

# A Humbled Resistance

An Examination and Response to Shane Claiborne's

*The Irresistible Revolution*

and

*Jesus for President*

(with Chris Haw)

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All Scripture Quotations are taken from the ESV

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<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Timothy 4:16** Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.  
Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

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## INTRODUCTION

“*The Irresistible Revolution (TIR)* by Shane Claiborne rocked my world” is commonly heard today in the churches, especially among the younger crowd. I think I first heard about it from one of my daughters who was reading it at the time. She asked me if I’d heard of it and what I thought about it. I later found out just how popular the book was among the college aged group when my other daughter told me about how there were some in their group who *really* believed it – the way she said it made me realize that it was a high impact book and was affecting the lives of our young people.

I wasn’t necessarily alarmed. Our young adults are bright and we are blessed with a great group of elders. I remember being “rocked” by a few books over the years that made significant impacts on my own life. I started out by reading reviews on *amazon.com*. Most were raving about how it rocked their world, etc. but there was one in particular that had significant concerns<sup>1</sup>. I found the review well written, and forwarded it to several people for comment. Two things eventually led to my diving into this project. The first was that I heard that my daughter had basically dismissed the review as being “by some random guy on the Internet.” And the other was that a local pastor that I love and respect wrote back “why don’t you do a review?” Since then I wrote a review that turned out to be much too long to be a review, and focused far more on the message of the book than its form and style. Just as I thought I had completed the project, I heard about *Jesus for President (JFP)* – co-authored with Chris Haw) and decided to examine it and include it in a combined response.

There is a lot of good stuff in these books. I have been significantly impacted by what I’ve read here and am continuing to study these issues and examine my own heart and life. Claiborne effectively exposes some serious problems in contemporary evangelicalism to a wider and more receptive audience. (He is not the only or first to expose these issues, but his contribution is welcomed.) We as a church have some painful self-examination and repentance ahead of us. I’ve titled the response “A Humbled Resistance” because the self-examination it has prompted in my own life has been and continues to be *humbling*. As the response progresses, I believe the need for *resistance* becomes clear.

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<sup>1</sup> “Deeply Flawed” review of *The Irresistible Revolution* by “PK Keith” as found on amazon.com: [www.amazon.com/Irresistible-Revolution-Living-Ordinary-Radical/dp/0310266300/ref=cm\\_pdp\\_review\\_teaser\\_product](http://www.amazon.com/Irresistible-Revolution-Living-Ordinary-Radical/dp/0310266300/ref=cm_pdp_review_teaser_product)

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<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 5:2** And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

<sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

<sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

<sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

<sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

<sup>13</sup> ***You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.***

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## Claiborne's Contributions

A simple fact of life is that to disagree with someone requires more explanation than to agree with him, therefore on a word count basis, this response is highly unbalanced in the direction of negative critique. Do not allow the number of pages dedicated to critique of his errors get in the way of grasping the positive impact of Claiborne's emphasis on *living* the faith we profess. I hope my early praise does not get swallowed up in the critique that follows it. If it starts to appear that I am beating up on Claiborne in later sections, I encourage readers to think about returning and rereading this section.

### *Which Son are You?*

As I read Claiborne's works, I was first taken aback by the errors, etc. (discussed later), but could not help but be affected by his willingness to tell it like he sees it and *live* what he believes. Some readers might be reading this looking for ammunition to unload on Claiborne and other emergents. Before skipping ahead and finding it, I hope readers will take a moment to examine the log in their (our) own eyes.

When the chief priests and elders came and challenged Jesus' authority, he first tested them to see if they were really interested in truth. They showed that they only cared about what people thought rather than truth. Then he tested them again:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 21:28** "What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup> And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.

After reading this response, the reader may conclude that Claiborne is a reckless and rebellious son, but at the same time, the reader cannot deny that he "goes" (v 29). We may sit here and get our theology just right and say "I go," but with an eye to the Great Commission, where have we gone lately? I strongly commend Claiborne for seeking to live the Way and encouraging and teaching others to do so as well.

## ***A Wise Start***

In the final chapter of *TIR*, Claiborne wisely encourages the ordinary radicals<sup>2</sup> to stay anchored in the church:

So to the young 'uns: we have to remind ourselves to stay anchored in the church, for we need roots and wisdom.

It seems to me that God could surround us with elders as we bring new energy into an aging body, but it will take tremendous courage from old folks to dream new dreams and allow a new generation to make their own mistakes. (*TIR* 353)

... we mustn't allow ourselves to detach from the church in a self-righteous cynicism. (*TIR* 354)

So may we have some grace, even with those Christians and pastors who make us nauseated and put us to sleep. After all, they have given us enough of the story that we have been able to stumble into God and community. A friend just told us that perhaps we should relate to the church as a dysfunctional parent. (*TIR* 354-355)

As one of those dysfunctional parents, I am seeking God's face for the courage to examine myself and repent of my many failures as a leader. Hopefully readers of this response to Claiborne's work will see that we (old folks) hear and take their critique seriously. In turn I hope and pray for them to have the humility to listen to the wisdom of their elders and learn from our mistakes.

## ***Something More***

Claiborne explains his vision and how many others seem to be sharing it:

We are not a neo-denomination, because we are not trying to spread a doctrine or theology. We are not even trying to spread a model of community. We are just trying to discover a new (ancient) kind of Christianity. We are about spreading a way of life that exists organically and relationally and is marked by such a brilliant love and grace that no one could resist it. ... Nearly everywhere we speak, young people come up with tears in their eyes, no longer alone in their dreams for another world. Over and over, we hear, "I knew there was more to Christianity." (*TIR* 348)

Indeed there must be something more to Christianity than what we see today in pop-evangelicalism. There are so many things worthy of our rebellion! Name a flaw: the push for bigger and sexier buildings, the seeker-sensitive entertainment oriented "worship" services, the escape to the suburbs tendency for our people and our churches, our marketing of Jesus as a form of life enhancement, our ... It's getting too painful, so I'll stop now. I believe Claiborne and other postmoderns/emergents

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<sup>2</sup> A term he uses to describe a new breed of Christians dedicated to principles of ending poverty, interdependent living, peace making and others he promotes in the book.

have done an effective job of exposing some of these problems. Though Claiborne addresses several of these problems, his strongest and most effective critique is in the area of the church's isolation and separation from the suffering of the poor.

Global initiatives like Live 8 and the ONE Campaign have gathered eclectic groups of celebrities and pop stars under slogans like "Make poverty history." But most Christian artists and preachers have remained strangely distant from human suffering. (*TIR* 17)

I learned from the lepers that leprosy is a disease of numbness. The contagion numbs the skin, and the nerves can no longer feel as the body wastes away. ... As I left Calcutta, it occurred to me that I was returning to a land of lepers, a land of people who had forgotten how to feel, to laugh, to cry, a land haunted by numbness. (*TIR* 89)

I asked the same group of strong followers whether they spent time with the poor, and less than 2 percent said they did. ... I had come to see that the great tragedy in the church is not that rich Christians do not care about the poor but that rich Christians do not know the poor. (*TIR* 113)

Layers of insulation separate the rich and the poor from truly encountering one another. There are the obvious layers like picket fences and SUVs, and there are more subtle ones like charity. Tithes, tax-exempt donations, and short-term mission trips, while they accomplish some good, can also function as outlets that allow us to appease our consciences and still remain a safe distance from the poor. (*TIR* 157)

Claiborne *nails* us. We as the church need to step out of our sinful comfort zones and begin engaging the poor in our own areas and abroad. Many of us are so individualistic that we don't even know our next door neighbors or the family that sits twenty feet away in the church, much less the struggling poor several blocks away in areas we avoid when we can. We need to repent of our selfishness as individuals and as churches.

