while certainly not ostentatious, are well kept and well furnished. While foreign luxury sedans are considered pretentious, boats and RV’s are not uncommon, and $70,000 pickup trucks are nearly ubiquitous. And, as evidenced in many
ways, people are very generous with their finances: the local schools (both public and private) and numerous civic organizations are often holding fundraisers that ultimately produce significant funds.

Worship is a central component of practiced faith at FRC. As a congregation, FRC gathers for formal worship services on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and on significant days of the liturgical and/or cultural calendar. Thanksgiving, while not a Christian holiday per se, is a part of FRC’s liturgical calendar: it is that specific and uniquely highlighted time of year when God’s people gather to simply say thank you to God for the abundance of his provision. In an agricultural area that depends on God’s provision of rain, sun, and fertility for its livelihood, Thanksgiving marks the ingathering of the harvest and thankfulness for crops and life.

The community’s commitment to faith, work, and wealth come together uniquely in FRC’s annual Thanksgiving Eve Worship Service. Here, the church gathers to thank God for the year’s harvest, to pray for the year to come, and to offer a gift of thanks in response to God’s generosity through a special charitable offering for designated charities determined by the deacons.

Thanksgiving is no superficial exercise for the people of FRC. People take this service very seriously, and look forward to celebrating it with great anticipation. For the last fifteen years, farming has been a tremendously lucrative business for farmers in Sioux County, Iowa, a unique place in which a single acre of land can sell for upwards of $25,000. Many farmers at FRC are millionaires, at least in
terms of the value of their land and implement assets. These same farmers also remember the farm crisis of the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, a period that swallowed up many family farms. Most of the farmers at FRC remember these days vividly, and are quick to point out that the threat of it happening again is neither unrealistic nor far from their minds at any time. Furthermore, many of the farmers at FRC come from family farms, and know well the stories of their great-grandparents who originally farmed the land in a hardscrabble existence that was measured by survival, not profit.

The wealth generated by crop and cattle farming in recent years is certainly cause for thanks. FRC also tells the story, and in fact considers its central Thanksgiving story, the story of 1936. That year, amidst the agony of the depression and Dust Bowl, the Reverend Brunsting gave each school-aged child in the congregation a pencil and asked them to write down what they were thankful for. They submitted these papers to the Reverend Brunsting at the Thanksgiving Eve service, and received in return a shiny red apple. This was no small gift in light of the economic hardships of that year! It is said that the winter of 1936 produced more snow, cold, and blizzard conditions that any previous year remembered. The brutal winter gave way to a dry, scorching summer in which corn withered and died, locusts depleted acres of crops, bringing to mind Biblical devastation, cattle expired from thirst, and dust covered everything. And yet, the people of FRC gave thanks. Reverend Brunsting preached a sermon on

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508 Though because of the exceptionally high capital demands of 21st century farmers, most of these farmers are cash poor.
Habakkuk: Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the
vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there
are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I
will be joyful in God my Savior” (3:17-18).

The Good of Thanksgiving Eve Worship at FRC

The worship order of the 2014 Thanksgiving Eve service at FRC followed a
fairly customary flow, similar to what we would experience together in worship
on any typical Sunday morning, and marked by the three-tiered Reformed
pattern of worship: approach, Word, response. The call to worship for the
evening was a congregational call and response based on Psalm 95. Following
the prayer of invocation and worship set (“For the Beauty of the Earth,” “Come,
Ye Thankful People, Come,” and “10,000 Reasons”), I preached a sermon based
on the texts of Psalm 65 and John 7:37-38. The song of response (“How Great
Thou Art”) led us into the long prayer (Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession).

The special Thanksgiving offering followed this prayer, and I introduced the
offering by recalling a meaning-making story of the church: the apple story (see
above). I asked people to write on a slip of paper (given out at the beginning of
the service to those entering the sanctuary) those things they were most thankful
for. I then had young people gather these up in wicker baskets, pouring all the
papers into one large basket on the communion table at the front of the
sanctuary.
As we sang the closing song (“Great is Thy Faithfulness”), children in the church were invited to come forward to receive a shiny red delicious apple, recalling again the remarkable year of 1936 and God’s faithfulness in any and every season of life. After a final benediction, we sang together the “Doxology,” and closed the evening worship.

There was palpable gratitude amongst the people as they left the church that night. In later counting the special Thanksgiving offering, the deacons informed the congregation that gifts totaled nearly $225,000 dollars (a sum slightly less than the previous year).

Distortions Observed

There are only three distortions that became immediately identifiable in this worship service, each one related to a value already noted:

Faith—There was a prevailing sense that much of what we did that night, particularly in the way of the apple story, was a celebration of the past history of the church. The love and reverence for that story seemed nearly to trump anything we did that night. Even in preparation for the service, as I attempted to get the history right, many older members of the congregation who were present at worship in 1936 took great pains in telling me how it really went down (each story with a slight divergence from all the others!). I had one octogenarian who later upbraided me for getting the story wrong: “It was pencils he gave out, not apples!”
Work ethic—It was impossible to ignore a certain pride in the worship service. People in Sioux Center do work hard, and an undercurrent of the general ethos of the evening was that, “We work hard, therefore God blesses us!” Work ethic is placed as an ultimate value in imperceptible ways (however also articulated by folks in the interview groups), and as such distorts the true nature and meaning of the gospel.

Wealth—FRC is a wealthy church. With not quite 1,000 members, the church operates on an $822,000 budget while also designating another $650,000 for missions. This is extraordinary. The families of FRC, generally, have done well financially and are remarkably generous to the church in their altruistic giving. Here, too, like work, pride is subtly evident. I have overheard the comment, “Can you believe how much we give?” and have even thought that myself!

Faith, work ethic, and wealth are all good things: gifts from God for our benefit. However, there are glimmerings of distortion in each of these that must be acknowledged.
Appendix J

Worship Order & Sermon Transcript

Sunday, January 4, 2015 (2nd Sunday After Christmas)

Text: Matthew 12:46-50
Title: “Who Is My Family?”

Call to Worship, Welcome, and Announcements

“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 124:8).

“Church, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
Welcome to FRC…(Announcements)

Psalm 96:1-9

“Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all people.

“For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.”
“Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts.
Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.”

Hymn—“Come People of the Risen King”

Ordination/Installation of Elders & Deacons

Confession

Almighty God, we confess how hard it is to be your people. You have called us to be the church, to continue the mission of Jesus Christ to our lonely and confused world. Yet we acknowledge we are more apathetic than active, more isolated than involved, more callous than compassionate, more obstinate than obedient, more legalistic than loving. We cling to idolatrous values and chase after the false promises of false gods. Gracious Lord, have mercy upon us and forgive us our sins. Remove the obstacles preventing us from being representatives to a broken world. Awaken our hearts to the promised gift of your indwelling Spirit. This we pray in Jesus’ powerful name. Amen.

Assurance

The Bible tells us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Believe the good news, Church: your sins are forgiven. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!
Song of Preparation—“Jesus Paid it All”

Prayer for Illumination

Almighty God, give us a Spirit of wisdom and discernment today, to hear your voice, to be convicted of your goodness, to confront the idols in our midst, and to live faithfully and joyfully for you. All this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Sermon

Introduction

I’ve been excited and even a bit anxious about starting this new series with you. Beginning today and over the next five weeks, we are going to explore idolatry. Of course, this seems such an antiquated term, and you might be tempted to shut down over the next twenty minutes, sparing your mind of the irrelevance that the term suggests. People in Sioux Center, Iowa do not worship idols, right? Does anyone? If they do, they are out there. We are here, in church, where we worship the one true God of heaven and earth.

Perhaps that is true. But then again, that depends on how you understand idolatry. That’s what we are going to explore over the next five weeks. To begin, I want very briefly to offer a few definitions of the terms I will be using over the next five weeks. I encourage you to write these down, as we will be coming back to them.
Idolatry—Idolatry is simply worshiping a created thing; this thing might be an object, but it also might be a concept or a principle (such as a law or institution). And here I want to be crystal clear: the Bible demands that all of creation is good. An idol is simply any good thing that we make into an ultimate thing, which we believe will give us life, hope, and happiness. Idolatry is simply a matter of distortion, conferring on something other than God an ultimate value. So, for instance, sex is good, but it can often be distorted to the point where it has control of our lives. That is idolatry.

The Powers—References I will make over the next five weeks to the powers are based on Paul’s reference to the “powers and principalities” in Ephesians 6: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against...the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (v. 12). The powers are the New Testament counterpart to idols, referring to those forces that lead us in ways that are antithetical to God’s ways.

Cultural Formation—It is at this point when perhaps many of you will want me to talk about angels and demons and the spiritual warfare that Christians are certainly subject to in this world. Demons and the forces of darkness are surely at work against humanity. However, in Sioux Center, Iowa, do you think Satan is going to be most effective in leading people into idolatry and away from the Living God through the manifestation of demon-possession a la The Exorcist (people vomiting up green slime and
such)? Satan, I believe, is smarter and therefore more subtle. He will take the most mundane and ordinary things of life and then entice us to distort those things in such a way that, before we know it (and perhaps without our ever knowing it) we are idolaters. My premise for this series is that we are formed culturally into idolatry through the most ordinary things of the world. We must be wise.

This series is, in fact, a part of my doctoral project. Some of you might ask, “Why these idols?” In fact, you chose these. This fall, I asked many members here to fill out a survey and later met with many of these same folks in focus groups to determine which idols might be present at FRC. This series is a result of that research. The whole purpose of the project is to make us, First Reformed Church, wise in our resistance to idolatry while at the same time developing practices of faithfulness to the Living God. I am hopeful that at least a few of you will be willing to join me right here in the sanctuary after worship to talk more fully about all of this.

My last word of introduction as we dive into this: there is something here to offend everyone. Some of what I say may very well make you mad or defensive. Lean into it. As you begin to feel the stirrings of those emotions, ask the Spirit to reveal to you what it is he wants you to learn from this. By the Word and Spirit God is determined to rescue us from our idolatry, but that requires an open spirit on our part.
Goodness—God Loves Families

So, let’s get to it. What am I suggesting today? If you read the title to the sermon in the bulletin, you’ve perhaps already deduced: family is an idol. In Sioux Center, Iowa, of all places, these are fighting words. Before any of you start tweeting that Pastor Travis just condemned families or hates families or is suggesting that families are bad…stop. Listen.

It doesn’t matter what I think, it matters what God thinks. And what does God think about families? The Bible tells us:

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24);

And as man and wife couples are called to do what? Make families!

“Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth…” (Gen. 1:28).

This is called the creational mandate. Created in the image of God, we are given a mandate to make families, and this is a good thing! Much of God’s instruction throughout the Scriptures affirms the goodness and importance of families:

In fact, the first command that comes with a promise is the fifth commandment: “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12).

Families are really important to God, and families are in fact are the primary repository for Christian instruction and faithful living.

All of this is to say that families are good! God made families and he loves families. Our family loves that families are so important here in Sioux Center and
particularly here in FRC. This is truly a church of families: one of our core values is that we are intergenerational, and that largely emerges from the fact that there are generations of families right here: children, parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents gathered together in worship. It is awesome! Thanks be to God!

Distortion — Making a Good Thing an Ultimate Thing

Did you hear my definition of idolatry earlier? Idolatry is simply a distortion: making a good thing (like family) into an ultimate thing; turning family into our ultimate source of hope, happiness, and life. What might that look like?

- It looks like life that revolves around family, sacrificing time and even other relationships for the sake of the family unit in unhealthy ways, insisting that blood is always thicker than water;
- It looks like control — using shame and control to coerce certain behaviors because “we need to keep it in the family” (dysfunctions, our deepest commitments, etc.);
- It looks like defensiveness and protection — anything to “preserve the family name,” even if that means acting unethically;
- It looks like people who don’t have family around here being marginalized and excluded, made sometimes to feel like second-class citizens;
- It looks like those who choose not to have kids or who can’t have kids to feel like they are less;
• It can looks like not caring genuinely for others because they are not family, and the first concern is ever and always determined through family.

