

S E V E N

## THINKING BIG

*Connecting Heavenly Hope to Daily Life*

**E**ach Friday night along the street outside my former apartment in downtown Chicago, the heart of the city's nightlife throbs to life. Young people wearing masks of makeup bustle in and out of bars and lounges; thumping music spills over their shoulders as they go through the doors. Smells waft from restaurants and drift into the street, where a chorus of cab horns fills the evening air.

In the exact center of it all, on the corner of Rush and Bellevue, a young man with a friendly but unsmiling face stands as though bolted to the concrete. He leans forward, propelled by an unseen, steady gust of wind, and, cupping a pocket Bible around his mouth, he shouts without stopping into the night.

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“For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life!” Pause. “The Bible says, two shall be standing in a field, one will be taken, the other left behind!”

The man keeps on shouting, enduring the cold, the exhaustion, and the open scorn of passers-by as the night wears on.

At first, this man strikes me as a powerful prophetic voice. What a way to witness: to surrender your Friday night for the thankless purpose of standing on that corner in the middle of drunks and revelers, all for the remote possibility of calling people to repentance or even converting someone to Christ that very night.

After I pass the man a second time, awkwardly averting my gaze as I walk by, the opposite thought occurs to me: that this man’s idea of faith and renewal is *small*. He seems to have found the most alienating way to talk to people (or *at* people), the way that involves the least listening, the least smiling, the least humility, the least possibility of getting anything but a cold shoulder in return. Granted, there’s no telling how the Holy Spirit can stir and sway in unexpected ways, but as I walk by the man, it seems to me that our aim should be to remove barriers to the Spirit and open points of contact with the wider world around us in order to convey the truth of Christ.

The shouting man’s methods, however, are in step with the small-gospel mentality that dominates modern thinking about religion. Like him, we tend to think of the gospel in terms of saving souls and making a personal commitment to Christ. Which it certainly is. But there’s a lot more to it. The gospel is a mind-altering message that affects every aspect of life. Its story of redemption describes the history of the whole universe—and its future.

When we consider the full story of the gospel (from the Old English word *godspel*, meaning “good news”), we see a larger picture of the redemption Christ brought about, and we starve for the completion of it. The gospel stands on three legs, not one; Christ’s redeeming work was done to restore nature, culture, and human beings. Now *that’s* good news. “The total work of Christ is nothing less than to redeem this entire creation from the effects of sin,” writes Anthony Hoekema. “We need a clear understanding of the doctrine of the new earth, therefore, in order to see God’s redemptive program in *cosmic dimensions*.”

In the terms of the small gospel, you make a personal commitment to Christ, try to be a kind person, and look for opportunities to witness to others about your faith. Which we all should do. But a gospel this limited also shrinks its source. In a small gospel, God’s main job is to be a missionary coordinator, and salvation is an insurance policy for hell avoidance. In a big gospel, God is the maker and manager of the entire creation and the commissioner of all the culture making of humans, and he is working toward the restoration of all of it.

When we live in the hope of a big gospel, we see Jesus Christ not just as a serial intruder on people’s souls but the one in whom “all things hold together,” in the words of Colossians I. *All things*—not just people’s hearts but the infrastructure of nature, culture, and relationships. So the hope of a big gospel is not just going to heaven to be with God, but a vision of the new earth and the heavenly city as the place where God’s authority over all of life is made complete. Living in the hope of heaven means seeing glimpses of such a place already, and wanting more.

In the conventional thinking of today’s society, connecting your faith to your life happens mostly in small ways. Your religion is a private thing. It’s something you do on Sundays and

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holidays. You pray before mealtimes, you keep a Bible by your bedside, wear a WWJD bracelet, give to charity. “Taylor, you’re a Sunday Protestant,” the pastor says in an episode of *Gilmore Girls*. “You come in, you say, ‘Hi God,’ you sing a song, and you leave.” (Taylor replies, “I always leave a dollar!”)

What the pastor is saying is this: your faith is small. This is a great compromise Taylor and many Christians have made with secular society. The authors of *Redeeming Creation* say this in humorous but sincere terms. “As Christians, we have accepted the secularist’s premise that religion may be personally enthralling but socially irrelevant—that it is some sort of private vice, like pornography, to be practiced in one’s closet.” Enlightenment thinkers approached Christians and said, “Please keep your Christianity to yourself, safely confined to your inner spiritual activity.” Many Christians responded, and still do, by saying, “Fine, we will.”

Why have Christians been willing to give up so much ground? Why have we been so inclined to agree with atheists about the place of religion in public life? Why have we settled for a small gospel?

This is what N. T. Wright must wonder as he writes about the modern meaning of the word *religion*. “Whatever Paul was heralding as he went around the Mediterranean world, our post-enlightenment category of ‘religion’ is far too restricted to handle it,” Wright says. He asserts that the good news is the news of a whole new kingdom. It’s not just the successful abduction of certain souls.