Just this last weekend here in Albuquerque, my sweet wife and I decided to go see Ben Stein's new documentary *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*. We went to the Saturday matinee to be good stewards (spiritual speak for "I'm cheap"). When we went to the window to buy tickets we were informed that a local church had bought out the theater.<sup>3</sup> We were turned away. What a wonderful message to send our neighbors: we want the theater to ourselves—you are out of luck. We "Christians" sometimes make terrible neighbors. It reminded me of the time we had arrived early to line up to see *The Passion of the Christ* at a theater and had group after group of teenagers show up (no doubt part various church youth groups) and cut in line with

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<sup>3</sup> The church will remain nameless. On another occasion I saw where a church had bought out the theater for *The Passion of the Christ* but were in front of the theater giving away the tickets—now that's more like it.

their friends<sup>4</sup>. I was appalled; I can only imagine what an unbeliever in the line with me must have thought.

I mention what bad neighbors we can be to each other and our fellow suburbanites just to illustrate how terribly far we have to go. We must repent. We must begin to not only be considerate of our neighbors, but willing to sacrifice our own comfort for their sake and that of the gospel. *TIR* has expanded my understanding of the problem. Not only do we need to be better neighbors to one another, we need to be better neighbors to the poor and suffering in our own communities and abroad.

So how are Christians to live anyway? One of our pastors has exhorted us to begin to “get messy in one another’s lives.” The Christian life was never intended to be a solo journey. Claiborne says it this way:

And they would become known as the Way. Their community was more than just a group of people who shared religious beliefs. They were a group of people that embodied a new way of living, ... They were to become the salt and light of the world. The credibility of their gospel would rest on the integrity of their lives. For they were now to be the body of Christ. (*JFP* 137)

In this section we’ve been talking about “something more” to our Christianity and I’ve expressed my belief that we are indeed missing the mark as good neighbors. As we consider “something more” it is critical that we, in our zeal for change, don’t end up simply settling for “something different” or worse, “something less.”

### *Other Good Stuff*

Claiborne has many more helpful (and convicting) things to say in his books and readers will find some of those interspersed throughout the rest of this response. There were others I found interesting and insightful, but couldn’t figure out where else to fit them in, so I thought I’d mention them here.

### *Healthy Self-Examination*

In a church culture that is so afraid of offense that it would rarely ask people to examine themselves, this was a breath of fresh air (and personally convicting).

If someone asks if we are Christ-followers, can we say, “tell me what you see”? Is there enough evidence to prove that we are taking after the slaughtered Lamb? What if they ask the poor around us? What if they ask our enemies? Would they say that we love them? Christians haven’t always looked like Jesus. Perhaps the greatest barrier to Christ has been

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<sup>4</sup> The same thing was happening at a “Christian Day” (or something like that) at a local amusement park on the various rides. Finally I stopped some on their way past us and just said, “It ain’t happening.” They looked at me like I was from Mars—as if common courtesy was an alien concept.

Christians who pronounce Jesus so loudly with their lips and deny him so loudly with their lives. (*JFP* 230)

### *An Appeal for Church Discipline*

Though long considered a mark of the true church<sup>5</sup>, church discipline is basically non-existent in the present church culture. It was a great surprise to read this excellent appeal for the return of church discipline.

Since one of the most precious treasures of the church is the gift of community, one of the most powerful disciplines of the church is isolation from community, the denial of communion. Excommunication has a harsh ring to it ... This era of sloppy Christianity and timid politeness demands that we rediscover this hidden treasure, which has led to the restoration of even the worst backslider... (*JFP* 286)

### *Luke 13:32ff -- "... tell that fox"*

I really appreciated Claiborne's description of the political satire of Jesus' response to the Pharisees who were warning him that Herod is out to kill him (*JFP* 119). "You tell that fox ..." Claiborne contrasts the royal lion (Jesus Christ – Hosea 5:14; Revelation 5:5) and the powerless, cowardly, and skittish fox--a lion wannabe.

### *Caesar's and Jesus' Coronations*

Claiborne effectively presents the ironic parallels (and contrasts) of the coronation of Caesar and the execution of Jesus Christ (*JFP* 126-131).

### *The Nature of True Israel*

Claiborne gives a strong statement about the miraculous and God-initiated nature of the birth of members of true Israel:

But being born Israelite in the flesh, Jesus insists, is not of concern... As with Abraham and Sarah's children, it is the child who is born of miraculous means and God's initiative who carries the blessing. (*JFP* 108)

### *Learning to Disagree Well*

As I prepare to turn the focus of this response to where we disagree, I'm encouraged by these words:

As I continued to wrestle with complex human and political issues. I resolved myself to one thing: the starting point must be that the church is a place where we can grapple with difficult questions with grace and humility. And I believe that, even more important than thinking

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<sup>5</sup> Article 29 of the Belgic Confession says: "The marks, by which the true Church is known, are these: if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin." To learn more about this important topic, go to [9marks.org](http://9marks.org). Biblical church discipline is listed as number seven of their *nine marks of a healthy church*.

identically on every issue, we must learn to disagree well. Our ability as a church to disagree well is as powerful a witness to the larger society as our uniformity on every issue. (*JFP* 234)

### *...But I Have These Things Against You*

I've been warned that when a person begins with "I like your books, but ..." that the "but" erases everything that the person has said up to that point. This is true because our culture of entitlement and self-esteem (narcissism) loathes to be criticized, even in love.

I could not, in good conscience, write a hit piece on a movement and message that is attempting to live a lifestyle like that of Jesus, especially when the church culture they are rebelling against neither live it nor proclaim it faithfully. I've chosen to follow the pattern Jesus used repeatedly in Revelation 2: acknowledge what is good, and then correct and rebuke error.

Though Claiborne recognizes many of the problems in pop-religion today, unfortunately what we find in these books is an example of the proverbial "throwing out the baby with the bathwater." The problems in the emergent movement have nothing to do with candles, couches, or funny haircuts; and the problem with "ordinary radicals" is not their desire to live like Jesus and provoke pop-churchianity to wake up and start living what they believe. The problem is theological liberalism<sup>6</sup>. Less than a century ago, liberalism thrived as modernism (the previous incarnation of worldliness) was influencing the church. J. Gresham Machen's classic work refuting modernist liberalism is as relevant and hard hitting today as it was when it was written. Substitute "post-modernism" for "modernism" in the following quote:

In the sphere of religion, in particular, the present time is a time of conflict; the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology. This modern non-redemptive religion is called "modernism" or "liberalism."<sup>7</sup>

Dr. D. A. Carson concludes (after extensive content review) his evaluation of Brian McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy* and Steve Chalke's *The Lost Message of Jesus* in this way:

I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel. Perhaps their rhetoric and enthusiasm have led them astray and they will prove willing to reconsider their published judgments on these matters and embrace biblical truth more holistically than they have been

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<sup>6</sup> It is important not to get sidetracked on politics here. The only politics in this paper is what the reader reads into it.

<sup>7</sup> J. Gresham Mehan, *Christianity and Liberalism*, Eerdmans. 1923. p. 2.

doing in their most recent works. But if not, I cannot see how their own words constitute anything less than a drift toward abandoning the gospel itself. ...surely the way to maturity, not to say biblical fidelity, is not pendulum-swinging reductionism, but the whole counsel of God, worked out, so far as we are able, in both theology and practice.<sup>8</sup>

I believe and will attempt to demonstrate in the following pages that *The Irresistible Revolution* and *Jesus for President* suffer from similar flaws to McLaren and Chalke and their modernist forerunners all of whom attempted to “save Christianity” in a time they were concerned it was becoming culturally irrelevant.

I will not be reviewing these other books here and will not depend upon “guilt by association” to make my case, nor will I assume readers will have already read those works or Carson’s review. I offer up Carson’s conclusion as similar to mine of *TIR* and *JFP* to provide a broader picture of the emergent conversation<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant With the Emerging Church*, Zondervan. 2005. 186-187.

<sup>9</sup> People in the emergent/emerging church prefer to speak of their “movement” (many don’t like that word but Claiborne uses it for the revolution) in terms of a “conversation.”