Family can become our everything, to the point where we go as the family goes and the quality of our life is determined by the family. The idolatry of family breeds all kinds of dysfunctions, and as idols always do, the idol of family can crush us under its weight.

Again, families are very good; but the reality is that there are forces at work that entice us to distort the importance and significance of families in ways that are not honoring to God, and never what God intended.

Redemption—A New Vision of the Kingdom

Jesus made this abundantly, even radically clear. In fact, he pierces us with some very uncomfortable truths about what God’s kingdom is truly like. It starts with a radical challenge, a challenge that he confronts us with again today:

“As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew…[and he said], ‘Come, follow me.’ Going from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him (Matthew 4:18-22).

Somehow, the call of Jesus trumps family. Leave your family. Come with me.
If you bristle a little at this…good! It is meant to be radical, and Jesus understood very well that this would make people angry; that it might make you angry. And if there was any question as to the true nature or meaning of Jesus words, he makes it abundantly clear when another disciple said to him, “‘I’ll follow you Jesus…but first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus told him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead’” (Matthew 8:19,21-22). Jesus demands complete loyalty that takes priority even over the most serious family obligations. If you are not willing to go this far, you won’t go at all in the end. Jesus won’t be your priority and the ultimate source of life, hope, and happiness in your life; family will.

This doesn’t mean that family isn’t important or that it is bad. It means that only when we come to Jesus and follow him completely and at the expense of everything else will the idolatry of family (or any other potential idolatry) not be able to get a foothold in our lives. In this, Jesus is actually protecting you and your family, saying that only if you get this right (following him first, completely, and at the expense of everything else) will you be able to do family right and not make it an idol in your life.

And here’s where Jesus turns our world upside down and rescues us from our idolatry: he gives us a radical new identity that finds its focus not in our biological family, but in God’s family. Listen:

“To all who received [Jesus Christ], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural
descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12-13).

When we are baptized and put our faith in Jesus Christ, we are born into a new family—God’s family—and become a part of a new household—God’s household—“which is the church” (1 Timothy 3:15). And this family is more real, and more important, than any other family we might be a part of.

Even this is rooted in a radical new vision—a vision of the kingdom of God that we are called to live into. Listen to how Jesus presents it:

“While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ He replied to them, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:46-50).

You might think that your family is limited to those blood relatives who you have lunch with every Sunday. Your family is much, much larger. This is your spiritual family. We are called to be brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers to each other.

Developing Practices of Faithfulness

Only when we get this family locked into our hearts and minds will we get our biological families right. Only then will we be rescued from the idolatry of family. Jesus is intent on redeeming family, and making sure it is put in its
proper place. For many of you today, that means letting go of some commitments to your biological family, and committing (or recommitting) yourself to God’s family. Very practically, it looks like cultivating patterns of faithfulness with and for this spiritual family:

- Gathering faithfully and regularly for worship together;
- Acknowledging your brothers and sisters in Christ as your true brothers and sisters. I walk into Josh Kuipers every morning with the words, “Brother Josh…”
- Open your home to those not in your biological family. If every week you have Sunday lunch with your relatives, perhaps alternate weeks with your spiritual family;
- Be a part of a LiFE group and cultivate a genuine sense of family with your siblings in Christ;
- Lastly, pray for those in your biological family who do not yet know and follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, that they too may be part of this spiritual family.

Blood is thicker than water. That may very well be true. But a greater truth is that the blood of Jesus Christ is thicker still. By his blood, you have been adopted into God’s family. He has summoned you with a radical challenge. He has given you a radical new identity. He has called you to a radical new vision of freedom from idolatry and freedom for faithfulness. Let’s pray…

**Hymn of Response—“Be Thou My Vision”** (#382)
Prayers of the People

God of the world, God of nations, God of families, God of each of us…

Lead us to resist idolatry in every one of its forms. Give us wise and discerning hearts to know when and where we fall away from making you are ultimate aim and desire. Shepherd us in those practices of faithfulness that lead to true worship, true faith, and true joy…

Lead all nations in the way of justice. Direct those who govern; may they be fair, maintain order, support those in need, and defend the oppressed, that the world may know true peace.

Give grace to all who proclaim the gospel through Word and sacrament and deeds of mercy, that by teaching and example others may come to live for you. Comfort and deliver, O Lord, all who are in trouble…sorrow…poverty…sickness…grief…especially…

Heal them in body, mind, spirit, or circumstance, working in them, by your grace, wonders beyond their dreams and hopes. We pray this in the name of the one who became flesh and dwelt among us, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

As recipients of abundant life in Christ, and as a sign of our deep devotion, we now offer our gifts to God.

Offering/Offertory – Mission Haiti update

Benediction
THE IDOL OF FAMILY

Sermon Debriefing/Discussion—January 4, 2015

What would it look like at FRC if we were to resist the idol of family and live more fully into faithfulness towards God?

• We could offer and host a “family” meal for all who come.

• Every individual has only so much they can do; I worry that people get spread too thin. I heard that a person can only invest in five people at a time. Family seems like they usually get most of that around here.

• We tend to idolize our children and never let them “leave.” We can certainly parent our kids, but we can also let them go, and [by doing this] empower them.

• Our Awana ministry is getting adults and kids involved in learning together. It is a welcoming environment for all people.

• We seem to have so many distractions today.

• Women in our church have been great at creating community, making friends, putting together prayer groups and Bible studies. Men seem to have a harder time with this; they have different needs.

• Families seem to meet in their little cliques during fellowship time. Is there room for new people? Are we hospitable to those who aren’t a part
of biological families? We can be family to others by breaking out of our cliques and deliberately engaging others.

The group was a little reticent to discuss this, I believe, because idolatry is not something they’ve thought of before—at least outside of Biblical references to golden calves and such. It took a bit of explanation to dial them into my thought processes around idolatry, particularly in how we idolize concepts and institutions (as opposed to objects). So, much of our discussion was a reiteration of my sermon, exploring the basis for idolatry and the powers that animate our idols.
Appendix L

Worship Order & Sermon Transcript

Sunday, January 11, 2015 (1st Sunday After Epiphany)

Text: Ephesians 5:3-10

Title: “What More Do You Want?”

Call to Worship, Welcome, and Announcements

“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 124:8).

“Church, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Welcome to FRC…(Announcements)

Psalm 115:1-8

“Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness. Why do the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’ Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.”

Hymn—“Our God Saves”
Confession

Eternal God, we confess that it is still all too easy for us to sacrifice our convictions for convenience, your standards for status, your principles for promotion, your absolutes for our ambition, and our very souls for shallow and unsatisfying success. We are easily seduced by power, prestige, pleasure, and possessions. We have grown accustomed to bowing down to the false god of wealth, to the point that we don’t even know we are doing it. In your mercy, please forgive us, O God. Rescue us again from the idols around us, and lead us to the way of life and wholeness. All this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Assurance

The song we’re going to sing in a moment has this line: “Because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free. For God the just is satisfied to look on Him and pardon me.” Jesus Christ bore our sins in his body on the cross, that we might be dead to idolatry, and alive to all that is good. I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Song of Preparation—“Before the Throne of God Above”

Prayer for Illumination

Almighty God, give us a Spirit of wisdom and discernment today, to hear your voice, to be convicted of your goodness, to confront the idols in our midst,
and to live faithfully and joyfully for you. All this through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

**Sermon**

**Introduction**

If you are joining us for the first time in the new-year, today we are in week
two of a five-week series on idolatry, the powers, and cultural formation. The
word idol is such an elusive term. We have accepted the word into our cultural
lexicon to the point that it probably has very little meaning: we watch *American
Idol*; each week we cheer on sports stars or read up on movie stars whom we
idolize. We generally know what idolatry means, but we’ve essentially neutered
the term and made it benign, to the point where it packs no punch.

Yet we are confronted with what seems to be a recurring theme in the
Scriptures: the suggestion that human beings have a genuine, deadly serious
problem with idolatry. The Old Testament is filled with stories of how all of
humanity in general, and God’s special people in particular, were constantly
forsaking the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth for false gods—things made
out of wood or stone or metal—and worshiping those things instead of the one
true God.

And we read those stories and are tempted to think: yes, but that was a pre-
modern people who didn’t know any better and we certainly don’t worship
golden calves or Ba’al or Asherah. We don’t have the pantheon of gods and
goddesses that the Greeks and Romans did. We’ve evolved beyond all that,
right? Well, last week I suggested to you that we make family into an idol. I think I made a pretty compelling case. And perhaps we could pick a little more at the scab of idolatry and find that while perhaps humans today don’t name and personify them as we once did, idols are everywhere around us: technology, sex, law, nationalism, and family. The list is perhaps endlessly long. That’s because an idol is anything, anything, that we make into an ultimate thing. Last week I shared with you my definition of an idol: *an idol is any good thing we make into an ultimate thing that we believe will give us life, hope, and happiness.*

Ancient Jewish people and early Christians did not doubt that there were thousands of idols. In fact, what set Jews and Christians apart in the first centuries was not that they worshiped God but that they insisted there was only one God, to the exclusion of all other gods. Today, people are more likely to think any god is a quaint superstition, much less thousands of them. What I am demanding in this series is that we must be wise; removing names from idols and false gods doesn’t make them any less real.

I mentioned to you last week that this is all a very calculated enterprise by the evil one, that likely for us here in Sioux Center, Iowa involves less of Satanic symbols and the occult, and more of the ordinary, mundane things of life…unknowingly we are being formed as idolaters, shaped in ways that are antithetical to God’s way. Forces press against; we are in a battle that, most of the time, we don’t even know we are fighting. We can’t afford to naïve. It all boils down to a simple equation: either worship the one true God and him alone; or
worship something else. And recognize that we all worship *something*. The stakes are extremely high, and there are eternal implications to how where we come down on this.

Goodness—Wealth is a Good and Necessary Thing

So, last week we considered family as an idol. Today, we get to talk about an idol that actually has a name: Mammon. This is an old Hebrew/Aramaic word that simply refers to wealth, money, or possessions. Understand something: like any created thing, wealth is a good thing. When people slam money, wealth, or possessions, I usually cock my head and give the *curious dog* look. Would you like your boss to withhold your paycheck? Are you suggesting that clothes, your home, or your vehicle are not really that important?

If I put a sign-up sheet on the back table for people to move with me out to the desert to wear camel hair shirts and eat bugs, I’m just guessing there would be very few names. Christians are not ascetics. It is okay to enjoy and appreciate good things: your home, your car, your clothes, your toys, your IRA, your bank account. You don’t need to feel guilty. God has given you these things: to enjoy the utility, craftsmanship, or beauty of artifacts like clothes, cars, architecture, art, boats, or whatever; to appreciate the complexity of economics and finance. Again, all that God has made is good, and we can certainly say of money, banks, wealth, and possessions that these are good things that God gifts to us out of his loving care. And all of these things not only allow us to live and enjoy life, but they provide structure and order in what would otherwise be a chaotic world. At
the very least, we must say that Mammon is neutral. It is a thing or things. And these things are for the benefit of people, and are therefore good.

Distortion—Making a Good Thing an Ultimate Thing

How I would love to stop right there: I’m okay, you’re okay, let’s go have lunch! ☺ But here’s a quick quiz for you: besides the Kingdom of Heaven, what did Jesus talk about most often? More than love…more than sex. Money. And as Jesus talked about money, he was speaking of it with a basic set of presumptions: 1) that money is a part of the order of things; 2) money is used to meet our needs and the needs of others; and 3) money is very, very dangerous. When he spoke of it, it almost always came with a warning:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).

