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# Building for the Future: Worldview Foundations of Sand and Rock<sup>1</sup>

by Michael Goheen

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## Abstract

The good news of Jesus Christ is a message about the revelation and accomplishment of the goal of history—the restoration of the entire creation from sin. Thus, the Christian faith is not a religion that can be slotted into the private domain of human life. Rather it is a comprehensive worldview embodied by the Christian community. The Christian community has always had to embody the gospel of the kingdom in the context of a culture that holds other comprehensive beliefs. Three cultural contexts can be discerned in church history, all of which bring possibilities for and dangers to a faithful witness to the gospel. Sometimes the cultural setting is hostile to the Christian faith, as in the case of the early church and the church under Communism. While Christians may be limited in contributing to the cultural development of society, they must embody an alternative worldview that challenges the reigning public doctrine, even if it means suffering. Sometimes the cultural arrangement will favour the Christian church, giving it an established position. In this situation, Christians must use the position offered to shape the culture according to the light of the gospel, remaining critical of elements of culture out of keeping with the kingdom and modelling the gentle and uncoercive manner of Jesus the Servant-King. Sometimes Christians will find themselves in a culture that ignores the Christian faith and relegates it to the private realm. Then Christians must refuse to reduce the gospel to a private religious teaching, and seek ways to embody the truth of the gospel for public life. The church in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has seen all three of these cultural contexts. The paper concludes with two comments for the church in Eastern Europe, Russia, Ukraine, and other countries of the former Soviet Union. First, there may be a parallel situation between the collapse of the Roman empire and the collapse of Communism. Both offer the opportunity for the Christian worldview to fill the vacuum created by the crumbling of the reigning cultural doctrine. Second, the growing presence of capitalistic liberalism threatens the gospel as public truth about human society and culture. The gospel and liberal, democratic capitalism offer two different stories about the world that demands a commitment in faith. Which worldview will provide a foundation for the future of Russia, Ukraine, and Eastern Europe? Will it be the rock of the gospel of Jesus Christ or the sand of a human hope for the future?

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I offer this paper with the full awareness that it is shaped by my cultural setting which is so different from that of nations from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. My own studies in worldview have been shaped in interaction with the cultural story that shapes the West. However, I take comfort in the conviction of Cyril and Methodius, apostles to the Slavs, that “every nation has its own particular gifts and every people its legitimate calling within the family of the universal church” (Obolensky 1994:215). This is also my conviction; all cultures have both insights and blind spots. Dialogue between different cultural traditions leads to mutual enrichment and correction. I hope that my insights on the Christian church, drawn from the Western setting, may offer some light for your situation.

Two thousand years ago Jesus of Nazareth opened his public career with the startling announcement that the kingdom of God had arrived in history. To judge the significance and meaning of these words we must attempt to return to the first-century Jewish context in which they were spoken. This was not an announcement about the beginning of a new religion to succeed Judaism or some new religious doctrine. Rather Jesus claimed that in him all of universal and world history found its meaning (Berkhof 1966). The Old Testament told a story that was not just about one small ethnic and religious group; rather it claimed to be a story about what the one Creator God was doing to restore the whole creation and all peoples from the devastating effects of human evil. God chose one nation, Israel, to be the channel through which He would restore the entire creation. The Old Testament looked forward to a time when one man from within Israel, a King, would appear and bring history to a close, judging evil and establishing a world-wide kingdom of justice, peace, and joy. This man would bring universal history to its end and consummation. Then God would rule over all of creation again as he had in the beginning; the kingdom of God would be restored. Jesus announced that he was that man hoped for by the Jewish people for thousands of years. He was the one through whom God would usher in His kingdom. Jesus announced the good news, the gospel, that now God was acting in him to bring an end to all the enemies of God and of the creation.