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<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Timothy 3:12** Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, <sup>13</sup> while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. <sup>14</sup> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it <sup>15</sup> and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

**4:1** I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: <sup>2</sup> preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. <sup>3</sup> For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

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## Truth and Theology/Doctrine

It is refreshing when a postmodern speaks of truth as something more than a person's preferred belief. Though many truth-claims of a postmodernist are unintentional (because they basically don't believe in absolute truth, or at least that truths can be known absolutely<sup>10</sup>), Claiborne makes several statements to ensure that we understand he believes in truth and it can be known.<sup>11</sup>

Religious extremists have perverted the best of our traditions. But there is another movement stirring, a little revolution of sorts. Many of us are refusing to allow distorted images of our faith to define us. (*TIR* 24)

In this one quote we see that traditions can be perverted, so they must have a true or pure form, and we see that images of our faith can be distorted, so they also can have a true form. He also speaks of "believing all the right stuff," so he is on record as believing in the true Christian faith (*TIR* 38). Elsewhere he claims that bad and dangerous theology exists (*JFP* 173,180), and bad books exist so there must be some objective standard upon which to measure a book's "goodness" (*TIR* 32).

### *Theology*

With the exception of the section I discuss below that is strongly theological, doctrine and theology are generally dismissed as secondary at best, and are often tagged with "even if it's true" (*TIR* 28, 45, 117). The message I receive from this is that not only is doctrine unimportant, it is not even important enough to bother determining if it is true.

I was able to download and include the statement of faith from The Simple Way<sup>12</sup> Web site and have provided it as an appendix. It is basically orthodox in what it does say, and that is encouraging. Generally speaking, people who are postmodern in their thinking do not, however, believe in absolute truth, especially in religion,

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<sup>10</sup> If this is all unfamiliar to you, I recommend D.A. Carson's book, *Becoming Conversant With the Emerging Church* as a good introduction. Phil Johnson also has a helpful introduction to postmodernism available for mp3 download here: <http://www.swordandtrowel.org/audio/GL-2006-06-30-PJ.mp3>

<sup>11</sup> I apologize for having to do this, but it is kind of a requirement when interacting with postmoderns and their ideas. Truth claims are a sore spot with them, so references to their own statements of absoluteness are necessary at times.

<sup>12</sup> This is the specific community that Claiborne belongs to where they are attempting to live out these principles. ([thesimpleway.org](http://thesimpleway.org))

ethics, and morality. Our enthusiasm over the orthodoxy of this statement of faith (commitments) has to be tempered by the tendency of “truths” (to postmoderns) *to be those things we choose to believe* (matter of taste or preference – our flavor of ice cream) rather than *those things we are convinced correspond to reality and that the Scriptures teach* (what we believe is true whether or not people believe it). What we have to do is test how closely what they preach corresponds to what they quietly profess.

When we reach page 169 in *TIR*, theology becomes “crucial.”

#### THEOLOGY OF ENOUGH

In addition to rooting simplicity in love, it also seems crucial that economic practices be theologically grounded. I am convinced that most of the terribly disturbing things that are happening in our world in the name of Christ and Christianity are primarily the result not of malicious people but of bad theology. (At least, I want to believe that.) And the answer to bad theology is not no theology but good theology. So rather than distancing ourselves from religious language and biblical study, let’s dive into the Scriptures together, correcting bad theology with good theology, correcting distorted understandings of the warrior God by internalizing our allegiance to the slaughtered Lamb, correcting the health-and-wealth gospel by following the Homeless Rabbi. (*TIR* 169)

Amen! I cannot possibly agree more. All I can say is, “where has *this* Shane Claiborne been?” Now we have to ask<sup>13</sup> why he limits his theological rigor to the area of economic practice? Why not make sure his understanding of the gospel, evangelism, sin, repentance, conversion, the significance of the cross, the person and work of Jesus Christ are theologically grounded as well?

#### *Who is Jesus?—Incarnate Word and Sovereign King or Super Gandhi?*

Whenever anyone says or implies that theology is unimportant and says, “just give me Jesus,” they need to be asked “who is Jesus?” With that one question we’ve taken the conversation directly to the most important theological question that can ever be asked.

As an example of what Christianity understands from Scripture about Jesus Christ, I’m going to borrow the text from a randomly selected<sup>14</sup> church Web site’s page entitled “Who Is Jesus Christ?”

Jesus Christ is central to everything we are, as well as everything we do. We believe that Jesus Christ is God, the 2nd Person of the Trinity. He is the Son of God; fully man, yet fully God. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary. Though begotten, Jesus was not made. He lived the perfect holy life

<sup>13</sup> “begs the question” would be a misuse of a term reserved for a logical fallacy. I include this footnote because my wife’s degrees are in English and Philosophy and she will be happy to see it. (It worked, she gave me a happy face during review).

<sup>14</sup> I did make sure it was doctrinally sound. I’ve never heard of them otherwise.

that we could not live; then Jesus died the substitutionary death on the cross, as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the elect. Jesus actually physically rose again from the dead on the 3rd day, and after validating His resurrection through many convincing proofs to His disciples and many other followers, He ascended into heaven. Jesus shall come again in glory, to judge all the living and all the dead.

Without Jesus Christ, there is no Christianity. The foundation of what Christians believe rests in the Lord Jesus Christ. According to the Bible (Acts 4:12), there is no other name but Jesus, by which men and women may inherit eternal life in heaven. Because all of us are sinners (Romans 3:23), every person in the world deserves to go to hell. But God, in His great mercy, sent Jesus to earth to pay the penalty of sin with His blood for millions and millions of people (Revelation 5:9). For this enormous group of people, the elect (Ephesians 1:3-12), through imputation, Jesus took upon Himself their sins and gave to them His righteousness (2nd Corinthians 5:21). After God regenerates us, we are finally aware of our sin and repent over our spiritual crimes against the Lord. When we confess our sins, God hears us, forgiving our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Along with repenting in sorrow over our countless sins, the Christian also places all of his/her trust in Jesus as well, (Mark 1:15). No longer are we king over our own lives; Jesus is now the highest authority. He reigns as king on the throne of our lives. Jesus is now #1, not we ourselves. Because of this, whether we are new Christians or whether we've been following Jesus for 50 years, all that we do is a continual cycle of repentance and faith. We repent again and again, and re-believe again and again in the gospel of the grace of Christ. Even our spiritual maturity is based solely on how closely we, through the strength of the Holy Spirit, remain connected with Jesus Christ in our everyday life (John 15:1-11).

The crux of Christianity is Jesus Christ!<sup>15</sup>

Readers with a rudimentary Christian education should find most of that pretty familiar. Let's compare this with the Jesus of *TIR* and *JFP*.

Jesus was not simply a missionary to the poor. He *was* poor—born a baby refugee from the badlands of Nazareth, wandered the world a homeless rabbi, died the rotten death of insurrectionists and bandits on the cross, executed by an oppressive empire, buried in a borrowed tomb. Jesus was crucified not for helping poor people but for joining them. That is the Jesus we follow. (*TIR* 144)

...Jesus did not set up a program but modeled a way of living that incarnated the reign of God. (*TIR* 159)

For Jesus did not seek out the rich and powerful in order to trickle down his kingdom. Rather, he joined those at the bottom, the outcasts and undesirables, and everyone was attracted to his love for people on the margins. (We know that we all are poor and lonely anyway, don't we?) Then he invited everyone into a journey of downward mobility to become the least. (*TIR* 127)

I find these descriptions more applicable to Gandhi than to Jesus Christ, but elsewhere I was able to find a reference<sup>16</sup> to Christ as God and as executed and risen.

I went to Iraq in the footsteps of an executed and risen God. (*TIR* 207)

<sup>15</sup> "Who is Jesus Christ?" from the Web site of Grace Reformed Church (PCA) in Omaha Nebraska (<http://www.gracereformed.net/Jesus.php>)

<sup>16</sup> The Simple Way statement of faith is provided in an appendix where they do affirm Christ's deity, resurrection, and ascension.

What does it mean “He died for joining the poor?” Was modeling a way of living His reason for coming? What was accomplished by His death? In his attempt to demonstrate his belief that the cross is more than people take it to mean, does he make it less?