“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon” (Matt. 6:24).

And how many of his parables or experiences were focused on money: the prodigal son squandering his inheritance; the rich man and Lazarus; the widow’s two coins; the rich young ruler. Jesus was a bit preoccupied with money, and he was very leery of it.
Why? Because he knew that wealth is dangerous. Jesus understood its power. He saw throughout the history of the humans populating the earth that money and possessions shape people; that we easily fall into its dread sway. Not because we want to be shaped by it. Not because we want to worship it. He knows that Mammon exerts a certain power that shapes and forms us in ways that are contrary to what God would have for us. God is always going to challenge us when it comes to money & wealth; Mammon is always going to challenge us when it comes to obeying God. We like to think we can have it both ways, and worship both. Jesus demands that it doesn’t work that way, not because Mammon is evil, but because of our proclivity to sin, to always want more, and to make Mammon into a god. We have to make a choice.

The term we give to the desire to have more, and to follow the god of Mammon is greed. Non-Christians oftentimes say that Christians are preoccupied with sexual sin and not enough about greed. They are probably right. Why is it like that? Because you know when you are in bed with someone not your spouse and you know when you are looking at porn on the net. You know if you are in it, so it is pretty easy to stay, “Stop!” But stop being greedy? We can think of extreme cases of greed—have any of you seen the movie The Wolf of Wall Street? The title is actually brilliant, identifying two symbols for greed: wolves and Wall St. It shows the clear excesses and tragic sin of greed. Seemingly ordinary and intelligent people get a taste of money and become addicted to it. More is never enough. But does it really affect me?
Think again about Jesus assumptions about money: it is useful for meeting our needs (particularly food, clothes, and shelter), and the needs of others. Simple, right? Getting dressed this morning, I actually had this thought: “I could really use some more shirts.” I have a closet-full of shirts! I have more clothes than I can wear in a year. I can afford to be picky with the food I eat. I could rattle off a dozen things that I think about often: things that I think I need or simply want really badly. Am I greedy? Yeah. Mammon has an otherworldly pull.

So, it makes me pretty uncomfortable when I read what Paul writes in Ephesians, “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Eph. 5:5). Greed is idolatry because greed allows something other than God to order our lives. It doesn’t have to be the excesses of The Wolf of Wall Street, either. Greed is pretty simple: it is the persistent desire to have more, and of course we soon finding that more is never enough.

What I pray you will see this morning is that Mammon can be an idol when we have a lot of money—when our thoughts and actions and dreams are captivated by it and we are constantly seeking to get more of it. But Mammon can also be an idol when we don’t have a lot of it—and our thoughts and actions and dreams are captivated by it and we are constantly seeking to get more of it. Jesus confronts each of us with this: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then
come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). Each time I hear Jesus say this, I get uncomfortable. Which can only mean that I have a tendency to idolize Mammon in hidden ways that I would not ordinarily recognize.

And it is here that we are confronted with the deep idols of the heart. The problem ultimately isn’t about money; it is about where we find our security, hope, and happiness. We can distort Mammon to the point where it exerts an influence in our life that is god-like. What we are really looking for from it is significance and security—and money is the currency by which we think we get those things in this world. In the survey I had many of you fill out, it was abundantly clear that you believe the symbol of power in our community and in our country is wealth. Wealth confers status, happiness, and ease of life. But understand that idols make promises they can never keep, and what we find when we depend on Mammon to give us life, hope, and happiness, is that it never fully delivers. It is the law of diminishing returns, and we soon find ourselves constantly worrying about how to keep our money or how to get more.

Redemption—A New Vision of the Kingdom

God is intent on rescuing us from our idolatries. Where the god of Mammon has set up a place in your heart, God comes to us with a vision of what is true and right and good. And it starts with the Gospel: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Greed is sin, and greed is ultimately contrary to God because it is the opposite of
who God is. Greed looks to self, and uses money to acquire identity, purpose, and happiness. God demands that identity, purpose, and happiness come only from him. Tim Keller says it this way: “Jesus gave up all his treasure in heaven, in order to make you his treasure—for you are a treasured people. When you see him dying to make you his treasure, that will make him yours. Money will cease to be the currency of your significance and security, and you will want to bless others with what you have” (Counterfeit Gods, 67).

When we think more and more about what Christ has done for us, what he has given us out of the abundance of his wealth, and what he sacrificed in order to give that to us, we will think less and less about money, wealth, and possessions. That opens the way for us to enjoy the things of this world as good gifts from God, but in a way that doesn’t deify it. It also opens the way for us to give it away…to be generous and share with people in need.

Developing Practices of Faithfulness

Greed is about scarcity—I need to have it because there is only so much around, and I need to elevate myself above others or at the very least have what others have. The Kingdom of God is about abundance—knowing that we have been given everything: identity, status, and purpose in life. God was being very strategic in demanding a tenth (or a tithe) from his people. It was a way to ensure that his people always knew and engaged in practices that affirmed that money and possessions are not lord. He is.
Today, we are confronted with the same practice: God rescuing us from the idol of Mammon and into the Kingdom...we do this with our tithes and offerings. Growing up, I never really paid attention to my parent’s giving, aside from excitedly putting the few shillings they gave me into the collection plate when it went around. When Julie and I got married, we had little money, of course. There was rent and books and insurance and all the rest. After we paid all the bills, there was not going to enough left over for a tithe, I demanded. She agreed, and therefore insisted that our tithe would be the first check we write each week. That rescued me from idolizing Mammon. And this morning, I want to take this even one step further, because even here we might have the tendency to say, “Right, just tell me what I should give so I can get on with life.” Let me ask you a question in light of the Cross: Are we under the obligation of the law? Or the greater obligation of grace? Which is of greater value?

And listen, even as we are being rescued from the idol of Mammon, we soon find that God is redeeming money and wealth and putting it into service for the kingdom. We are freed from the grip of idolatry, and so the money, wealth, and possessions God has blessed us with can be held lightly, both for our own enjoyment and for the benefit of others. We are freed from anxiety. And we are free to take care of the poor, to bless those who are in need. Are you willing to let God take control? I challenge you this week to make your prayer very simple: “God, show me what you want me to do with your money.” See what happens. Let’s pray…
Hymn of Response—“Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus”

Communion

Introduction

Apostle’s Creed

Words of Institution

Prayers of the People

Thank you, Lord, for feeding us at your table. You are the bread of life, and we need you, above all else, in order to be nourished and whole in body, mind, and spirit.

God of new beginnings, as we have concluded the recent holiday season and settle into our routines, we recognize that we are even now forging ahead into a new year. As we look back on the year gone by, we see so many things: things that grieve us, things that cause us to rejoice, things that surprise us in ways both good and bad, things that concern us. For our congregation, O Lord, any given year is often a time of highs and lows, of births and of deaths, of exciting opportunities and of unfulfilled hopes. Yet you are the faithful God who stays with us in and through it all. When we ascend into heights of joy, you are there to receive the words of praise that gush from our lips. When we descend into valleys of shadow, death, fear, and uncertainty, you are there to hold our hand in the darkness and to assure us that we are not alone. When we walk level paths as
we go about ordinary tasks, you walk with us, gracing the fruit of our hands with your own sacred benediction.

O God, we do not have eyesight that can penetrate the months ahead in this new year. All we can do is petition you for mercy and strength to face what is to come. But we pray too that you will keep us in good health, in perfect safety, and in the knowledge that we are loved by you and also by family and friends. With that in mind, we pray especially today for... All of us are in need of that sense of your love, O God, because we know there are so many around us in life who lack this awareness. So many are lonely. So many are crushed under the weight of illness, or disease, or loss. We ourselves are daily fighting, and often losing, in the battle against the forces of darkness that rage for our souls. False gods abound, and there are invisible forces at work animating these idols and leading us in ways that not what you desire for us.

Today, Lord, would you give us the courage and strength to fight—empower us with your Holy Spirit to confront the idols in our midst, to unmask them, revealing them for the powerless things they are. And lead us, O Lord, in the way of faithfulness: loving, serving, blessing, giving...just as you have done and are doing for us. Give us a greater vision of your glory and your kingdom. And may the fullness of your kingdom come soon. We pray it all in the name and the power of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Offering/Offertory—Mission Update, RCA Orma Project (Kenya)
Closing Hymn—“Doxology”

Benediction
Appendix M

THE IDOL OF MAMMON

Sermon Debriefing/Discussion — January 11, 2015

What would it look like at FRC if we were to resist the idol of Mammon and live more fully into faithfulness towards God?

• Our conversation began with a conversation about the content of my sermon, and I asked the participants to tell me two things about what they heard: “What do you resonate with?” And 2) “What critique do you have of this (theologically or emotionally)?”
  o Participants heard that there is power in these idols. They move us to think and act in ways that are oftentimes irrational.
  o Whether we have a lot of money or just a little money, we can make Mammon into our god. “More is never enough.”
  o There wasn’t anything, in particular, that the group critiqued.
• “Sometimes around here it is not so much the evident idol (Mammon), but the idol on the opposite side. For instance, my mother knew about Mammon, and wanted to be sure not to fall under its spell. But her idol then became frugality. It works both ways...anything that takes our eyes off of God and onto things (either the thing or the thing opposite the thing).”
• “We can give out of the abundance of God’s grace, and not according to some rule (10%).”

• “It is about enjoying good things, but not letting those things control you.”

• “Contentment is the key.” (This was reiterated in some form several times, with personal illustrations attached to most.)

• “Simplicity—appreciating the simple things we need to live (food, shelter, clothing) but not getting caught up with keeping up with the neighbors.”

• “Consumerism of the age drives us. We shut down the television for this reason: somebody was always trying to sell us something. We got tired of it.”

• “Teach your kids to handle money…it is useful and needed, but not everything.”

• “It is all relative, of course. We think we need a lot more today than we used to. People in other countries have different needs, and it doesn’t seem that money is such an idol in other parts of the world.” (We had missionaries from the Orma Project in Kenya worshiping with us this morning [in fact, teaching a Sunday school class next door to our gathering] and it was noted that the idols in Kenya were likely very different from those in the U.S.)

• “Wealth looks different in Sioux Center. It is not paraded around...people don’t necessarily show their wealth (even though it is certainly there).”
•  “Giving is one way that Mammon won’t get a foothold…tithing at church, but also in simply helping people out, sharing a meal, or supporting a ministry or non-profit.”

•  “It doesn’t look like legalism, and all of us living in fear of what people might think. Maybe it just looks like asking God the question when we are faced with buying things, ‘God, does this honor you?’

•  “The tension is okay. We just need to be aware and ask questions. That doesn’t let us off the hook, but it forces us to acknowledge that we are maybe making having money (or not having money) into an idol. The goal is generosity.”

•  “We must hold onto all of what we have very loosely.”

•  “We must be good stewards, but not claim ‘mine.’”
Appendix N

Worship Order & Sermon Transcript

Sunday, January 18, 2015

(2nd Sunday After the Epiphany)

Text: 1 Samuel 2:1-10

Title: “The LORD is a God Who Knows”

Call to Worship, Welcome, and Announcements

“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 124:8).

“Church, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Welcome to FRC…(Announcements)

Isaiah 40:18-20, 28-31

“With whom […] will you compare God? To what image will you liken him? As for an idol, a metalworker casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. They look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple.

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

Hymn—“Your Grace is Enough”

Children in Covenant

(Note Sanctity of Life Sunday…)

Confession

Father, how we thank you today for the precious gift of these children whom you have called to yourself. You have entered into covenant with them, you’ve made promises to them, and we pray that you will continue to grow them up in wisdom and the fear of the Lord, that they will daily recognize their great dependence on you, and that they will love you with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength. God of grace, we confess to you that we, your people, have not feared you and honored you and loved you above all. We have elevated the things of this world above you. We have made idols of possessions and people; we have been proud in spirit, inflated with pride in our own self-sufficiency, and have forgotten just how needy we are. Forgive us, gracious God, and bring us back into the fullness of our covenant with you and one another. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Assurance
While it is true that we have sinned, it is a greater truth that we are forgiven through God’s love in Jesus Christ. To all who humbly seek the mercy of God I say, in Jesus Christ your sin is forgiven. Thanks be to God.