Yet history did not end. Jesus appeared to be more of a Jewish rabbi than the one who would conquer evil and establish a worldwide kingdom. However, Jesus’

message remained consistent. While the kingdom was already present in a provisional form in the healing power of God's Spirit, the final kingdom was not to be established immediately. There would be a delay before its final unveiling and the intervening time would give opportunity for this message to be communicated to all the peoples of the earth. All who believed the message would begin to experience the healing power of God that had entered history, and would enjoy a foretaste of the life of God's final kingdom. In the irony of God's purpose, the shameful crucifixion coupled with the resurrection became the central events in history. Jesus met and defeated death and the evil of the world by taking it all upon himself at the cross. His resurrection from the dead signalled the victory over death and evil as Jesus was the first one to victoriously enter into the life of the world to come. He poured out the Spirit to share this life with his followers. All those who follow him now begin to experience in foretaste the life of the world to come, and are called to live under the rule of God in the whole of their lives, words, and deeds. Jesus promised to return and complete his work. At that time every person will acknowledge that Jesus is not the founder of a new religion but King and Lord over all creation. Creation will be restored and all the evil and suffering that corrupts this world will be defeated.

This brief summary shows that the good news, the Christian message is not simply some new religious teaching that can be incorporated into the reigning culture. Rather it is a message about the end of history, the culmination of universal history. It is a story about the restoration of all creation, all peoples, and all of human life, from the effects of human sin. All of human life can again be lived unto God. If the message of Jesus is true—and it can be rejected, of course—but if it is true, it is public truth. It has universal significance, and has implications for all of human life; it offers a comprehensive worldview. To use the words of the Russian theologian George Fedotov, Christian 'spirituality' (to use his term) cannot be "confined to prayer but embraces the whole world-outlook" (Fedotov 1988:7). The gospel has implications for politics, economics, education, media, business, family, indeed all of life. If the church is the people of God that has begun to share in the healing of Jesus' work, its task is to embody Christ's victory in every realm and station of life.

From the beginning, the church that believed its own gospel was compelled to live in the midst of a culture that embodied other comprehensive beliefs about the world and another story about where history was going. In other words, the Christian worldview has always had to negotiate a faithful witness in the context of an alternative story about the world. It will be no different for the Christian community in the Ukraine or Russia or Eastern Europe in the future. But perhaps a brief look at history can be instructive.

The small fledgling church of the first centuries in the Roman empire believed that Jesus had, in fact, made known and accomplished the end of universal history. Although small, and insignificant in both economic and political terms, they resolved to embody the universal claims of Christ in the face of the powerful and often hostile Roman empire. The name the early church chose to designate itself reveals the self-understanding of that early Christian community. That self-designation is in Greek, *ecclesia tou Theou*, translated, the public assembly of God. The Roman empire had other words with which to label private religious communities—*thiasos* and *heranos*. Both of these words described a religious community organized for religious or cultic exercises (like prayer and worship) and were only interested in the personal and future spiritual salvation of its members<sup>2</sup>. *Ecclesia* was a word that described a public assembly to which all the citizens of the city were summoned by the town clerk. It was a public gathering where citizens discussed and settled affairs that were important for the city's life. According to the early Christian community they were the *ecclesia* of God. That is, they were a public assembly summoned not by the town clerk but by a much higher authority—God. It was an assembly in which even the imperial claim of Caesar could only have a subordinate place. While all the enemies of the church used the terms *thiasos* and *heranos* to describe that new Christian community, the early church itself refused to accept these designations of religious fraternities. Rather they saw themselves as a people already beginning to embody the

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<sup>2</sup>The word salvation can be used in various ways. The Bible describes salvation as salvation **from** sin. Salvation is, then, the restoration of the creational life of the world from the effects of human sin and evil. Unfortunately, some have understood salvation as salvation **from** the creation. Salvation is then understood in an otherworldly sense. When this happens it is often interpreted in personal and future terms. Salvation in Scripture is not (only) future, otherworldly, or personal. It is (also) present, creational, and cosmic in scope.

end-time kingdom of God, and launched into the public life of the world to challenge all competing allegiances, including the emperor cult that bound the Roman empire together (Schmidt 1965:501-536).

The church's earliest confession 'Jesus is Lord' indicates the depth of this commitment. The Greek word *kurios*, translated Lord, indicates one with absolute authority. Various people were given that title but only one person held that title absolutely—the Roman Caesar. 'Caesar is Lord' is the confession at the centre of Roman culture, binding its public life together. When the church confessed Jesus as Lord, they relativized the authority and claim of the Roman emperor. Their refusal to be labelled as a religious cult and their rejection of the public doctrine of the Lordship of the Caesar brought persecution from an empire who would brook no rivals.