It's not that the cross is just some necessary step to accomplishing some religious plan of salvation—an abstract scheme that leaves Jesus politically meaningless. (*JFP* 131)

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 2:22** "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—<sup>23</sup> this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Ephesians 1:7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,<sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight<sup>9</sup> making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ<sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

If we abandon the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, we abandon the gospel. That is a strong claim, so I'll attempt to back it up with a brief explanation of the centrality of substitutionary atonement. Here is a description of “penal substitution” from Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*:

Christ’s death was “penal” in that he bore a penalty when he died. His death was also a “substitution” in that he was a substitute for us when he died. This has been the orthodox understanding of the atonement held by evangelical theologians, in contrast to other views that attempt to explain the atonement apart from the idea of the wrath of God or payment of the penalty for sin.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:21** For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The Apostle Paul explains how we can be justified before God or “be at peace” with God (that’s a good theological explanation of what we call “saved”):

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 3:21** But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—<sup>22</sup> **the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ** for all who believe. For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and **are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,** <sup>25</sup> **whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood,** to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 5:1** Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>17</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan. 1994. p. 579.

Then Grudem helps us with the definition of “propitiation,” a word we don’t see every day:

Three other crucial passages in the New Testament refer to Jesus’ death as a “propitiation”: Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2; and 4:10. The Greek terms (the verb *hilaskomai*, “to make propitiation” and the noun *hilasmos*, “a sacrifice of propitiation”) used in these passages have the sense of “a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God—and thereby makes God propitious (or favorable) toward us.” This is the consistent meaning of these words outside the Bible ... These verses simply mean that Jesus bore the wrath of God against sin.<sup>18</sup>

Without Christ’s substitutionary atonement, there is no turning away of the holy wrath of God, no justification before God, no peace with God, no salvation. Theology matters.

Jesus Christ is the Passover lamb who was slain (1 Cor 5:7), a once and for all fulfillment of the Passover of Israel in Egypt. To characterize Christ’s atoning death (the most important event in human history) as “the rotten death of insurrectionists and bandits” is a gross reduction. Claiborne also reinvents the Passover to exclude the lamb, the blood, the judgment of God, and even the meaning of the word “Passover.” Compare Claiborne’s description with the Biblical description and observance.

Passover was an anti-imperial Jewish festival in which the Jews celebrated their ancestors’ coming out of Egyptian slavery and “passing over” to a land of promise. (*TIR* 281 footnote 9)

<sup>ESV</sup> **Exodus 12:3** Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household...  
<sup>7</sup>"Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ... <sup>11</sup> In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover. <sup>12</sup> For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. <sup>13</sup> The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. **And when I see the blood, I will pass over you**, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt. <sup>14</sup> "This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast.

Why don’t Christians celebrate Passover? Or do they?<sup>19</sup> Theology matters.

### *What is the Gospel?*

When we speak of “the gospel” or “good news” in a Christian context, what are we talking about? We know it is something to be proclaimed, so it must be a message.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 575.

<sup>19</sup> *Hint*: Look into the origins of the Lord’s Supper or Communion.

Claiborne has understandably grown weary of a gospel that simply manipulates people into punching their ticket to heaven but with no application to the world in which we live. We see that in statements like these:

There are those of us who, rather than simply reject pop evangelicalism, want to spread another kind of Christianity, a faith that has as much to say about this world as it does about the next. (*TIR* 24)

...we can tell the world that there is life after death, but the world really seems to be wondering if there is life before death. (*TIR* 150)

Claiborne also makes some helpful statements and asks some important questions about the gospel we proclaim.

I'm not sure the Christian gospel always draws a crowd. People may not stand in line for a Roman cross; ... people may not flock to an invitation to lose their lives. ... Sometimes I wonder, amid our crowds, if we are really preaching the gospel. (*TIR* 317)

In a later section on evangelism we'll examine more of his observations about pop evangelicalism's methods of evangelism, but before that, we have to get back to the important question he raised, are we really preaching the gospel?

Scripture warns that there are false Christs and false gospels:

<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Corinthians 11:4** For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Galatians 1:8** But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. <sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

As he ponders what the church could be, Claiborne recognizes that there are differences between gospels (those that are actually good news and those that aren't):

I thought to myself, Wouldn't we all go to a church that believes in ordinary fools and ragamuffins and whose gospel is actually good news? (*TIR* 19)

In *TIR* we often see Claiborne referring to people within the movement preaching and prophesying, but rarely do we get any insight into the content of the messages they preach. He will say things like "we are about ending poverty" (*TIR* 123). That's a noble thing, and if it could be done without ending wealth<sup>20</sup>, it would indeed be good news. But is that *the* good news of the Bible?

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<sup>20</sup> Winston Churchill once said "Capitalism is the uneven distribution of wealth, socialism is the even distribution of poverty, and communism is socialism with a gun at your back." When people are not allowed to

Claiborne appeals to the early church on a number of occasions as his inspiration. The first few speak of their lifestyle, but not their message (*TIR* 63, 87). Then we start to realize that in Claiborne's view, the lifestyle *is* the gospel.

What gave the early Christians integrity was the fact that they could denounce the empire and in the same breath say, "and we have another way of living. If you are tired of what the empire has to offer, we invite you into the Way." (*TIR* 118)

For the original plan<sup>21</sup> of God was that Israel would be set apart to redeem the nations. This was not a plan to reform the pagan nations around it ... Rather, God would save the world through fascination, by setting up an alternative society on the margins of empire for the world to come and see what a society of love looks like. It would be a city on a hill that God would use to light up the world, drawing the world back to God." (*JFP* 60)

It is important for witnesses and ambassadors not to disqualify their message by being hypocrites. I think Claiborne does a good job of calling our attention to the glaring worldliness and selfishness in the church. As I confessed before, we as a church have some serious self-examination to do. Was the message of the early church to denounce "the empire" and invite people to join the movement/lifestyle? Before I turn to the Scriptures, here is an interesting take on Claiborne's perceived mission of the early church:

What an extraordinary thing it must have been to sit around with that eclectic mix of Zealot revolutionaries, Roman tax collectors, peasants, Samaritans, prostitutes, and fishermen, all conspiring to find a radical new way of life. (*TIR* 139)

I don't mean to represent Claiborne's view as being that the communal lifestyle practiced for a short time by a few members of the early church is the full content and substance of the gospel, but he has given us little indication that there is any more to it.

When I read my New Testament, I find a vastly different gospel message. When Jesus gave the Great Commission, it was:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Mark 16:15** And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 28:19** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,<sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

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keep what they produce, they quit producing. Compulsion, whether it is by the state or by a misguided legalism, would have the same effect. Also note their call to "make affluence history" (*JFP* 189).

<sup>21</sup> Earlier on the page they speak of God's failed original plan: "...God had hoped that these initiatives [Jubilee] would prevent that [suffering] from happening again." Does the God of the Bible ever fail to accomplish His will?

Jesus commissioned ambassadors for himself and we see the message also characterized as a ministry/message of reconciliation to God.

<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:18** All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

If the world needs to be reconciled to God, there must be a broken relationship. We start figuring out very quickly that while doctrine may not be compelling (*TIR* 28) or attractive (*TIR* 117), it is important.

The gospel is this: God, in His grace, sent Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord to die on the cross to satisfy God's holy justice and reconcile to himself a people from every nation, economic status, etc.

When we continue the passage in 2 Corinthians 5, we see substitutionary atonement in all its mystery and beauty:

<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:21** For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

When we think about it from the world's perspective, why would Jesus have to suffer such a bloody and terrible thing? Why can't God just blow it off/get over it and save everybody? Theology matters.

If we believe this is the gospel, how do we become one of God's people? Theology matters a lot.

### *The Message of the Cross*

Claiborne refers to the cross often in the books. For instance he was upset when he discovered the folks at Willow Creek church had removed their cross from their auditorium because it wasn't seeker-sensitive (*TIR* 106).