Song of Preparation — “Be Thou My Vision”

Prayer for Illumination

Almighty God, give us a Spirit of wisdom and discernment today, to hear your voice, to be convicted of your goodness, to confront the idols in our midst, and to live faithfully and joyfully for you. All this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon

Goodness — God Loves Community

We live in a great community, don’t we? I mean that very seriously. Sioux Center is an extraordinary community, and I base that sentiment on experience. Julie and I have lived in many different communities over the course of our lives, and we have seen communities that don’t really function as communities at all: they are only a random collection of people and houses that happen to share the same general space. In such places there is little unity; little care for neighbor; and little concern over creating an environment that is well-ordered and pleasant. But Sioux Center is unique. Here’s what we love about Sioux Center (I’m including stories you’ve told me in this):
• People know each other and care for each other; there is a genuine sense of shared concern for one another. When there is a death or illness, people step up and show love in a thousand, oftentimes very practical ways. We look out for each other. Someone in one of our focus groups said, “I’ve never been in a community where you know that your friends have your back.”

• People are generous here with their time, finances, and energy. “Say somebody has a serious injury during harvest...there will be 20 combines in their field the next day.” If a family is getting buried under medical bills, a friend will step up to plan and host a fundraiser. I’ve never been in a community where there is such support for what goes on in the community: businesspeople, I’m thinking especially of you...you are being asked for donations all the time. And I don’t hear complaining! This support for organizations and schools and churches is amazing! We help each other. And are we not blessed by it?

• This kind of community-mindedness and togetherness fits in with the wonderful vision of former Mayor Maury TePaske’s Progress Through Cooperation. We have outstanding schools, an outstanding college, a beautiful library and hospital, vibrant churches, and thriving businesses. There is not a culture of dog-eat-dog competition, but genuine cooperation. Do you know how rare that is? It is bizarre! I love it!
• I love how the town comes out in force to support our sports teams and bands. The high school in West Chicago was about 2,200 students. At a home football game, there were typically about 250 fans in the seats. We invert those numbers: for our public high school of 299 students, we will pack the stands with 2,000. (That’s maybe an exaggeration, but it’s close!) Last night at the Simon Estes concert, BJ Haan was packed, and the last Middle School concert I went to was standing-room-only. That is awesome!

• I love how people care for their homes and their lawns. It looks nice. It is aesthetically pleasing. It is clean. Again, until you’ve lived in a community where people just let things go, you maybe won’t appreciate this fully. The appearance of a community affects the way we think about our community and even ourselves. God is the God of beauty and order, and our community reflects that.

• I love how people appreciate their Dutch heritage here. There is a connectedness with our history and culture that is to be prized.

• I love how the churches not only have a voice in the community but are central to the life of the community. That is not something to be taken lightly, and again until you live in a community where the church is silent or marginalized, this is one that is perhaps hard to fully appreciate.

• I love how people are driven to make this a great community: there is an attitude of, “Be your best!” and accountability is built into the system.
This is a great community. I love that this is a proud community. I am proud of our community!

Distortion—Making a Good Thing an Ultimate Thing

This is a series on idolatry, so perhaps you know where I’m going with this. We continue our series on idolatry this morning with yet another false god, whose name I will get to in a moment. We started all this two weeks ago with the idol of family, and I didn’t give that idol a name at the time, only because it didn’t seem important. Actually, the idol of family does have a name: Hestia. Hestia was the Greek virgin goddess of family, though she has different names in different cultures, of course. She’s been around a long time and travels easily. Last week we talked about the god Mammon. He, too, has been around the block, and though he isn’t known by that name so much today, he can be found hanging out with the Federal Reserve Board, International Monetary Fund, and even sitting right next to us when we balance our checkbooks. Today, we get to talk about the god of pride, and she has (or had) a name: the Greek goddess or spirit of excessive pride was named Hybris, from which we get the word hubris. Hubris is the belief that you are or that we are the center of the universe; that the world revolves around us, and all else is secondary or inferior. Excessive pride is an idol...a god.

I’ve said to you before that my definition of an idol is any good thing we make into an ultimate thing that we believe will give us life, hope, and happiness. God gives us good things like family, wealth, and community, and idolatry is simply
the all-too-easy tendency we have to make these created things into little gods. We commit our ultimate loyalty to these things. We put our faith in them. We center our lives around them. In so doing, we end up jettisoning the one true God in order to appease these false gods. Idolatry is simply distortion—putting an ultimate value in created things that shifts our attention away from the one true God.

How does that work with community? Again, community is good. God loves community. In fact, we believe that God exists in the eternal community of Father, Son, and Spirit—a sharing and mutuality that is God’s ultimate design for us. Jesus said, “I pray also for those who will believe in me…that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:20-21a). God loves community and desires community for us, with him and with each other. We live that out here, right, in the church. And we live it out in the broader community, here in Sioux Center. So how do we make distortions out of community in such a way that the god of pride takes over?

Many years ago, Julie and I gathered with some friends in Central Park. We were living in Rock Valley at the time, and these friends lived in Orange City. It was a beautiful night in a beautiful park, happy kids everywhere…almost a scene out of a Norman Rockwell painting. We talked about how unique Sioux County is, how much we appreciated our communities and all of these good things we’ve just listed. Then, at about the same time and in very similar ways, we both said the same thing: those same blessings are also curses. What did I
mean by that? Only that there is a shadow side to everything…not because any of these things are bad, but because they are things that sinful human beings distort.

In our focus groups, I asked participants this question: “Of all the good things we’ve mentioned about our community…how might these good things turn into ultimate things?” In other words, how do we distort these good things to the point where they begin to serve as idols? This is what they said:

- Distortion happens when, “Care for one another can turn into gossip and a curiosity about others that is unhealthy”; community is great and knowing everyone can be a blessing, but we’ve all been on the receiving end of others knowing our business and making it their business in ways that are not healthy; people talking about you; judging you; dissecting you and your family and analyzing all of your dysfunctions & pathologies not with you but about you.

- Community is distorted when, “Affluence and generosity become a source of pride, where individuals or groups or even churches say, ‘We are better…we are more generous’”;

- When, based on our uniqueness and the rich blessings that we’ve been given we say, “Look at us…how cool are we?!!!”; or making such statements as, “If it ain’t Dutch, it ain’t much,” and then applying that to our schools, “If it ain’t Kinsey, it ain’t much.”
• Distortion reveals itself when we are looking down on other communities. This fall, walking out of the stadium after a football game, I heard a fan from Sheldon say, “They think they’re so much better than us!” Well, at least on the football field that night, we were. But why do you suppose this person felt that way? It’s not the first time I’ve heard that from people in neighboring towns. It may be a general inferiority complex. But might it also be something of a superiority complex here?

• Community pride is distorted when “people taking care of their lawns become obsessive…the need to be perfect takes over.” I would add that that includes more than lawns: it can be house, kids, appearance, reputation…presenting a shiny veneer that hides the flaws that we all have and creates a suffocating atmosphere for those who don’t have the means to erect a polished exterior.

• It is looks like an unhealthy pride that ultimately says, “We are the center of the universe.”

The care for neighbor and love of community can be distorted. It is the sin, the ancient idol of pride.

Redemption—A New Vision of the Kingdom

I want to tell you a story from the Bible that illustrates this reality, and provides for us a new vision of what God would have for us. I thought about this, and considered Genesis 3, the first story of pride taking over, wrecking the community that existed between God and humans. If you remember, Adam and
Eve, living in the richness of God’s blessedness and presence, decided that would rather not depend on God and instead desired to be like him. They ate the fruit, and it all came crashing down. Community was broken.

I thought also about the story in Genesis chapter 11…about the timeless desire of humans to “make a name” for themselves (v. 4). People, blessed by God with ingenuity and skill, erected a tower that would reach to the heavens; pride; they desired to make themselves into little gods, not unlike Adam and Eve.

Instead, God laid a story from 1 Samuel on my heart. This story seems a bit more practical and down-to-earth. As the story goes, there was a man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, and he had two wives. His wife Peninnah had children, but his wife Hannah, whom he loved, had none. In the ancient world, a woman’s worth was largely determined by her ability to have children. Peninnah, blessed by God with children, used this blessedness to provoke Hannah. Peninnah rubbed her competitor’s face in the fact that she could have children but Hannah could not. The Bible says that Hannah’s “rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat” (v. 7).

So Hannah went to Eli, the priest of Shiloh, and she wept and prayed: “O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life” (1 Samuel 1:11). Eli blessed her, prophesied that God would indeed give her a son, and sent her on her way.
Hannah eventually had a son and named him Samuel. Here’s the difference between Peninnah and Hannah: both are blessed with the same thing—children. But Peninnah is proud and uses what God has given her as a blessing to shame Hannah. She thinks she is the center of the universe. Peninnah is proud; Hannah is humble. Hannah trusted God in her great need; she worshiped Him. Hannah brought Samuel to Eli, and gave him to the LORD. She did not carry him as a source of pride. She did not make Samuel into her idol. And we are left with this extraordinary prayer in chapter two:

“My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn (my strength) is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed.

The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength. Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry hunger no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has many sons pines away.

The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. For the
foundations of the earth are the LORD’s; upon them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked will be silenced in darkness. It is not by strength that one prevails; those who oppose the LORD will be shattered. He will thunder against them from heaven; the LORD will judge the ends of the earth” (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

Idolatry, remember, is making anything greater than God: a child; a community; our families; our wealth. All of these things are good things, blessings from God…but they are things. The vision of the kingdom is not that we would discard these things, but that we would humbly receive these things from the hand of God and therefore love Him more. The cure for a prideful heart is humility—acknowledging the lordship of God and his great goodness in caring for us.

Developing Practices of Faithfulness

How do we develop practices of faithfulness to God and resist the pull of idolatry, particularly in the way of pride? Worship and service. Worship always calls us to acknowledge God’s greatness and our great dependence. The only cure for idolatry is humbly looking to the one true God in adoration and need and gratitude. Here, I am not referring to just showing up and fulfilling your religious obligation by gutting out yet another Sunday service. I mean casting your eyes upon the gracious God of heaven and earth who is the center of the universe and who has graciously given you everything. True worship cultivates the kind of humility that will destroy your idols.
Because here’s the threat of following any other way: when we look at the idols in our midst, we can oftentimes accept that they are idols or could easily become idols to us. But our usual reaction to that is to simply exchange one idol for another.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Idol</th>
<th>New Idol</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Anti-family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth</td>
<td>Frugality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>Self-loathing/false humility</td>
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</tbody>
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So, for instance, I can acknowledge that family might be an idol to me. A response might be that I discard my family; but now I’m simply controlled by my need to separate myself from my family. Independence from family becomes my new idol. Same with wealth: I’m not going to bow down to wealth; look, I don’t spend a dime (thanks Tonia, for this one). Well, I don’t want to be prideful, so I’ll hate myself or hate my community.

Jesus said, “When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first” (Matthew 12:43-45a).

Satan doesn’t care what idols you have; he only cares that you have them.

Removing an idol does you no good, because others will happily come and take
its place. Just cleaning up your life without filling it with God leaves plenty of room for other idols to set up shop.

When we worship God, pride cannot get a foothold, and we are then free to serve. Pride is mostly compensation for our insecurities, and so we expend all kinds of energy attempting to assure ourselves and others that we are worthy. The Gospel has an answer, however, before you lift a finger. You are precious to God. He is so crazy about you that he gave his one and only son, that you might be his eternally. This reality takes the focus off of self and puts it on others in love and service. “Humility, then, isn’t thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less” (C.S.Lewis).