It probably doesn’t help that popular religious prophets tend to preach a small-gospel message. They have trained us to see salvation as a “personal transaction,” as Richard Mouw puts it, a solely spiritual exchange between an individual person and God, which leads to a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”

This is only part of the story. The problem is that this small story trains us to consider the presence of Christ as a natural fit only in the space of our souls, not in nature, culture, and human relationships. We see Christ as merely a converter, not the one “in whom all things hold together,” and through whom all things were “created” and are being “reconciled,” as Colossians says. Mouw’s stirring words about the limits of the “personal transaction” model struck me when I first read them in high school, and have stuck with me ever since:

Jesus came to rescue a creation that was pervasively infected by the curse of sin—an infection not limited to the psychic territory populated by “human hearts.” The curse of sin touches the natural realm, reaching into art and economics, affecting family relationships and educational endeavors, holding thrones and budgets in its grip. . . . “Changed hearts” will *not* “change society” if the efforts at change are not also directed toward the structures and patterns of human interaction.

Christ came to mend and restore *shalom* in its entirety—every part of human existence that is out of place, everything that is not the way it’s supposed to be.

Here’s the extended passage from Colossians 1; listen to how un-small it makes Christ sound:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things

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on the earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

The words *souls* and *hearts*, though used elsewhere in the Bible, are not used here. The verse thunders with the might of mastery over the universe. I've always wondered whether this was the verse Abraham Kuyper had in mind when he uttered his famous sentence in his inaugural address to the university he founded in the Netherlands. I adopted it as my credo when I went to work in the Tribune Tower in downtown Chicago. "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'" Kuyper lived out this motto by covering more of those square inches than most of us do; he founded two newspapers, a political party, and a university, wrote several scholarly books, and served one term as prime minister of the Netherlands.

Colossians 1:17 is one passage that affirms Christ's claim on the cosmos; another one is John 3:16, though I only realized it recently, long after I'd begun writing this chapter. I was reading Richard Mouw's chapter on Kuyper in his book *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, and I realized how ironic it is that John 3:16 is the verse on which small-gospel believers base their belief that salvation is a purely personal matter. Mouw points out that the Greek word for "world" in John 3:16–17 is *kosmos*, meaning "order," as in, "created order" or "whole universe." Mouw writes these verses with the Greek word inserted (I'll use the Latin and English spelling):

For God so loved the *cosmos* that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the *cosmos* to condemn the *cosmos*, but to save the *cosmos* through him.

In the literally thousands of times I've heard that verse, I'd never heard it that way before, until Mouw pointed that out.

So seeing “saving souls” as the core of the gospel story is too small. The other part of the small gospel—having a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ”—has similar shortcomings. This phrase has come to be seen as a central tenet of Christianity, even though it never occurs in the Bible. Limiting ourselves to a personal relationship with God is problematic, for it focuses a Christian's attention on himself or herself. Robert Price states the problem succinctly: this personal model, he says, can lead believers “to focus myopically on the application of Christ's death to the private internal struggles of piety.” When the small gospel is taken to the extreme, Price says, “the strong impression is given that God sent his only begotten Son, the second Person of the Trinity, to earth to be crucified and resurrected just so the pietist can . . . have a blissful quiet time.” As a result, “the reality of Christ is effectively limited to a source for individual sanctification, even for spiritual coziness.”

The irony is that while a small gospel appropriately humbles the believer with the reality of his own sin and the need for salvation, the idea of a personal relationship can amplify the individual inappropriately. It can bring a person to be so wrapped up in her soul that she loses sight of the relevance of the gospel to nature, culture, and human relationships around her. Price calls each believer to see “that her small planet is only one of many orbiting a greater sun” and “to see the same light [of Christ] that illuminates her shining on other people, other areas of life and culture.”

How big or small our understanding of the good news is will affect how we live now in anticipation of how we will live in heaven. Take televangelism, for example. When television was invented,

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Christians came to believe that the most holy way to use the new technology was for preaching the gospel—the small gospel of saving souls. Although Christ did indeed give his followers the Great Commission in Matthew 28 to “go and make disciples of all nations,” Quentin Schultze, coining an amusing but apt phrase, says that when this verse is too narrowly understood, it becomes the “Great Commotion”—the frantic search for converts. “Although evangelicals have rightly kept alive the fundamental necessity of personal religious conversion,” Schultze writes, “they have also sometimes tried to make such conversion the alpha and omega of *all* Christian activity in the world.”