My heart sank as I walked into the foyer and noticed something I had never seen before: the American flag standing prominently in front of the auditorium. And never before was I so heartbroken that the cross was missing. For the flag and the cross are both spiritual. And they are both political. It is a dangerous day when we can take the cross out of the church more easily than the flag. (*TIR* 193)

I find other references like this one that sounds poetic, but demonstrates a common problem among postmodern/emergent authors, false dichotomies<sup>22</sup>:

What do we do when the foolishness of the cross actually makes more sense than the wisdom of the sword? (*TIR* 21)

Then he appears to make politics and economics the meaning behind Jesus' death:

The Jesus of the margins suffered an imperial execution by an oppressive regime of wealthy and pious elites. And now he dares me and woos me to come and follow, to take up my cross, to lose my life to find it... (*TIR* 207)

*Does Jesus woo and dare us, or command us as Sovereign King?*

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 17:30** The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

<sup>ESV</sup> **Luke 9:23** And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. <sup>24</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.

To take up one's cross means to obey and so identify with Jesus Christ, we will do so even unto death. How do we live out our love for Christ?

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 14:15** "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

I believe obedience to Christ is summarized well in The Great Commandments, and the Great Commission.

*The Great Commandments*

<sup>ESV</sup> **Mark 12:28** And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' <sup>31</sup> The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

*The Great Commission*

<sup>ESV</sup> **Mark 16:15** And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.

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<sup>22</sup> A form of false dichotomy is where two options are presented as either/or (mutually exclusive) when both/and is possible or even preferable. Emergents are known for their *to-from* lists expressing their visions for transformation of the church. These lists are often riddled with this kind of error. Example: David Tomlinson's list includes "from a theology that prepares people for death and the afterlife to a theology of life" [*The Post Evangelical* (42-43)].

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 28:19** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,<sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

To love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength leaves no room for careless theology. God has a lot to say about Himself and how He is to be worshiped. The Great Commission speaks of "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded." How can we say we love God when we don't work hard at understanding that which we are to obey?

Claiborne recognized a problem:

From my desk at college, it looked like some time back we had stopped living Christianity and just started studying it. (*TIR* 71)

To study it without obeying or living it is folly, but the answer is not to quit studying the great doctrines of the faith. J. Gresham Machen describes Paul's view of doctrine this way:

Paul was convinced of the objective truth of the gospel message, and devotion to that truth was a great passion of his life. Christianity for Paul was not only a life, but also a doctrine, and logically the doctrine came first.<sup>23</sup>

To love our neighbors as ourselves is an area where Claiborne can teach us a lot. While I don't believe in his concept of "redistribution" (discussed later), I do believe in generosity, engagement, incorporation, and interdependence. I also don't believe for a moment this is just about economics. God is drawing his people from every sector of the world and that includes the poor. As we consider the Church as the Body of Christ, we are no doubt missing some important Body parts when we neglect to expand the kingdom among the poor.

To go and proclaim the gospel and make disciples is our primary call. To obey Christ is to preach the cross – Christ crucified.

The foolishness of [*the preaching of*] the cross is not simply referring to a lifestyle; it is far more. It is the ultimate expression of God's love. To preach of God's love in its most radical form we have to preach the cross, and give the complete story. One cannot preach the cross apart from preaching sin. Without an understanding of the requirement for this bloody vicious act, it doesn't just sound like foolishness, it is foolishness. Just as one cannot preach the cross apart from sin, one cannot preach sin apart from God's Law. Without God's revealed standard of righteousness known, sin is reduced to moral opinion (Rom 3:19-20).

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<sup>23</sup> Mechan, p. 23.

To take up our cross and follow Christ is to love and obey Him. We must learn to love our neighbors more genuinely, but we must not forfeit sound doctrine and biblical worship to do it. As D.A. Carson warned us in the quote I gave in the introduction, we need to avoid “pendulum-swinging reductionism.” We need to stop over-reacting against legitimate errors, only to take us deeper into others. The answer to “dead orthodoxy” is not to get rid of orthodoxy, but to go to the source of life.

### *What is Evangelism?*

Claiborne sees and rightly critiques a disturbing trend in pop evangelicalism, the marketing of Jesus.

I even heard a pastor explain that he used to work in the corporate world and how he was in a “different kind of business” with the “best product in the world.” (TIR 45)

I knew what Cornell West meant when he said “We’ve taken the blood at the foot of the cross and turned it into Kool-Aid” and marketed it all over the world” (TIR 112)

He shares some of his experiences as a “Jesus Freak” doing evangelism at the mall as a teenager. Here we get some insight into his current understanding of evangelism:

I went to the malls to do goofy skits and hand out religious tracts to try to save innocent shoppers from the fires of hell.” (TIR 45)

I don’t doubt the skits were goofy, and I can empathize with looking back and feeling foolish for participating in them. These skits (and probably the tracts<sup>24</sup>) almost certainly ended with “just ask Jesus into your heart...” (with the implication being that you too can be as weird as we are). But what he says next is disturbing. It appears he saw the problem was not just that the evangelism methods were goofy, but that the evangelism had the wrong (and unnecessary) goal. He believes the shoppers were innocent and in no danger of God’s judgment. Scripture disagrees:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 3:10** as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup> no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

<sup>ESV</sup> **Hebrews 9:27** And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 14:6** Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

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<sup>24</sup> Quality gospel tracts are excellent tools for evangelism. On two different occasions in my life, I have had a tract rock my world. Both times they were just on the ground having been discarded by the original recipient. Go to [livingwaters.com](http://livingwaters.com) for a selection of good tracts. Good tracts *tell the truth* rather than seek to market Jesus as life enhancement or manipulate people into “praying a prayer.”

*What About Sin?*

Claiborne has little to say about sin. Who wants to talk about sin anyway, right? In his autobiography, Charles Spurgeon speaks to the importance of taking sin seriously in evangelism:

Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Saviour. He who has stood before his God, convicted and condemned, with the rope about his neck, is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate the evil which has been forgiven him, and to live to the honour of the Redeemer by whose blood he has been cleansed.<sup>25</sup>

I found it interesting how Claiborne could take a Scriptural reference to a sinful person and turn it to make it look like their sin was somehow the fault of others:

As we study the Scriptures, we see how many texts we have misread, contextualized, and exegeted to hear what we want to. Like this one about the poor being among us, which Jesus says in the home of a leper and after a poor marginalized woman anoints his feet with perfume. (*T/R* 160)

Let's see what it means to "hear what we want to" in this story.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Mark 14:3** And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. <sup>4</sup> There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that?" <sup>5</sup> For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her. <sup>6</sup> But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. <sup>7</sup> For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Luke 7:36** One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup> And behold, **a woman of the city, who was a sinner**, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, <sup>38</sup> and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

Why characterize a "woman ... who was a sinner" and had "very costly" perfume at her disposal as "marginalized" and poor? The saddest thing here is that we have taken a text that demonstrates true brokenness, passionate Godly contrition, the pricelessness of Jesus Christ, and the priority of honoring Him over everything (even "redistribution" to the poor), and turned it into a socio-political talking point<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> C.H. Spurgeon in his autobiography. Unfortunately I haven't found the primary source yet, only multiple secondary sources. It was just too good to leave out.

<sup>26</sup> Abram and Sarai are asserted to have been "homeless, small, and powerless..." (*JFP* 31) though they carried with them "all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran" (Gen 12:5). And only Claiborne could claim Moses, who was raised (by his own mother--fully funded) to be the son

*What About Hell?*

After an ironically prophetic start to their *Gates of Hell* section: “There’s a lot of bad theology out there (*JFP* 290),” Claiborne & Haw (C&H) proceed to prove themselves right.

But have you ever noticed that Jesus didn’t spend much time on hell? Really there are only a couple of times when he spoke of weeping and gnashing of teeth, of hell and God’s judgment, and both had to do with the walls we create between ourselves and our suffering neighbors. (*JFP* 291)

Hell is not the kind of topic that one needs to spend a lot of time discussing in order to get the point across. Though Jesus did not have lengthy teachings on it, he did speak authoritatively and ominously about it. C&H are simply wrong here. Jesus speaks of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” six times in the book of Matthew alone (Matt. 8:12; 13:42; 13:50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30), and *none* of these have anything to do with “walls we create between ourselves and our suffering neighbors.”