It seems to me that the church in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe faced a similar situation under Communism. Marxism offered an alternative story about the world. The world was moving toward justice, peace, and prosperity in a classless society by successive revolutions. All religions must either conform and contribute to this overarching story or be suppressed. Like the Roman empire, the Communist regime made absolute and comprehensive claims, turning a hostile face to any religious community that would not find a subordinate place within the more ultimate Marxist story. The churches in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe often refused to offer such allegiance, claiming universality and comprehensiveness for the Christian story. As a result, they paid the price for their effrontery, but they were among the primary reasons the Communist regime ultimately toppled.

When the church finds itself in a hostile environment, as it did in the Roman empire and the Communist regime, Christians are often pushed to the margins of public life. Excluded from public offices, it is often difficult for Christians to contribute to the political, educational, economic—indeed, the whole public—life of the nation. Yet if the church is faithful to its founding message, it may not withdraw into a private ghetto and renounce all responsibility for the cultural, political, and economic development of the nation. The church will seek to challenge the state and society by its very existence and example, witnessing to an alternative vision of life.

This can have dramatic results and open up the opportunity to implement that alternative way of life as happened in the Roman empire in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The conversion of Constantine to Christianity in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century opened the way for this to take place. There was a dramatic change in the church's position within society. From being in a marginal position within society, it became a dominant institution; from being socially, politically, and intellectually inferior, it moved to a position of power and superiority; from being economically weak and poor, it rose to a position of immense wealth; from being a (sometimes oppressed) minority, it became a (sometimes oppressive) majority; from being an illegal religion, it was now the only religion of the state. The church was now an established church, a powerful and privileged institution. Now there was opportunity for the church to shape the cultural life of the nation. A close alliance between church and state was formed. Byzantine emperor Basil I refers to this as the *symphonia*: "As the Commonwealth consists of parts and members, by analogy with an individual man, the greatest and most necessary parts are the emperor and the Patriarch. Wherefore agreement in all things and harmony (*sumfwnia*) between the Imperium and the Sacerdotium bring peace and prosperity to the souls and the bodies of the subjects" (Epanagoge, III, 8).

While there were differences, this Christendom or *corpus Christianum* *symphonia* characterized the relationship between Roman political authorities and the Roman Catholic church in the West, and the Byzantine rulers and the Eastern Orthodox church in the East. This *symphonia* has lasted for much of the church's life in both East and West. In Western scholarship, this Christendom arrangement has come under searching criticism. For some, the critique centres on the oppressive power of the Christian church. Now that the church held political power, it utilized that position to suppress all dissent and enforce Christian obedience. For others, the critique centres on the absorption of the church and its message into an established position where it eventually lost its critical stance toward society. The church became an arm of the state which was by definition Christian. In this situation, there was no need to critique the dominant order in the light of the gospel; after all it was supposedly Christian. Thus the church was domesticated, serving the interests of the

state. As I understand it, many Russian and Ukrainian scholars criticize the Russian empire under the Tzars for the same reason.

There is much truth to these critiques: indeed power can corrupt any movement, and an established church is tempted to abandon its critical role. However, the words of Lesslie Newbigin are appropriate here: “Much has been written about the harm done to the cause of the gospel when Constantine accepted baptism, and it is not difficult to expatiate on this theme. But could any other choice have been made? When the ancient classical world . . . ran out of spiritual fuel and turned to the church as the one society that could hold a disintegrating world together, should the church have refused the appeal and washed its hands of responsibility for the political order? . . . It is easy to see with hindsight how quickly the church fell into the temptation of worldly power. It is easy to point out the glaring contradiction between the man Jesus of the gospels and his followers occupying seats of power and wealth. And yet we have to ask, would God’s purpose . . . have been better served if the church had refused all political responsibility, if there had never been a ‘Christian’ Europe? . . . I find it hard to think so” (Newbigin 1986:100-101). Christendom provided an opportunity for the church to work out the claims of Christ’s Lordship over all of public life. Faithfulness to the gospel of the kingdom demanded that the church accept responsibility for the public life of culture. Faithfulness to Jesus who is Lord of history and culture required the church to bring politics, economics, education, and social life under the authority of Christ in spite of the dangers and temptations.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Part of the history and legacy of Christendom is what Oliver O’Donovan calls ‘the obedience of the rulers.’ O’Donovan argues that the Christendom idea must “be located correctly as an aspect of the church’s understanding of mission.” He continues: “It is precisely the missionary imperative that compelled the Church to take the conversion of the Roman empire seriously and to seize the opportunities it offered.” The martyrdom and protest of the early church witnessed to an alternative social order. This witness is vindicated by a church that subsequently brings the gospel to bear on the public life of culture, encouraging repentance and calling the powers to bring all of society under the authority of Christ (O’Donovan 1996:212-216).