God could do everything himself, but he doesn’t. He uses us. It is an honor to share in God’s work, and God has chosen you. So when we are blessed or our community is blessed, doors are opened to love and serve our neighbor! The reason for the blessings isn’t so that we can think we are better than others, it is so that he can use us to draw others to himself. It begins with the truth that God is central; he is ultimate. Living that truth out in a life of service helps me to resist the idol of pride.

Love your community; be proud of Sioux Center; be proud of your kids and your schools; delight in keeping a clean house and beautiful lawn. But remember that these are things. They are blessings from God. Then recognize that these things are going to compete with God for primacy in your life. Are you willing to let them go? Are you willing to let your lawn go? Maybe that’s what you need to
practice this summer in order to protect yourself from judging others, and use that time you would otherwise be obsessing over your lawn by getting to know your neighbor. My greatest prayer for all of us is that we would hold onto all of the things God has given us loosely, with a great deal of humility.

We are utterly dependent on him. And he has given us everything. And he shows us the way. Jesus did not come in glitter and gold. He emptied himself, and humbled himself, even to the point of death. When we come humbly before the Lord of heaven and earth, which is the only way we can come before him, we are put into a position where we know we are not above anybody. There is no room for pride before God or before our neighbor. That, church, is freedom: freedom from idolatry but freedom to rightly love God and each other. Let’s pray...

**Hymn of Response — “How Great is Our God”**

**Prayers of the People**

Little ones

Search committee — Director of Care & Connections;

Community, state, and federal leaders;

Prayer for peace amidst violence in France & Nigeria.

Thank you, Lord, for blessing us with all we need to live. In gratefulness we offer it back to you, asking that these gifts be used for the upbuilding of your kingdom. Amen.
Offering/Offertory – *Center for Financial Education* video

Closing Hymn – “Doxology”

Benediction
Appendix O

THE IDOL OF COMMUNITY (PRIDE)

Sermon Debriefing/Discussion—January 18, 2015

What would it look like at FRC if we were to resist the idol of pride and live more fully into faithfulness towards God?

• “Generally...we would initially see an extreme level of conflict. Forces of darkness will try to push back and create chaos.”

• “Should it look like the first century church? I’m thinking of Acts 2 here...teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer...sharing.”

• “It might look like hatred from others...certain parts of the community might look down on us.”

• “Satan will attack...Christianity in Africa is growing leaps and bounds and Satan is pushing back.”

• “If the kingdom is fully realized here it would look like heaven!” (Asked, “What do you mean by that?”) “It would look like love.”

• “How do we respond to things that challenge our protectiveness to tradition? There are good things here [at FRC] but protection does more harm than good. We become prideful in tradition and then think we need to protect that tradition. That is based in pride. It would look like the
freedom to love God and love each other and not worry so much about what or why things are different."

• “It would look like worship and service. True worship leads to service as an expression of gratitude to God.”

• “Every program of the church would align with the Kingdom of God both inside and outside of the church. We would be flooded with people who desire to serve!”

• “Love looks like Jesus Christ.”

• “It would look like everyone believing in the Gospel, knowing they are forgiven. Knowing Jesus Christ.”

We had a long discussion on what “love” truly is. Some in the group associated this emphasis on love with a secular-cultural free-for-all (“love could be whatever I define it to mean”). We then talked about how Jesus gives a face and focus to love. Love looks like this. “God is love.” Therefore, we need the Gospel to show us what love looks like, and then pattern our love on God’s love for us in Christ.

This love then shapes the way we engage the broader community. We love people. We are open and welcoming. We are not driven by the protectionism that comes from pride, but the openness driven by true Christ-like love.

There was a long discussion about culturally defined love (i.e. what was referred to in our discussion as the “gay agenda”). We didn’t get into that too
much, but did point out how much of the meaning we attach to terms is increasingly driven by ideology. I took time to explain how ideologies work (based on Bob Gouzdwaard’s *Hope in Troubled Times*).

We also spent some time talking about the unique power of false gods and where that power comes from (“the powers and principalities” animating these idols). Forces of darkness are at work in seeking to distract and captivate us with an alternate vision to the kingdom.
Appendix P

Worship Order & Sermon Transcript

Sunday, January 25, 2015

(3rd Sunday After the Epiphany)

Text: Genesis 1:27-28, 31-2:3

Title: “Working for a Living”

Call to Worship, Welcome, and Announcements

“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 124:8).

“Church, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Welcome to FRC…(Announcements)

Isaiah 40:18-20, 28-31

“With whom […] will you compare God? To what image will you liken him? As for an idol, a metalworker casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. They look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple.

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

Prayer of Invocation

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, transform our hearts and minds and hands today, that we might live to serve you. We pray today for grace and freedom: to love you and love each other. I pray that, in that freedom, we may worship you today with abandon. All to your glory. Amen.

Hymn—“10,000 Reasons”

Voices of Praise—“Agnus Dei”

Confession

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty. By the power of your Spirit you bring us before you that we might catch a glimpse of your glory. In the light of your countenance, we fall down before you in humility and awe. And we recognize, if only for a moment, how small and vulnerable we are. We confess to you today that we have avoided you; we have ignored you; we have hidden from you. In your place we have erected idols to be gods to us: objects we have made from the stuff of your creation; work that you have commissioned us to; principles that were instituted by you for our good…we have bowed down to these things, subjecting ourselves to the futility of that which can profit us
nothing. Forgive us, gracious heavenly Father, and restore in us a way of being
that honors and glorifies you. We pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

Assurance

In the depths of our idolatry and sin, it is God who comes us. He doesn’t wait
for us to get our act together, but rather his grace precedes our repentance.
Listen: “I have made you, you are my servant…I will not forget you. I have
swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist” (Isaiah
44:21-22). Believe the good news, church: in the name of Jesus Christ, who died
and rose again, your sin is forgiven. Thanks be to God!

Song of Preparation—“Beneath the Cross”

Prayer for Illumination

Almighty God, give us a Spirit of wisdom and discernment today, to hear
your voice, to be convicted of your goodness, to confront the idols in our midst,
and to live faithfully and joyfully for you. All this through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Sermon

Introduction

In the ancient world, pagans believed that the ultimate goal in life was
freedom from work. Some days, this seems like a pretty good idea. The ancients
believed that the gods had made humans for work; that work was punishment,
and the goal of human life was to \textit{transcend} the physical world and become like gods, free from the captivity of the world and work. To be god-like was to contemplate art, philosophy, and politics, and not engage in the less noble exercise of manual work. The Apostle Paul ran into this reality during his second missionary journey. In the city of Athens in the first century, he found that all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas—they were all philosophers—surely with more than a few less-than-human slaves to peel their grapes and iron their togas. Culturally, we are still informed by this way of thinking to a degree. Work is a drag, a necessary evil; ease and comfort are the goal; and hopefully you can retire early and enjoy a life of leisure.

But that is not the teaching of the Bible and the church. And, come to think of it, we don’t think that way in Sioux Center, Iowa. People work hard here; \textit{really} hard. But why? And what might work have to do with idolatry?

The Goodness of Work

With all of the idols we’ve talked about so far—family, wealth, and community—we’ve started with goodness. These are all created things that God created good. We look at the work the same way. It is a good thing. I said to you that the ancient Greeks viewed work as bad; as dishonorable. One of the many differences between the story of God and the story of pagan gods is that our stories begin in a much different places. The story of the Bible tells us that the world was not created out of conflict (as in ancient Babylonian creation myths),
and it did not begin with a *golden age* in which neither gods nor humans worked, a the pagans believed. In the Bible, the creation of the world begins with work. God is the master craftsman and artist who designs and forms the heavens and the earth and all that it is in it, and there isn’t a special word that the Bible uses for this work that God does; it is simply *work* (הכrocessing).

A part of God’s work, of course, was the creation of human beings. And the Bible tells us something rather extraordinary about our creation on the sixth day of creation. Listen:

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground’” (Genesis 1:27-28).

What this means is that, being made in the image of God, we are to do as God does. We get to create things! We are called to take the stuff of creation and make things of it. Look: everything in here was created by someone living into the *imago Dei*: fashioning a pulpit, table, and baptismal font out of trees; making coffee out of water and cherrybeans; making clothes out of cotton plants or sheep’s wool; making glass out of sand and fire; making computers and smart phones out of plastic and silicon; making the breakfast you ate a little while ago out of pigs and chickens and wheat. Humans make things, and the world is full of human creativity! We don’t make stuff the way God makes it; he creates out of...
nothing (*ex nihilo*). We create using the raw materials God provides and by the ingenuity and skill that he provides. That all people make things affirms that we are created in his image. It is a response to his great design. We call this the creational mandate or cultural mandate. We work because God works, as we have been created in his image. The command to us is to continue his work of creation—could there be a higher or more noble endeavor?

Distortion—Making Work Into an Ultimate Thing

This community understands well, I believe, the creational mandate (even if, perhaps, you’ve never used that term). Work is a value here in Sioux County. People work hard here and they take their work very seriously. So what’s the problem?

Idolatry, remember is making any good thing into an ultimate thing. That commitment to or value of work can quickly make work into an idol, as we look at our work to provide us with hope, happiness, and life. This is revealed in any one of a number of ways:

(Work becomes an idol when…)

**Work shapes our identity**—Someone in one of our focus groups stated, “Whatever defines you determines who you are…and I am often defined by my work.” This was a brilliant, wonderfully self-aware insight that captures well how work becomes an idol to us. In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, actor Ben Cross plays British sprinter Harold Abrahams. His work is running the 100-yard dash at the 1924 Olympics. As he nervously awaits his last Olympic race, he thinks to
himself, “I have ten lonely seconds to justify my whole existence…” And we can think that way about work much of the time: my reputation, my value to my family, my value as a human being, and maybe even my value to God is determined by my work (how much money I make, or my ability to succeed, or however my work might be measured). Parents, do you not feel this pressure? I have to raise these kids to be well-adjusted contributors to the betterment of society; get a good education; good job; etc. And if they don’t, it must mean I’m a bad parent; perhaps even a bad person. Work can shape our identity.

**Work captures our heart**—What I mean by that is simply that work can exert a pull and power that captivates us and demands all of our time, energy, and commitment. It has been said that, “our ultimate love is what we worship” (James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 51). Sometimes it is truly a love for our work—the buzz that comes with closing the big sale or making a lot of money or cultivating a certain reputation. We love our work, and we end up worshiping it. Other times, work simply makes demands on us that we don’t necessarily like, but compels us to bow down to it as a god. A person made a telling comment in our interviews: “This amazing Dutch work ethic gets carried away…the job rules.” I believe that Satanic forces (“powers and principalities”) animate our idols and give them a life and a power that draws us to them in worship. We don’t want to worship our work, but there seem to be forces beyond our control that compel us to. It takes over and dominates our life. Farmers, this surely affects you. Much of what you do is determined by the season, and weather, and
commodities prices. There are so many forces pressing up against you. Pretty soon, life revolves around the farm, and all else fades away. Imbalance is created in your life and it affects your health and your family. You are certainly not alone, as anyone who works is confronted with this.

These are general distortions that we all must wrestle with personally; inwardly. But there are other distortions that have an outward trajectory, affecting the broader environment in which we live and shaping a culture.