Theologian R.C. Sproul has seen it before:

There is no biblical concept more grim or terror-invoking than the idea of hell. It is so unpopular with us that few would give credence to it at all except that it comes to us from the teaching of Christ Himself. Almost all the biblical teaching about hell comes from the lips of Jesus. It is this doctrine, perhaps more than any other, that strains even the Christian’s loyalty to the teaching of Christ. Modern Christians have pushed the limits of minimizing hell in an effort to sidestep or soften Jesus’ own teaching.<sup>27</sup>

Can we afford to sidestep teachings emphasized by Christ this strongly?

<sup>ESV</sup> **Luke 12:4** "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. <sup>5</sup> But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!

C&H reference C. S. Lewis on hell<sup>28</sup> and then drop a theological bomb.

C.S. Lewis understood hell not as a place where God locks people out of heaven but as a dungeon that we lock ourselves into. ***So we hold the keys of liberation from our own captivity.*** (*JFP* 292 emphasis added)

Unless I read them wrong, C&H believe that we can save ourselves from hell. This is a false gospel and a false hope.

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of Pharaoh’s daughter (Exodus 2), was an “orphaned refugee” who “quivered under the shadow of an oppressive regime” (*JFP* 32).

<sup>27</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, Tyndale House, 1992. p. 285.

<sup>28</sup> In *The Great Divorce* (p.65) Lewis wrote: “... every shutting-up of the creature within ***the dungeon of its own mind*** is, in the end, Hell.” I’ve not researched Lewis’ views on hell, but if he denies eternal punishment, he too is in error.

*Calcutta and the Great Omission*<sup>29</sup>

When we view things from an eternal perspective, our life on this earth is but a vapor (James 4:14): here today – gone tomorrow. We cannot discount the terrible suffering in the world today as insignificant, but we also cannot lose eternal perspective. While feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and comforting the dying are important areas of ministry (and many of us have some serious self-examination and repentance in order); they are not our primary calling. The Great Commission (primary calling) is to go and proclaim the gospel. It is to go and make disciples, teaching them to observe God’s commandments. To comfort the dying without proclaiming Christ crucified (the law and the gospel) is a tragedy. It is to lend fleeting comfort to a sinner passing into a Christless eternity. From a worldly perspective it would seem cruel to tell a suffering and dying person that he has sinned and offended a holy God, but we are not called to be popular or comfortable. We are called to be faithful. If a person does not know he needs a savior, if he is not called to repent and believe the gospel, he has no hope of justification and peace with God.

Claiborne’s view of evangelism and definition of the gospel becomes clear in the section “Shouting The Gospel With Our Lives.”

As an evangelical, the only way I know to invite people into the Christian faith is to come and see. After all, I’m not just trying to get someone to sign a doctrinal statement, but to come to know love, grace, and peace in the incarnation of Jesus, and now in the incarnation of his body, Christ’s church. So if someone asked me to introduce them to Jesus, I would say, “Come and see. Let me show you Jesus with skin on.” Sometimes we have evangelicals (usually from the suburbs) who pretentiously ask how we “evangelize people.” I usually tell them that we bring folks like them here to learn the kingdom of God from the poor, and then send them out to tell the rich and powerful there is another way of life being born in the margins. (*TIR* 127)

The gospel of *The Irresistible Revolution* is a lifestyle, and evangelism is to invite people to come check it out. It is clearly offensive to Claiborne to ask him if he has bothered to tell people the truth about sin, judgment, repentance, and faith.

With a section title like “Shouting The Gospel With Our Lives,” I knew it was coming. The most over-used excuse for cowardice in evangelism, and there it was:

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<sup>29</sup> I have truly dreaded writing on this topic because I know it is going to infuriate people. I pray that I can do this with proper humility and that I do not needlessly anger people. Let me say from the start that I do not know Mother Teresa or her ministry beyond what I saw in the news and what Claiborne tells us in the book. I deeply respect and admire her life of sacrificial service to the suffering and dying in Calcutta. I was moved as I read about the suffering and the gentle care that the lepers were receiving. As I write this I am again convicted that I need to consider the poor more in my giving and service.

As the old Franciscan slogan goes, "Preach the gospel always. And when necessary, use words." Many spiritual seekers have not been able to hear the words of Christians because the lives of Christians have been making so much horrible noise. (*TIR* 127)

This saying is a favorite of advocates of "lifestyle evangelism." Unfortunately, it has become synonymous with "non-evangelism." While it is true that Christian testimony can be seriously harmed by a person's lifestyle (a wife-beater makes for a poor ambassador), it is just as true that there is no amount of loving kindness, redistribution, or peace-talk that will bring a sinner to the foot of the cross in broken contrition and repentance. When it comes to the gospel, words are always necessary. The proclamation of the gospel is God's divinely decreed means through which souls are saved and the kingdom of God is spread.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 1:21** For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

Claiborne expresses his hope for the future of missions in this very revealing quote:

I am going to Iraq as a missionary. In an age of omni-present war, it is my hope that Christian peacemaking becomes the new face of global missions. May we stand by those who face the impending wrath of empire and whisper, "God loves you, I love you, and if my country bombs your country, I will be right here with you." (*TIR* 367)

If we contrast Claiborne's vision for missions with that of the early church we will see a marked difference. When Christ commissioned us to go into all the world and preach the gospel, was it a message of "God loves you," "I love you," and (basically) "can't we all just get along?" Or was that message something else?

Let's see if we can pick up on a common theme in the message of some key players in the early church.

*Jesus' first words preached*

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 4:17** From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

*Jesus to the Church in Laodicia*

<sup>ESV</sup> **Revelation 3:19** Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.

*John the Baptist—pre-church, but sounds familiar*

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 3:1** In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

*Jesus sends out the twelve two-by-two ...*

<sup>ESV</sup> **Mark 6:12** So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent.

*Peter (former coward now empowered by the Holy Spirit) brings knowledge of sin then...*

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 2:38** And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

*Peter has a personal message for Simon the magician ...*

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 8:22** Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.

*Paul addresses the Areopagus*

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 17:30** The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,

*Paul describes his message to King Agrippa*

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 26:19** "Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,<sup>20</sup> but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.

If the message of the early church was to tell everyone of God's love, one would think that the word "love" would appear at least once in the book of Acts. It doesn't. The message of the early church and the message of the faithful church today is for people to repent and believe (put trust in, have faith in) the gospel.

### *What is Repentance?*

C&H characterize John the Baptist's message of repentance this way:

And John preached, "Repent," a message stronger than a neon sign outside a soup kitchen. It was a radical invitation to rethink the way we live. (*JFP 79*)

They give a footnote description of repentance:

Repent (metanoite) has nuanced meaning, translatable to "change your mind," "rethink your life," "think about the way you think," or "turn your life around." Consider the connected word *pensive* in English or *pensar* in Spanish, which both relate to thinking. (*JFP 79*)

Given the prominence in both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures of the call to repent<sup>30</sup>, what is it that we have been called to turn away from? C&H would have us to believe it is an issue of imperial economics or lifestyle, but if we study the message

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<sup>30</sup> Hebrew שׁוּב (*shoob*)--"to turn back"; Greek μετανοέω (*metanoeo*) "to change one's mind"

"Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ." Grudem, p. 713.

of the early church, we can see that the call to repent is over personal sin and rebellion against God. Far from an “invitation” (something that could be refused without consequence), it is a somber command.

C&H simply offer an updated version of the felt-needs, seeker-sensitive, pop-gospel of “Jesus loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life<sup>31</sup>” easy-believism-cheap-grace-gospel has produced generations of nominal Christians. Those church folk with the very problems Claiborne laments in *TIR*.

### ***What is Conversion? (Rebirth, Regeneration, to be Born Again)***

Claiborne’s redefinition of conversion is perhaps the most dangerous and disturbing of his errors. The section entitled *Schools For Conversion* is so critical I will cite it all by paragraphs with comments interspersed.