Yet it remains true that the church often became an instrument for the political authorities rather than for the kingdom of God. Perhaps Arnold Toynbee overstates the case when he says that the Byzantine emperors succeeded in making the Orthodox church “virtually a department of the medieval East Roman state” (Toynbee 1958:160). However, the danger remains in the Christendom arrangement that the church will find its identity in its role in society rather than in the purposes of God. The threat of the *corpus Christianum* is that the comprehensive Christian worldview will be clipped back to accommodate itself to the comprehensive cultural worldview rather than challenging and shaping it. The church that enjoys political or social or economic power must not renounce that power because of the inherent dangers. Rather, the privileged church must resist coercion and be aware of its identity as a kingdom community called to shape all aspects of culture in keeping with the gospel of the servant King.

In the West the *corpus Christianum* was shattered by the Enlightenment—an important era in Western history during the 18<sup>th</sup> century when human reason pushed the Christian religion to the margins of society.<sup>36</sup> During the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the church had fragmented into many pieces. The close tie between church and state remained but now, alongside Roman Catholic territories, there were Anglican, Lutheran, and Calvinist political units. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, religious wars ensued wherein each confessional state attempted to establish supremacy.<sup>37i</sup> None were successful; yet the sight of Europe soaked with the blood of Christians shed by fellow Christians sickened many and seemed to say that the Christian message could not shape the public life of culture without violence. At the same time that these religious wars were draining confidence in the gospel, the

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<sup>36</sup>The Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is a critical time for Western history. It was the time when the modern, secular worldview reached maturity. This time is characterized by a widespread confidence in the power of reason to reshape human society into a free and prosperous world. The Christian story was marginalized by a new story of progress by scientific reason. Peter the Great attempted to carry out a similar project in his secularizing reforms.

<sup>37</sup>See Richard S. Dunn *The Age of Religious Wars, 1559-1689*. During this 130 year period Europe was ravaged by numerous religious wars all motivated by religious strife. The French civil wars of the 1562-1598, the Dutch revolt against Philip II, the Scottish rebellion against Mary Stuart, the Spanish attack on England in 1588, the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), the Puritan Revolution (1640-1660), and the Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689 in England were all, in part, religious conflicts.

success of the new physics flowing from the scientific revolution of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries offered another centre for European culture—scientific reason. A rationally ordered society and science-based technology offered new hope for society. Thus a new worldview took hold of western culture: reason disciplined by the scientific method, applied to society and translated into technological power, had the ability to transform the world into a materially and socially prosperous utopia. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century this worldview took two paths: liberal capitalism and Marxism. Both were in fundamental agreement with the basics of this worldview; they only differed on which rational economic and political order would bring about this prosperous world.

With scientific reason established at the centre of European culture as the ultimate judge of truth, all religious claims were either rejected, ignored, or reduced to the status of private beliefs. One may believe that Jesus was Saviour, but that confession must remain in the private individual realm. One may believe in Jesus for their own personal and future salvation but that confession had no place in the political, economic, educational, or social realms. Two comprehensive stories clashed—the Enlightenment one and the Christian one. The Enlightenment sought to be the exclusive story by domesticating the Christian story. Sadly, Christians were often not faithful to the founding message of Jesus. They reduced the gospel to a private religious message about their spiritual future. In fact, they allowed themselves to become what the early church had resolutely refused to be—a private religious community.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> When communism collapsed in the East a decade ago, Francis Fukuyama, an American politician wrote a widely read article entitled *The End of History* (Fukuyama 1989). By his account of history, there were two comprehensive worldviews competing for world dominance—the capitalist and communist. With the fall of the communist system, he argues, we have reached the end of history; liberal democratic capitalism is the goal of history. All that is left is the implementation of capitalism throughout the entire globe. Fukayama's arrogant and exaggerated claims come into conflict, not only with Scripture, which envisions the fall of all civilizations that do not conform to the gospel and the final establishment of the kingdom of God. It also comes into conflict with the erosion of confidence in liberal democratic capitalism within the West itself. The so-called postmodern condition is a reflection of the loss of confidence in 'the gospel' of the West. Both communism and capitalism were built on the humanistic sand of idolatry rather than the rock of the gospel, and so neither can finally stand.