Work leads us to judge others—It has been suggested to me more than once that Sioux County is full of workaholics, and would you be willing to admit that, for many of you, you take a great deal of pride in being thought of that way. That strong work ethic, which is a sign of our being created in God’s image, is elevated and then used as a means of judging other people. “They don’t work as hard as I do, therefore I can feel justified in looking down on them.” “He doesn’t make as much money, so he must not work as hard or be as smart.” “She can’t keep a job, so there must be something wrong with her.” “Those people living in poverty, well, they just need to get to work! I did it...why can’t they?” The blessing of work and intelligence and creativity are twisted into a means of dismissing others; withholding our love because they aren’t as deserving. We find flaws in others according to our own standard of worth, which is largely determined by work. What is implicit in this, of course, is what I mentioned earlier about identity, and the fear that maybe my worth is determined by my work, so I can take some measure of comfort in knowing that, at the very least,
I’m ahead of *that* guy. Maybe more than anything it is simply a means by which I can justify myself in withholding love from someone else. Church, this is a distortion; this is idolatry.

**Work earns God’s favor**—At the heart of making work into an idol is the belief that I can earn God’s love and favor. I get why we might be tempted to think this way. The world operates on this premise: if I work hard and do a good job I will be rewarded. If I work hard and do a good job I likely *will* get more money, and more prestige, and my star will ascend. Culturally, we still operate in large part by the old axiom, “God helps those who help themselves.” By they way, do you know where that verse is found in the Bible? Hezekiah 1:1? There is no Book of Hezekiah…and this is not in the Bible. It is, however, in Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanack*. But it’s still lodged in here (head & heart) and we believe it. God will love me…God will bless me…but I have to *earn* it.

Here’s what unites all of these distortions regarding work: “When we fail to believe that God accepts us fully in Jesus Christ, and we look to some other way to justify or prove ourselves, we commit idolatry” (Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, 133). Martin Luther wrote it this way:

“If we do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up” false gods (Martin Luther, *Treatise Concerning Good Works*, X-XI, 18-20).
When we look to our work to provide for us meaning, value, identity, or happiness, it becomes to us, by definition, an idol.

Redemption – A New Vision of the Kingdom

So, let’s review for a moment. The world is good. God made the whole world and everything in it and he declared it good. He worked in creation, and he made you in his image; you were given the mandate to follow him in the goodness and dignity of work. But, the world is fallen. Sin has affected every part of creation, including work. Not only in that work is hard (the ground now produces thistles and thorns), but even in the way we think about work and distort its value.

Lastly, and this is the good news, the whole world is going to be redeemed. And it is here that we look to the Gospel, and a new vision of the kingdom that, I pray, changes the way we think about work today.

Listen: we don’t work to live, because that suggests work isn’t important; it is. But neither do we live to work. Work is not designed to be ultimate. It is not supposed to determine our worth or value or identity. The Gospel insists that we never earn God’s love and favor. God does not love you more or less whether you own 1,000 acres or rent 200. He does not love you more or less whether you’ve worked successfully your whole life or never been able to hold down a job. God does not love you more or less whether you are closing million dollar deals or sweeping floors. Your value in God’s eyes is not determined by work.
The Gospel tells us that, “When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly…While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6,8b). What this means, of course, is that we don’t earn salvation. We don’t merit God’s love and favor. It is a gift. In fact, what we rightfully earn from God is condemnation and death (Rom. 5:23). Even the best we do—our noblest act, our most charitable sacrifice, our most intelligent discovery, our greatest, most successful work—is as a filthy rag before God (Isaiah 64:6). To measure ourselves by our work might lead us to hope (or, conversantly, despair) if the measure is other people. But the true measure by which we are judged is the glory, and holiness, and power of the God in whose image we were all created. And that would indeed be reason for despair if not for God’s grace. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). You didn’t earn it. This is only bad news if you think you are in control. If you recognize that only God is God, and that you are a sinful human being who cannot earn his love and favor, then this will become the best news in the world to you, recognizing that this means you are of infinitely more value than you could have ever dared dream!

This changes the way we think about work. Work is not about earning power, or wealth, or identity, or success. Think of those distortions we’ve already talked about regarding work:
Christ shapes our identity—our identity is determined not by our work, but by Christ’s sacrifice for us on the cross; our identity is rooted in his work, not our work.

Christ captures our heart—when you experience God’s grace in Jesus Christ, your heart will be captivated by him; as you continually live under the Gospel story, you will hold your work more loosely: it will not define you, and you will not worship it.

Christ leads us to love others—when you realize that you are a sinful human being no better or worse than others, you will not look down on others or place yourself above others. You will view them as sinners like you who are loved by God.

Christ earns God’s favor for you—when you have heard and believed this gospel, you will recognize that God’s love and favor is a gift; it is not earned and there is nothing you can do to make him love you more than he already does. Because you didn’t earn it, also know that you can’t un-earn it. There is nothing you could do to make him stop loving you.

Rather than becoming an idol, work becomes the means by which we practice love toward God and neighbor, as a response to his great love for us in Jesus Christ. Here’s the thing: we are constantly tempted to make work into an idol because we are in such a performance-driven society. Culturally, we are measured by our work. For me, it looks like a near constant anxiety that I am going to fail. That I will be loved and valued based on my performance. Never
once did my parents suggest that was the case; and for nearly 20 years Julie has tried to love me off that ledge. Yet, I can walk out of church today convinced that this sermon was a disaster and I will hate myself for a week (and I’m not fishing for a word of encouragement here, as even if one hundred of you told me it was awesome I would still convince myself otherwise…such is my pathology!). You can do this as a teacher, too: a student bombs a test, and you are a terrible teacher. Parents: it was *your* kid who bombed, so you must be a terrible parent. Farmer: one machine breakdown after another, so you must be a terrible farmer. Doctor, your not getting enough patients; financial planner, you’re not getting the kind of returns your clients expect…you must be terrible. Of course, that works the other direction, too: Business is off the charts…God must really love me! Corn hit an all-time high…I must really be favored! In every one of these cases, we’ve made work into an idol. We must resist.

That resistance takes the form of us coming to the gospel daily and being reminded of who we are and the true source of our identity. For me, it involves almost daily reciting an adage in my head: *God is my true north.* What that means is that my value and identity have already been determined by him. Do you know how enormously freeing that is? It frees work to be simply work.

In making an idol, what we are really doing is placing a value on a thing that it was never intended to carry. An idol might assert itself to pull off what only God can, but ultimately it will disappoint. The stock market will crash. Cattle prices will tank. The favorable evaluations will dry up. The awards will end.
And you will be lost. But if work can simply be work, and the means by which you practice love toward God and neighbor, you will actually find joy in it, whatever you do—high pressure job, low pressure job; big responsibility, little responsibility; high pay, low pay; high skilled, low skilled. The Bible commands us, in light of the gospel, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Colossians 3:23). You are not just making widgets, which is important, but you are working for God. Your passion may not be for widgets, but it is to love people, who have a need for widgets. The point is, you will work, you just won’t worship work. And that work will be transformed into mission: to love and serve others. And that is maybe the way to think of yourself in whatever it is that you do: you are a missionary, an ambassador for Jesus Christ, masquerading as a teacher, or financial planner, or farmer, or lawyer, or retiree.

Developing Practices of Faithfulness

What are the practices that help us live into this? I’ve already said one: first, come back to the gospel every day. Spend time with God who is your true north, or you will begin to believe the story the world tells you regarding your worth. We need to be reminded that God is God; work is not. Commune with God, who delights in reminding you these things, every day. Spend time in the Word and in prayer.
The other is equally practical, and it is simply this: rest. Cease from work. One way to loosen work’s grip on your life is to let it go. Let’s look again to our text in Genesis:

“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done” (Genesis 1:31-2:3).

So, God is God, the world truly does depend on him, and he rested…do you think maybe you could afford to rest, too? Of course, rest comes to us not only as the design of the universe and pattern of God, in whose image we’ve been created, but it comes as a command, I think, to protect us from idolizing work:

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20: 8-11).

The Sabbath is our reset button, not only physically, but spiritually. On it, as we worship and rest, we become reacquainted to our true identity and purpose:
God’s children set apart to worship him. Refreshed in the Lord, work then takes up its proper, God-ordained place in our lives, and it becomes our mission field to love and serve others. May your work become the means by which to glorify the Father and point people to Jesus Christ. Let’s pray…

Solo—“Before You I Kneel”

Prayers of the People

Sick & grieving…

Search committee—Director of Care & Connections;

Community, state, and federal leaders;

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of work—the dignity it gives to us, and the fruit it bears for the sake of others. We offer back to you our first fruits of these endeavors, asking your blessing upon them for the sake of Christ and the kingdom. Amen.

Offering/Offertory

Closing Hymn—“Great is Thy Faithfulness”

Benediction
Appendix Q

THE IDOL OF WORK

Sermon Debriefing/Discussion—January 25, 2015

What would it look like at FRC if we were to resist the idol of work and live more fully into faithfulness towards God?

• “Shared contentment and celebration of the work that was done…not regret over work that wasn’t done”;

• “All of these idols seem to be grounded in a lack of significance: ‘I’ll look for significance in my family, in wealth, in my community, or in work.’ How do we get people to feel significant?”

• “We combat the lack of significance through the preaching of the Gospel.”

• “It is hard to stop working when that is the means by which we gain our significance…how do you go back?”

  o “For retirees, this seems like it would be really hard to do after the novelty and freedom of retirement wears off. What do you do? Culturally, we send people out to pasture, and communicate to them that they are not significant or of little worth to society anymore.”

  o “Stay-at-home moms deal with this all the time. What is communicated, it seems, is that they don’t really work. People would constantly ask me after I quit my job and went full-time as a
mom, ‘What do you do all day?’ It was insulting! In any case, it was really hard to feel significant or valuable when people thought of me that way.”

- “As another stay-at-home mom, I found that it was really hard to climb, climb, climb professionally…it made it harder and harder to make the decision to go back home to the kids as mom.”

- “Work is our identity…and forms our status. This is an idol, I get it, but it is so hard to shake.”

- “One of the things I had to get over was the expectation that once I retired, I was supposed to simply sit in front of the television. No! I still have a lot of life in me, and I want to be active!”

- “How do we get people to feel significant? That’s what we need to show here. That needs to be a part of our culture. People need to hear the Gospel every week (day?), and know that their significance comes from God, and not from the world.”

- “Our worship is our work, and our work is our worship. Can we somehow instill the value that what we do outside of this place is our worship; and what we do in here is our work (and vice-versa)? We work and worship to bless others, to serve others, and to glorify God.”

- “I see [a culture in which idolatry is resisted and patterns of faithfulness are developed] here at FRC…I’m no one in this church or community: I’m not from here; I have no family here; I have a menial job and no status
whatsoever. Yet everyone in this congregation treats me with significance.”

- “To live it out here, it would look like a lot of care and a lot of encouragement: welcoming people; showing interest in people; listening to people. The little things!”

- “It seems immigrants in this community feel unwelcome. One woman said to me, ‘We have no fancy clothes, we don’t speak English, we don’t really understand the culture…we can’t come to your church.’ And she’s right. A vision for what could be is that we would be a welcoming, hospitable place for all people, regardless of culture or language or social status.”

- “With work, the desire is to give our best to God. We do that with our dress on Sunday…that isn’t a bad thing.”
  - “But is that a value of the church, and if it is, should it be?”
  - “It shows reverence…”
  - “But does it make an idol out of the clothes we wear?”

- “When people come here, do they see people who have it all together, or do they see who love Jesus? What do we want to be known for? We want to be known for Jesus…making him known.”

This was our best discussion yet, and people seem to be dialed into how we make idols out of the good things in life (family, wealth, community, work). They are starting to more capably articulate what it might look like here at FRC if
we were to resist these idols and cultivate patterns of faithfulness. What is frustrating to the group, however, is that so many of the dreams we have are small gestures. There have been few large, tangible things. The focus has been on general ideas of encouragement and welcome/hospitality to combat the problem of idolizing status and work and revealing it in the church culture.