#### SCHOOLS FOR CONVERSION

It’s a shame that a few conservative evangelicals have had a monopoly on the word *conversion*. Some of us shiver at the word. But conversion means to change, to alter, after which something looks different than it did before—like conversion vans or converted currency. We need converts in the best sense of the word, people who are marked by the renewing of their minds and imaginations, who no longer conform to the pattern that is destroying our world. Otherwise we have only believers, and believers are a dime-a-dozen nowadays. What the world needs is people who believe so much in another world that they cannot help but begin enacting it now. (*TIR* 149)

Conversion in the biblical sense of the word is speaking of a person who has repented and believed the gospel and has passed from death unto life. (I contend that this is a convert in the best sense of the word.) To reduce this word simply to mean a noticeable difference and distinguish it from a believer seriously distorts the gospel. We cross from grace back to legalism.

Then we will start to see some true conversion vans—vehicles that run on veggie oil instead of diesel. Then we will see some converted homes—fueled by renewable energy—and laundry machines power by stationary bicycles and toilets flushed with dirty sink water. Then we will see tears converted to laughter as people beat their swords into plowshares and weld their machine guns into saxophones, and as police officers use their billy clubs to play baseball. (*TIR* 149-150)

This takes the reduction of Christianity to a new level. In the introduction we saw where young people were looking for something more in Christianity. Here we see how much less we can offer when we abandon sound doctrine.

There is a kind of conversion that happens to people not because of how we talk but because of how we live. And our little experiments in truth become the schools for conversion, where

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<sup>31</sup> For a biblical assessment of the popular Four Spiritual Laws tract:  
<http://www.objectivegospel.org/iron/CCC4Laws.shtml>

folks can learn what it means for the old life to be gone and the new life to be upon us, no longer taking the broad path that leads to destruction. Conversion is not an event but a process, a process of slowly tearing ourselves from the clutches of the culture. (*TIR* 150)

There are all kinds of conversions. Jennie Craig and Weight Watchers produce a lot of them. The danger comes in when we start speaking of lifestyle conversions in biblical terms. Biblical conversion is not a process; it is a miracle. It is a sovereign act of Almighty God giving life to the dead. The dead cannot learn themselves to life nor tear themselves away from death.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Colossians 2:13** And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,

It saddens me to say that at this point we've come to the place where D.A. Carson's evaluation of McLaren and Chalke (in the introduction) rings true in our ears for Claiborne as well:

I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Wealth and Redistribution***

Claiborne makes clear his view of wealth when he states that the existence of the poor and of the wealthy is a result of our sin.

People are poor not just because of their sins; they are poor because of our sins (and people are rich because of our sins). (*TIR* 152)

And then he implies that all wealth/profit has been taken from the poor,

... we received an anonymous gift of \$10,000, which had been invested in the stock market and now was being **returned** to the poor. (*TIR* 187, *JFP* 310, emphasis added)

or is the result of the deliberate oppression of the poor.

... and I know this world will never be safe as long as the masses live in poverty **so that** a handful of people can live as the wish. (*TIR* 366, emphasis added)

Does Claiborne believe that wealth is zero-sum gain? Does he really believe that for some people to have wealth, it will have to have been taken from someone else? Does he naively believe that wealth is about oppressing the poor? Are corporate boardrooms secretly discussing how to take from the poor rather than how to make a better product or market it more effectively (usually to people who can afford them)?

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<sup>32</sup> Carson, 186.

If a person creates a quality product and sells it to people who want it, and grows wealthy as a result of his hard work and ingenuity, is this a sin? The book of Proverbs will need an overhaul if this is so.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Proverbs 24:3** By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; <sup>4</sup> by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.

We'll also have to drastically change our understanding of God's response to Solomon's desire for wisdom:

<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Chronicles 1:11** God answered Solomon, "Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked possessions, wealth, honor, or the life of those who hate you, and have not even asked long life, but have asked wisdom and knowledge for yourself that you may govern my people over whom I have made you king, <sup>12</sup> wisdom and knowledge are granted to you. I will also give you riches, possessions, and honor, such as none of the kings had who were before you, and none after you shall have the like."

As well as God's response to Job's faithfulness:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Job 42:10** And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.

Then again, what are we to make of the parable of the talents/minas<sup>33</sup>?

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 25:29** For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

We see this same wording repeated four times in the synoptic gospels (Matt 13:12; 25:29; Mark 4:25; Luke 19:26). Could it be that God is not bound by our sense of fairness? Could it be that Claiborne and the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel preachers are both wrong and it just isn't about the money?

What is God's view of wealth? Despite it being commonly misquoted (not by Claiborne), money is not "the root of all evil," but the *love of* money is another story.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Timothy 6:10** For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Hebrews 13:5** Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

And money is never to be trusted as our sustenance or salvation:

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<sup>33</sup> In the Biblical Texts Evaluated—Proof Texts section, I address their misleading attempt to explain away this parable.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Proverbs 11:28** Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like a green leaf.

Wealth is a blessing and a test. It can and should be used to expand the kingdom of God (through the proclamation of the Gospel) and to help the poor – especially the poor of the household of faith (Gal 6:10). If disciples are all called to “release their riches and enter the kingdom of God,” (*TIR* 182) what are we to make of verses that instruct the rich? It seems clear here they exist within the Church and there is no instruction to go and sell everything.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Timothy 6:17** As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. <sup>18</sup> They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, <sup>19</sup> thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

Though I believe Claiborne is wrong in his theology of money, I do believe we the church in America are guilty of hoarding our money into fancy buildings and silly programs and largely (with many notable exceptions) neglecting the poor. Where we are guilty of these, we need to repent.

What are we to make of “redistribution?” Anyone who reads *TIR* cannot help but notice Claiborne’s repetitive use of the term. He places a heavy emphasis on it, even having it “inextricably bound” to rebirth.

Simplicity is meaningful only inasmuch as it is grounded in love, authentic relationships and interdependence. Redistribution then springs naturally out of our rebirth, from a vision of family that is larger than biology or nationalism. As we consider what it means to be “born again,” as the evangelical jargon goes, we must ask what it means to be born again into a family in which our sisters and brothers are starving to death. Then we see why rebirth and redistribution are inextricably bound up in one another. (*TIR* 163)

Aside from reducing God’s miraculous regeneration to “evangelical jargon” and divorcing it from its biblical meaning, there is some merit to his statement. If by this he means that a person who has been born again from above will have his heart, mind, priorities, etc. molded in line with God’s and begin to be generous with the poor, then I’ll agree.

I think the primary problem is that “redistribution” carries with it the meaning of taking rather than giving. Otherwise he would speak of “distribution” rather than “redistribution.”

Claiborne makes the original deacons into agents of “redistribution.”

But it is not a coincidence that the first major organization structure in the early church was created to assure order in the redistribution of resources to widows and orphans (Acts 6:1-6). (TIR 331)

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 6:1** Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup> And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

The text is talking about the daily *διακονία* (*diakonia*--the word that we turn into "deacon" that means service or ministry). Most translations render it "daily distribution of food" or "daily serving of food" (note the later reference to "waiting tables"). It's a pretty tough sell to make this about the redistribution of wealth.

### *Tithes and Offerings*

Claiborne explains his understanding of the proper use of tithes and offerings:

I did a ton of research on tithes and offerings in Scripture, and discovered they are unmistakably intended to be used for redistributing resources to the poor and not to go toward buildings and staff for the church. I quoted the church fathers and mothers ... all attest that the church offerings are to be given to the poor as their right. (TIR 326-327)

It would have been helpful to see some of this research. As I look through the Scriptures, I don't find that. I see ministers of the gospel making their living by the gospel.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 9:13** Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? <sup>14</sup> In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

It was used to provide a living for the priestly tribe. There is no indication that they were poor, in fact when we take a tenth from eleven other tribes, we have an extra tenth<sup>34</sup> for the Levites doing the work of the LORD.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Numbers 18:24** For the tithes of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the LORD, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance. Therefore I have said of them that they shall have no inheritance among the people of Israel."