I close with a summary and two comments. The Christian community has been entrusted with a comprehensive story about the end of history. Christians are called to embody and announce that story as the true story about the world and to bring all aspects of life under the rule of God. I have briefly sketched three cultural contexts in which the Christian community may carry out that task. Sometimes they will find themselves in societies where they are actively opposed. This may hinder their cultural involvement but they must remain faithful to the message and witness to an alternative order and story in their corporate lives. Sometimes the church will find itself in a society that is friendly and where they are in an established position. In this situation, the church is called to shape the public life of society with the comprehensive demands of the gospel, and avoid the danger of being domesticated as a department of the state. Sometimes the church will find itself in a society that simply ignores its comprehensive claims and reduces the gospel to a private, otherworldly message. In this situation, the church must refuse to accommodate itself to this alternative story but must seek ways to bring the gospel to bear on politics, economics, education, media, and social life. It is noteworthy that the region of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union is the only place in the world that the church has faced all three of these contexts: a Christendom arrangement between the state and Orthodox church, hostility under Communism, and increasingly today the context of liberalism. This enables the church in this region to make a contribution to the world church that has only experienced one or two of these contexts.

The history I have sketched may have lessons for the countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. I make two suggestions from my limited understanding of your situation. I leave it to you who know your situation so much better to evaluate the value of these comments. First, there may be a parallel between your situation and the situation of the Roman empire in the third century. In his book *Christianity and Classical Culture*, Charles Cochrane has told the history of the erosion and collapse of the Roman empire, a state actively opposed to the gospel. When this state ran out of spiritual fuel and collapsed, the church offered another worldview that ultimately formed the basis for society for a thousand years (Cochrane 1939). Perhaps the collapse of the Communist worldview offers a similar opportunity

today. If so, the Christian churches must attempt to translate the comprehensive claims of the gospel into all of public life—education, scholarship, politics, business, media, and economics. If you do not share the Christian view of life, may I humbly invite you to consider the comprehensive claims of the gospel for your life and for the public life of culture. As we consider what worldview we are bequeathing to our children, from the standpoint of the gospel, only a worldview in keeping with the founding message of Jesus will stand the test of time. Any other worldview is built on the sand of a future envisioned by the human imagination.

Second, I am told that the liberal and democratic capitalism of the West is spreading throughout the former Soviet Union and Eastern European nations. If so, it harbours, of course, both benefits and dangers (as did the Communist worldview). Confidence is placed in science, technology, and a rationally order society (especially democratic government and free enterprise economics) to bring about a new world. Its view of the end of history is built on idolatry. If the gospel is true—and I believe it is—then only Jesus Christ can bring about the renewal of the world. Science, technology, and a political and economic system shaped by science will fail if it is expected to fill the role of Jesus. The Western story reduces the Christian message to private, religious teaching. This changes the gospel into something that is very different from what Jesus preached and demonstrated. It must be insisted that the gospel and liberal capitalism offer two different, comprehensive, and competing stories about the world; both cannot be true. We all must make a choice, committing ourselves in faith to some story. For the sake of our children, may it be the true story of the gospel.

Jesus tells the story of two builders. One builds his house on the rock and it stands firm during a heavy storm. The other builds his house on the sand and it collapses when the rain and winds beat against it. Jesus compares the one who builds on rock to the person who builds his life on his words and the one who builds on sand to the person who builds on any another foundation. Undoubtedly the same is true for cultural building. The only solid foundation for the public life of culture is a worldview shaped by the gospel.

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