One hypothetical that we did discuss revolved around a potential opportunity to welcome a small Guatemalan house church into our facility for worship. Could we provide an open, welcoming space to these brothers and sisters who would otherwise (and have otherwise) been marginalized in our community? People in the group were excited about this prospect, though it was evident that some were skeptical (at least based on my reading of their facial expressions).

Significance seemed to be the central concern for the group as we discussed the idol of work. This is the deep idol of the heart that is manifest in the idol of work. How do we create a culture where all people are made to feel significant, and how do we put flesh on that? One person noted we must preach the Gospel, as that is the source of our significance.
Appendix R

Worship Order & Sermon Transcript

Sunday, March 1, 2015

(4th Sunday After the Epiphany)

Text: Amos 5:18-27
Title: “Taking the Religion Out of Church”

Call to Worship, Welcome, and Announcements

“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 124:8).

“Church, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Welcome to FRC…(Announcements)

Psalm 86:8-10

“Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord; no deeds can compare with yours. All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name. For you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God.”

Prayer of Invocation
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you call us in love to come before you with love. 
Humbly we come. Receive our gratitude today, dear Lord, and be glorified in 
this place. Amen.

Hymns—“The Solid Rock”, “Jesus Paid It All”

Confession

Most gracious and merciful God, you have revealed yourself to us in your 
Word, and you call us to worship you in spirit and in truth. We confess to you 
today that time after time we have entered your presence with countless prayers 
but with hearts that have been closed to your grace. We have lifted our hands to 
you in praise, but our feet have still walked in the ways of evil. We have 
rehearsed your commandments but have refused to see your face in the needs of 
our neighbor. We confess that we often worship not your true self but who we 
wish you to be. We too often ask you to bless what we do rather than seeking to 
do what you bless. Forgive us when our worship shapes you into what we want 
instead of shaping us into what you want. We so often just go through the 
motions, Lord, failing to recognize that you want to engage us deeply. Renew us, 
we pray, according to your steadfast love. Remind us of your covenant 
faithfulness and have mercy on us in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Assurance

Church, hear the good news: the God who challenges us is also the God who 
encourages us. The God who confronts us is also the God who accepts us. In the
desert of our sin and idolatry, Jesus says to us, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” Be assured that God is with us even now, accepting, guiding, and forgiving. All this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Song of Preparation — “Lord, I Need You”**

**Prayer for Illumination**

Almighty God, give us a Spirit of wisdom and discernment today, to hear your voice, to be convicted of your goodness, to confront the idols in our midst, and to live faithfully and joyfully for you. All this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Sermon**

**Introduction**

This is our last Sunday exploring idolatry, and I must tell you that I’m a bit conflicted. On the one hand, I love this particular subject, and believe that through the teaching of the Spirit I am growing in faith, wisdom, and righteousness (and I hope you are, too). On the other hand, all of what I have preached over the last month has smacked me in the face. My knees buckle as I’m confronted with the reality that I have worshiped family, and wealth, and my community, and work. I have looked to all of these things (and a hundred more)
to give me life, hope, and happiness. I have turned these good things into ultimate things.

During our Sunday school time several weeks ago, someone made a brilliant statement regarding all idols: he said, “All of these idols seem to be grounded in our own lack of significance: so I’ll look for significance in my family, or my wealth, or my community, or my work.” Timothy Keller, in his wonderful book, *Counterfeit Gods*, notes in this the difference between surface idols and deep idols. A surface idol is the idol of work. But the deep idol is the idol of significance, and believing that your work will give it to you.

My point in bringing this up is to encourage you to go deeper: you may find that sex or technology or sports, or any of the idols we’ve already talked about…these might be idols. But what is underneath *that*? Is it a need for significance? A need to be loved? A need to succeed (or fear of failure) as a measure of your worth? We look for *things* to fill those needs, when only God can fill them. What I hope you have heard throughout this series is that yes, we are idolaters, but that God will rescue us from our idols. The message of the Gospel is that you are precious and eternally significant in God’s eyes. You are unconditionally loved by the Creator of heaven and earth. The best you do will not make God love you more, and the worst that you do will not make him love you less.

So, I’m ending this series in what might be a hard word to hear; that perhaps upsets everything I’ve just said to you. Because today, we are going to consider
yet another idol, and this might seem a bit counter-intuitive to you: today our subject is the idol of religion and the church.

The Goodness of Church

Before we get to that, I want to share just a bit of my methodology through this series: I’ve mentioned to you the groups I met with last fall that provided some of the content of this series in pointing to the particular idols of Sioux Center and FRC. It began with a survey to 55 people in the church, and was followed by small group interviews: I asked questions about what is good...then moved to how we distort that good...and finally considered what it might look like at FRC if we were to practice resistance against these things we make into idols. So, we met as 4 small groups in the conference room over a couple of months to have this conversation.

A basic truth I want to impress upon you in this is simply that all God made was good. Family is good; the physical things we enjoy in life are good; community is good (even the pride we feel in our community); and work is good. So, today, as we talk about the idol of religion/church, we begin by acknowledging that the church is good! In fact, I’m not sure we could exaggerate the goodness of the church: God formed his church; God loves his church; the church is the radiant and beautiful Bride of Jesus Christ! Just so we’re clear, however, let’s make sure we understand what the church is. The Belgic Confession, one of our old creeds, defines the church this way:
“[The church is] a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers, awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit…[This holy church] is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain persons. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith” (The Belgic Confession, Article 27).

We are the church. And other congregations of believers gathered at various other locations right here in Sioux Center and all over the world are the church. So, I hope you see in this that church isn’t what we do, it is not a place we are, it is who we are, wherever we are: a bunch of broken, sinful people who have been called out and gathered up by God to be his special representatives on earth, empowered to love him and love each other, and to embody in all that we are and all that we do the Kingdom of God.

Here at First, we do that in a thousand and one ways. People are engaged here…you are engaged here: worshiping God corporately, singing, praying, serving, and leading. The list is long for what this looks like: Kidzone, LiFE groups, Awana, orphan care, local and world missions, community action and social justice, Bible studies, prayer groups, quilting, worship. And none of that is limited to this space: it is at the HOME building, driving in your car, at school, downtown, in Guatemala and Haiti, and at home. As the church, you are
representatives of Jesus Christ, at your workplace, at your home, in your neighborhood, and in the world.

This is such a unique community, because in so many ways we are identified by the vibrancy of the church in our community. I believe I’ve said this to you before, that only when you’ve lived somewhere where this is not the case—where the church has no influence, no voice, no engagement with the community—perhaps only then can you truly appreciate how special and unique it is here in Sioux Center.

In the survey I had so many of you fill out last fall, I asked several questions to determine what it is you truly value. One of the questions went like this: “If I had to live without ______ I would experience withdrawal, feelings of deep insecurity, and/or ‘end of the world’ vulnerability.” Do you know what came up the most? Faith. Another question was, “What is most important to me?” The most frequent answer? Jesus. In our small group interviews, many of you corroborated these sentiments by noting the importance and value of the church in our community. This, brothers and sisters, makes my heart sing!

What encourages me so much about the church in Sioux Center, and even the church as it is spread out all over the world, is that it is active. It is alive! We say here at FRC that we have been called to listen to the Spirit, follow the Son, and exalt the Father. Notice that these are active, not passive terms. Listen, follow, exalt. The church is moving, because the church is organic; it is alive! Paul writes that we have all been baptized by one Spirit into one body. “Now you are the
body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27a). “Christ is the head of the body, the church” (Colossians 1:18). The church is the body of Jesus Christ in the world, and Jesus is alive! So, that means we have been joined to Christ by the power of the Spirit to do what Jesus does, to go where Jesus goes. May God grant us to grace listen to the Spirit, follow the Son, and exalt him, because if we are not alive and active, we are not the church.

So, again, the church is a living organism of all those who have been joined to Jesus by the Spirit. We engage the world as representatives of Jesus. And Jesus has made very clear what our purpose is:

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

This is the great commission that we have been called to. Every one of us. And in this great commission we hear echoes of the larger story: that God created the world good; that his good creation is fallen; that in Christ is redeeming creation (we are evidence of that!); and he will restore all of his lost and broken creation. His church is the means by which he communicates this good news and then shows to the world what this redemption and restoration looks like. In our study of Genesis last fall, I told you that God’s church doesn’t have a mission, God’s mission has a church. We are the instrument by which God is restoring his creation.
What all of this means is that when we think of the church, we must think of it in terms of our identity and our purpose. It isn’t just good: it is glorious! It is holy!

Distortion – Making Church Into an Ultimate Thing

So, how do we take this good thing, this glorious thing, and make church into an idol. Now, remember our definition of idol: an idol is any good thing we make into an ultimate thing that we believe will give us life, hope, and happiness. How do we make church into an ultimate thing? To help us think about how we might answer this question, we turn to our text for today in Amos, chapter 5, verses 18-27 (you can find this text on page 1,426). A little context is helpful. Amos was a prophet in the northern kingdom (Israel) during the reign of Jeroboam II. At this time, both Judah and Israel were enjoying relative prosperity, though the northern kingdom, in particular, was growing a bit nervous because of a highly aggressive Assyrian Empire. But, for the most part, life was good. And in their prosperity, the people had grown complacent. Not only that, but God’s people were exploiting the poor, even selling them into slavery. But the people of God were worshiping like they always did. In fact, we are told they were looking forward to the Day of the Lord: that great day when God would intervene and put an end to the bullying of the Assyrians. That was the short view. The long view was that the Day of the Lord would come and they would finally be rewarded for their faith. So, understand that for the people of
Israel, their belief appeared to be intact; even their worship appeared to be intact.

But listen:

“Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light—pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness? I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god—which you made for yourselves. Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus, says the LORD, whose name is God Almighty.”

Here’s what going on: God’s people are engaging in the action of church: they are gathering, giving their offerings, singing...and yet God says, “I want nothing of it. You think just going through the motions is going to please me? Do you think that honors me?” For the people of Israel, their ceremonies and rituals have become gods to them. Church has become their god. It is about the ceremony and the
ritual, about the elements of worship—and not about God. They have made church, not God, ultimate.

What might this look like for us today? Do we do this? Have we made church into an idol? Like each of the idols we’ve talked about—family, wealth, community pride, and work—the sin is cloaked behind the appearance of what is good. Especially here—we’re talking about the church! How could we distort this? I have a pretty short list this morning for what this might look like, and we can surely add to it, but perhaps we know we’ve made church into an idol…

**Consumerism**—When we’ve become consumers of church. Consumerism is the belief that the church is a purveyor of religious goods and services, and you are the customer. As with most businesses, the point of this business is to ensure the customer’s happiness and growth (and of course the customer is always right!). Your king, your idol, your god…is your need. The question you ask is, “What’s in it for me?” The church being comprised of broken people, getting what you want doesn’t usually happen. Of course, maybe our happiness isn’t the point, anyway. But God help the one who gets in the way of our happiness or fulfillment. One of our interviewees said that, “People will beat you up (figuratively) if you don’t do what [people in the church] want you to do.” Consumers make church into an idol.

**Narcissism**—When we believe that church is about me. Narcissism is actually closely related to consumerism, and is simply the belief that the church is about me: *my* beliefs, *my* preferences, *my* emotions, what will make *me* happy (or
unhappy). My king, my idol, my god...is me. The question we ask is, “Do I like this or not?” If I don’t like whatever is happening, then I will justify myself in withholding love from others because, after all, it’s about me. It’s personal, but it can also be corporate—a sort of shared narcissism. This is the belief that it’s about us, about those of us who are here, and not about those who aren’t here. Whether personal or corporate, we make church about us on the inside, and end up being judgmental toward those on the outside. Narcissists make church into an idol. With both consumerism and narcissism, we invert the creation story. The creation story tells us that God made us in his image, and we are to worship him alone. With narcissism, what we are really doing is creating God in our image and then worshiping ourselves. Church becomes the idol by which to worship...me!