It’s not as though Jesus said to “go and make converts,” though that is part of the equation. Christ was calling his followers to attest to his transforming truth and let it work to restore not only people’s sin-soiled lives but also the natural and cultural environment and human relationships across the globe. The small gospel, Schultze says, prioritizes the Great Commission over the cultural commission to the extent that you might feel guilty for ordering a pizza without trying to convert the delivery boy.

Suppose we evaluate all of our communication—everything we write and say—solely in terms of whether or not the gospel was directly proclaimed. Most college lectures would be unacceptable. So would most musical recordings and concerts, mathematics, and engineering. In fact, if we said “I love you” to someone it could be construed as non-Christian.

Wittmer makes a good point about this small-mindedness and the term “the Christian life.” “If *life* includes more than Bible reading, prayer, and evangelism,” Wittmer says, “then *the Christian life* must include more as well.”

Despite their narrow outlook, we must affirm that small-gospel believers often live with a palpable sense of the power of the dramatic transformation of Christ's truth. Even the man shouting on the Chicago street corner drew people's attention for his passion. They also affirm the important fact that you can't wander into heaven; you have to be reconciled to God in a decisive way. The danger of the big gospel is that it can get so big that it becomes vague and generic, leaning toward a New Age, wishy-washy feeling about the unity of all things. Big or small, our understanding of the transformation of the gospel must be centered on Christ.

But practically, a small-gospel vision can keep us from getting big ideas about what heaven means for us now. Imagine if the shouting Chicago street prophet lived out his passion for his faith and testament to Christ's truth in other ways. What if he stopped shouting and visited with some of the homeless people sitting down the street from him, listening to their stories and maybe sharing a meal with them? What if he devoted his life to advocating affordable housing or health care for the poor? What if he ran one of the bars he was shouting at and tried to make it better, or ran for city government to help bring about a more harmonious development of culture with the earth? What if he wrote songs that spoke to people about beauty and sin? And what if, in these ways of making culture and embodying justice and righteousness, he testified to the name of Christ?

Again, no one can deny this man the assumption that he was trying to faithfully respond to his convictions. But wouldn't these bigger possibilities make for a more meaningful connection with his urban environment and testify more powerfully to a God "in whom all things hold together"? Wouldn't they be compelling echoes of heaven?

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The big gospel calls us to broad-minded ways of transforming creation and culture in the name of Christ. The Bible and its story of cosmic redemption should have us thinking big, and thinking ahead, to the time when God brings heaven to earth.

The future of the small gospel is itself small; since a small gospel stands on one leg—the salvation of human souls—its chief hope is similarly weak-kneed: the collection of these souls in a faraway place, the final step in what the sumptuous song “I’ll Fly Away” imagines:

Some glad morning when this life is o’er  
I’ll fly away  
To a home on God’s celestial shore  
I’ll fly away

This is a comforting thought, especially to those suffering from disease or oppression. But it restricts heaven to little more than the assembly of these airborne souls “on God’s celestial shore.” A big gospel, with its three legs—the restoration of nature, culture, and human beings—gives us a bigger picture of heaven: the natural planet, the heavenly city, and the people who have been restored to God-with-us. The difference in this projection of heavenly sentiments, Mouw writes, is the difference in scope between the hymn chorus that says “It is well with my soul” and the exclamation of Revelation 21: “I am making everything new!”

The big ideas of the big gospel lead us to imagine a new earth, a heavenly city, and a perfected state of God-with-us. And they lead us to anticipate the restoration of all three by turning our gaze to our present earth, culture, and relationships with others, in addition to the reconciliation of human beings to God. To think big as we live our lives, we need to have a framework,

a foundational vision of how heaven is coming to earth. We need a big gospel mindset for living on this earth and hoping for the one to come.

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### The Big Picture

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Thoreau's last words, I noted at the beginning of this book, were to his friend Parker Pillsbury, in response to the question of whether he had any vision of the afterlife. "One world at a time, Parker," Thoreau replied.

To live in the hope of heaven is to live as though Thoreau were wrong. It is to live in two worlds at once: the world as it is and the world as it was meant to be—and will be again. It is to see shades of both creation and new creation in daily life—the present visited by the future. It is to see heaven creeping into our natural environment and social lives and to want more of it. It is to live with a constant consciousness of what David Dark calls "a world both beyond *and* presently among the world of appearances." To live in the hope of heaven is to feel the tug of the strange tension between what Oscar Cullman called the *already* and the *not yet*—the initial triumph of the first coming of Christ and the promise of his second one.

To live with this tension on a daily basis—to simultaneously occupy the two worlds Thoreau separated—requires a big picture of the world and our place and purpose within it. We need a big gospel vision for how we are living, what we are hoping, and where we are going.

"Ideas have legs," writes Steven Garber. Theories have their grounding in our daily walk. Neither is complete without the other—legs walk aimlessly without a deeper purpose; ideas are thought of to no discernible end. The way we integrate how we