**Traditionalism**—When tradition governs us. Traditionalism is a big one. Most churches with any history whatsoever struggle with this. In fact, it’s even been found that new church starts only a year old become entrenched, and make an idol out of tradition. Hear something now: tradition is good; celebrating our history is good; telling stories about our past is good. Tradition can and should be prized. Traditionalism, however, is a distortion of tradition; making tradition into an idol. It is when our king, our idol, our god...is the way we’ve always done it before. Thom Rainer is a researcher with LifeWay Christian Resources, and in his study of churches in North America finds that the famous last words of dying churches are, “We’ve always done it this way before,” or “We’ve never
done it *that* way before.” This is perhaps the best picture of *going through the motions*. We’ve got it dialed in. We know the drill. Let’s fulfill our religious obligation and nobody gets hurt. No risk. No faith required, because we know where this is going. No prayer required, because we know exactly what we are doing. In Europe, and increasingly in the United States, churches are becoming quite lovely museums; mementoes of an ancient, risky, living faith that has been replaced by “the way it’s always been done before.” And it’s easy to say, “Well, the world is going to pot and these younger generations don’t value the church!” But maybe it is more true to say that what worked before doesn’t work today. Maybe the limited vision of the church, which in so many places has closed itself off from the rest of the world and sought only its own comfort and need, simply didn’t capture the imagination of those younger generations. And why would it?

Maybe the world saw our idolatry before we did: that we had made a god out of “the way it’s always been done before,” instead of faithfully following the Spirit who is always on the move. Church, we must be honest in our appraisal of the situation, recognizing that making church into an idol is a persistent threat.

Redemption—A New Vision of the Kingdom

Consumerism, narcissism, and traditionalism makes church into something that it is not. These things replace God with distortions of our identity and purpose. When we use the church as the shrine, pedestal, and star of our needs, wants, and desires, then we’ve made it into an idol. And it will not matter what the stuff we do looks like—whether we have five elders or fifty; whether we
sings hymns or praise choruses; whether accompanied by organ or guitar; whether my sermons are entertaining or academic. It will all be an abomination to God. We will just be going through the motions.

What does God desire? “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (v. 24). In these two words, justice and righteousness, God gives us a new vision of the Kingdom, and he showed it most dramatically and brought it together in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. What is that vision? **Love.** The night he was betrayed, Jesus gathered in a room with his disciples, and in preparation for the Passover feast, Jesus put a towel around his waist, got out a bowl of water, and he washed his disciples feet. He washed them. Served them. Loved them. This was in anticipation of his greatest act of love: going to the cross on our behalf *before we loved him.* In fact, he went when we were his enemies. “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). In Christ’s action, we actually know what true love is. As he washed his disciples feet, and in anticipation of what he would do on the cross, Jesus gave his disciples a command and he gives us a command: “Love one another” (John 13:34).

This is nothing new. From the beginning, the command has been “Love God; love your neighbor.” The church is not something to worship. In fact, we can be certain that when we use the church as a justification to withhold love from others, we have made church into a demonic idol.
The church is who you are and the church is the means by which we engage the world with God’s love! Listen: you can love FRC, and you can love music, and you can love the Bible...just don’t worship these things. There is so much infighting in the Christian church today over the Bible, and worship, and theology, and tradition. Does the Bible save you? Does right theology save you? Does tradition save you? No! Only Jesus saves. What we do here are simply things that point us to Christ and his love for us. And in and through Christ and his love we are enabled to love God and love each other, which is the point, after all.

Developing Practices of Faithfulness

One of the ways we resist making church into an idol is remembering that this isn’t it. Making this building or this music or this preaching or this ministry the focus of your love is idolatry. Instead, make God your love, and then go out and love people. The only way I believe we are capable of doing that is by Listening to the Spirit—practicing lives of prayer and reading and studying the scriptures alone and together. Listening actually puts us into a position to Follow the Son. As we grow in the knowledge that Jesus is who he says he is, and we are who he says we are, then we are empowered to engage the world—wherever he is at work...at school, at home, at work—in love. As we do that, we will truly be Exalting the Father. We practice that right here on Sunday mornings and evenings, to be sure, but that worship will be reflected all of life.

I want to be at least somewhat practical with all of this and provide some direction. What can you do?
• Worship: here, at home, in your car. Give thanks to God in any and every situation.

• Serve: it is amazing how we stop thinking about ourselves when we go out and serve others. Sign up for a mission trip; participate in a local ministry like Operation Prom or Kidzone; ask to be a server here at our Wednesday night meal; come sing in the choir; help out with a Sunday school class or Awana; start something new in the community...find a way to bless people and fill a need. Participate with a goal of blessing and serving others.

• LiFE Group: Mark DeYounge leads our LiFE Groups ministries here at FRC. My hope is that upon hearing this sermon today you will email, call, or write Mark DeYounge and tell him you want to be a part of a life group, so that tomorrow morning when he gets to the office his email and voicemail inboxes will be OVERFLOWING with your desire to be part of a LiFE Group. In LiFE Group, you will learn and practice what it means to listen, follow, and exalt. And, it will give you a place to experience the kind of community that, unfortunately, a church of 1,000 people cannot provide on Sunday mornings.

Then, church, love each other! You are loved. The Creator of heaven and earth is crazy about you, and he set you apart to be his servants and ambassadors right here in Sioux Center. Let’s show the world, let’s show our neighbor who this God is by the way we love.
Josh Kuipers is going to come up now and sing a song. Would you listen carefully to the lyrics? The song is an acknowledgment that sometimes we have missed the mark when it comes to how we act as the church both inside and outside of these walls. It hits lots of different groups of people, so don’t get stuck. It gives space to ask the question: are we, as the church, all who God intends us to be? Bride of Christ, listen well. Let’s pray…

Solo—“Song For My Family”

Prayers of the People

God of all seasons, in your pattern of things there is a time for keeping and a time for losing, a time for building up and a time for pulling down. In this season of Lent as we journey to the cross, help us to discern in our lives what we must lay down and what we must begin. Thank you for your great love and compassion, for blessing us with all we need for this life and the life to come. As you breath your Spirit into us, conform us to the pattern of your Son, that we might look a little bit more like Jesus every day. In that, dear God, save us from using our power to satisfy the demands of selfishness in the face of the greater needs of others. Save us from offering our devotion to cheap or easy religion in the face of the harder path on which you bid us to follow you. Give us wisdom to discern evil, and in the face of all that is deceptively attractive help us to choose your will.
Lord, today we pray for those in our congregation and community who are suffering in body, mind, and spirit...

We pray for your church worldwide, and especially for those who are persecuted and oppressed...

We pray for our country, its leaders, and those serving in the military...

We pray for a world torn by war and violence...

May your kingdom come, O God!

Mighty God and Father, you overwhelm us with your great mercy. At the time of our greatest need you surprised us with your wondrous love. Through Christ, your Son, you have removed the curse and draw us into this renewing relationship of love. Father, our response is gratitude...and we offer the substance of our lives to continue the ministry of Christ. For his name and glory we pray and present our gifts. Amen.

Offering/Offertory – “Grace”

Closing Hymn – “In Christ Alone”

Benediction
Appendix S

THE IDOL OF RELIGION

Sermon Debriefing/Discussion – March 1, 2015

What would it look like at FRC if we were to resist the idol of religion and live more fully into faithfulness towards God?

Our conversation this morning included more people than we’ve had yet in these gatherings. We were blessed by the high school Sunday school class, which doubled our numbers and gave a unique perspective to the discussion. Evidently, while the entire series has been highly commended by the body, this last subject—religion—piqued more interest than any of the others.

I opened our discussion by asking people to openly share comments regarding what they resonated with in the morning’s sermon, followed by critique. Several general comments were made (some even quoting the sermon itself) in deep resonance with the content of the sermon, and no statements of critique were proffered.

• “Amos is a hard book…I read the passage this morning before worship and wondered, ‘Where in the world is he going to go with this?’”

• “The idea of Christian-on-Christian crime struck a nerve…we do this all the time.”

388
• “I really identify with the tradition piece. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard (or said myself), ‘We’ve always done it this way before.’”

• “Tradition is comfortable. It seems like it is normal, and keeps us in our comfort zone (which is kinda where we like to be most of the time).”

• “Yeah, and we have such a remarkable tendency to make it about ourselves. The whole idea of individual and corporate narcissism is right on…”

I asked at this point for specific examples of what consumerism/narcissism/traditionalism looks like at FRC:

• “The avoidance of change…”

• “Excluding those who don’t look like us…”

• “Excluding those people who are different from us, especially culturally (for example, the Latino community here in Sioux Center).”

• “We do a good job of making God into our own image…so anything different is suspicious.”

• “We haven’t done this here (though people have maybe felt it), but I have a friend who insisted that it isn’t worship unless the music is organ-accompanied.

Moving on to the pertinent question (above), the following comments were made, forming the basis of our discussion:
• “It would look like living for Him throughout the week...so engaged in living as Christ’s ambassadors that Sunday becomes a celebration of acts of love engaged in throughout the week.”

• “Maybe each Sunday (or every few weeks) we could provide a ‘witness stand,’ in which people could share their experiences over the course of the week in loving their neighbor.”

• “Yeah, it would give everyone at FRC an opportunity to see it...to see God at work; it would inspire more openness in prayer.”

• “That imaginative prayer time would cultivate greater intimacy at worship (which is otherwise pretty hard to pull off in a church of 1,000 people!).”

• “It opened the way for me to think about different worship styles and methods of worship...requiring me to ask ‘Why do we do what we do when we do it?’”

• “The witness stand idea...[allows us to see] how God is working in other lives than my own. [It gives us an opportunity to] see how great He is.”

• “Miracles are happening all around us...we just don’t hear about it or see it because we tend to be in our own little worlds, and it is hard to create the kind of space that opens people up to sharing stuff.”

• “What we are doing inter-generationally...it is a picture of the Kingdom; a picture of the world. If we can do it [worship, actively loving God and neighbor] well, it will spill out into all of life, affecting everything...”
• “Things have changed here pretty dramatically…the community looks a whole lot different today than it did 20 years ago. Pretty cool to think about how God is positioning FRC.”

• “We need to pray…We don’t have a bead on what God is doing that we can just dial it in. We need to stay open to his Spirit’s leading. Prayer positions us to live out a risky, dangerous faith…”

This was a tremendously thoughtful group, who were willing to look critically at our way of being historically at FRC, but who are equally willing to humbly go where God leads. A wonderful spirit of humility was revealed in the group, along with a sincere desire to listen carefully to the Spirit that we might be all that God intends for us to be.

Humility is the term that keeps coming up in all of these debriefing sessions: a willingness to be self-critical, and in so doing finding that God offers freedom. This is hard to do, as when we confront the ways in which we have made the church into an idol, we have to acknowledge that we’ve hurt and marginalized people. It was interesting to note than when I asked the Sunday school class if any had ever been hurt by the church, pretty much every hand went up. The call to love our neighbor as God loves us, and to also know that this is precisely what God has freed us to do, resonated deeply. The is a church who truly desires to live according to God’s will, but perhaps has not always felt permission. Just dreaming what this might look opened eyes…people were excited. For the second straight debriefing session, I noted the opportunity to open FRC’s doors
to a group of Guatemalan Christians for worship. This was met by joy and excitement; not, as I had feared originally, with skepticism and fear.

This debriefing session effectively closed our series on idolatry at FRC. It is not the last time we will talk about idolatry, but our earnest work is over for now. Encouraging to me is the fact that everyone I talked to throughout this series was excited about and interested in the subject. The folks of FRC want to know what their idols look like, and desire to resist them even as they cultivate practices of faithfulness. As I finish writing this summary, my phone whistled in a text: “We are so grateful for this series!”
Bibliography