Though God rebuked David and wouldn't allow him to build him a temple (TIR 324), he did allow David's son Solomon to build him a great (and no doubt expensive) temple (1 Kings 6). When the temple was in disrepair the money was given to workers for repair.

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<sup>34</sup> Take this with a healthy "grain of salt." The tribes were of varying sizes so there is no guarantee that this was a "score" for the Levites. I just couldn't resist mentioning the eleven tenths.

<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Kings 22:4** "Go up to Hilkiah the high priest, that he may count the money that has been brought into the house of the LORD, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people. <sup>5</sup> And let it be given into the hand of the workmen who have the oversight of the house of the LORD, and let them give it to the workmen who are at the house of the LORD, repairing the house."

And in another case God just says... party hearty!

<sup>ESV</sup> **Deuteronomy 14:24** And if the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, when the LORD your God blesses you, because the place is too far from you, which the LORD your God chooses, to set his name there, <sup>25</sup> then you shall turn it into money and bind up the money in your hand and go to the place that the LORD your God chooses <sup>26</sup> and spend the money for whatever you desire- oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household.

### *Legalism Rears Its Head*

Claiborne describes the proper motive for operating in the communal life.

When we talk of materialism and simplicity, we must always begin with love for God and neighbor, otherwise we're operating out of little more than legalistic, guilt-ridden self-righteousness. (*TIR* 162)

And he describes some of the difficulties with taking advantage of certain "privileges" like healthcare.

In our community, one question we continually revisit is health insurance. Many of us feel uneasy living without it, especially as we have kids entering our communal life. And yet it is difficult to use that privilege when many of our neighbors go without health care. (*TIR* 178)

But some privileges are OK, I guess.

After I got back from Iraq, I participated in a gathering in the Bahamas called La Mesa, where a bunch of theologians and pastors and old friends get together to talk trash and get a tan. (*TIR* 237)

### *A Question of Credibility*

My final exhortation to fans of *TIR* in the area of economics is to look closely at Claiborne's methods for living out his beliefs. As an adult, it is difficult to take seriously a person who decides to "start living" and acts upon it in this way:

So about thirty of us from Eastern College continued dreaming together about another way of doing life. We stayed up night after night laughing and arguing, ... so we decided to go

ahead and give our vision a shot. Besides, most of us were getting tired of talking and were ready to live. And I was living in a van (yes, down by the river), so we started looking for houses.

One of the first things we did was mail out letters to share stories and needs with a large cloud of supporters surrounding us... (*TIR* 120)

To start living, they: 1) needed to find a house; and 2) needed to find some people to pay for it. If we all decided to become ordinary radicals, to whom should we send our support letters?

### *War and Violence*

Though this is a major theme in *TIR* and *JFP* and a very important one, I will only give it brief attention since I am focused more on the gospel and its faithful proclamation.

I<sup>35</sup> hate war, but I am a believer in just-war theory<sup>36</sup>. Before I launch into a critique of Claiborne's comments, let me first make some concessions that may make some on the political right cringe. I don't believe we have the right to fight wars to ensure the stability of our economy (a.k.a. the free flow of oil at market prices...). We don't have a "right" to the standard of living that we have created for ourselves that can be justifiably defended. While it is noble and right to come to the aid of our neighbors under attack and oppression, history will not be kind to us if it becomes clear that we only did it when we had something to gain economically. Were these oppressive and terror supporting regimes worse than others where we did nothing? We cannot be afraid to face the tough questions, examine our miserable hearts, repent and reform where we should.

Claiborne never engages the arguments of just-war theory but chooses instead to rig "debates" and grossly oversimplify:

We had some good times together, including a debate we hosted (okay rigged) for all of the ROTC cadets in which we "debated" just-war theory and surprisingly came out agreeing that when Jesus said, "Love your enemies," he meant not to kill them. (*TIR* 95-96)

In *TIR* Claiborne speaks of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a "spiritual writer and fellow resister" (*TIR* 320) but not until the later book do they even acknowledge why Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis. Rather than for "joining the poor" or peacemaking, it was for his participation in an assassination attempt on Adolph Hitler. Though Bonhoeffer hated war and looked for every possible alternative to violence, he finally realized that Hitler must be stopped:

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<sup>35</sup> I am a retired military officer and defense contractor, so I have some background to draw upon.

<sup>36</sup> Unfamiliar?—You can find a good summary on this in *The Life and Death Debate—Moral Issues of Our Time* by J.P. Moreland and Norm Geisler.

This was why Bonhoeffer could pray for Germany to be defeated, despite the terrible conditions which a defeat would bring. The most important political, humanistic, ethical and Christian goal for him was getting rid of the tyranny of Hitler. He once explained his participation in the resistance by this analogy: if a drunken driver drives into a crowd, what is the task of the Christian and the church? To run along behind to bury the dead and bind up the wounded? Or isn't it, if possible, to get the driver out of the driver's seat?<sup>37</sup>

Sadly, Bonhoeffer's heroically laying down his life for his friends is disrespected in *JFP* as "Another attempt to pick up the sword went haywire, not only fueling further bloodshed but costing our brother Bonhoeffer his own life..." I'm left wondering their view of the liberation of the Jews in Europe, and those who died in the effort. Perhaps Claiborne and Haw would benefit from watching episode nine of "*Band of Brothers*" titled "*Why We Fight*<sup>38</sup>," repeatedly until their confidence in the inherent goodness of man is finally shaken.

Claiborne also quotes an unknown saint (I searched and couldn't find who it was) in his explanation of his trip to Iraq:

As one of the saints said, "if they come for the innocent and do not pass over our bodies, then cursed be our religion." (*TIR* 367)

I wonder if the unnamed saint could have meant something more by this quote than simply "wait! kill me first!" It would be hard to find a better just-war quote.

I did find a glimmer of hope where C&H make this wise admission:

When we talk about peacemaking and the "third way of Jesus." People inevitably ask bizarre situational questions like, "if someone broke into your house and was raping your grandmother, what would you do?" We can't exhaustively troubleshoot every situation with a nonviolent "strategy." (*JFP* 273)

It is a bit disturbing that Claiborne finds this scenario "bizarre." Evil men perpetrate these kinds of things every day. Sometimes they are alone, sometimes in bands, and sometimes they form armies and perpetrate even greater evils. Bonhoeffer figured that out, but it appears Claiborne and Haw have not.

Finally, I think it would be helpful also if Claiborne would at least make an attempt to differentiate between "killing in the name of God" where it is consistent with the beliefs and practices of the religion (Islam) and where it is done by zealots in violation of their own faith (Christianity).

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<sup>37</sup> Albrecht Schoenherr, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Message of a Life*. Available for download at Faith Streams network: <http://www.faithstreams.com> (search on the author's name).

<sup>38</sup>This HBO series chronicles the true story of a group of American paratroopers (Easy Company) from initial training to victory in Europe. Episode nine shows the heart-breaking reality of the brutality of the Nazis to the Jews and their liberation by God using American fighting men as his instruments.

### ***Sticking it to the ~~Man~~ Empire***

When reading *TIR* and *JFP*, one cannot help but notice their over-use of the words “empire” and “imperial.” These seem to function as favorite trigger words to associate with all things evil. For example, selfishness and a refusal to trust God get characterized strangely:

Remembering the Exodus people in the desert, Jesus knew that “bread from heaven” was not about miracles but was a test—to see whether Israel could resist the Egyptian imperial economics of hoarding. (*JFP* 84)

In another place they say “Jesus healed people who had been made sick by the imperial system” (*JFP* 115), and in another they claim (without support) that in the early church:

To enter the church, many converts even went through a process of “exorcisms” to cast out the empires within. (*JFP* 144)

When I read things like this, I can’t help but be reminded of those who desire to blame their sinfulness on someone else, teaching that we need to be freed from the “demons” of lust, greed, etc. Or those in the prosperity gospel movement who desire to free people from the “demons” of lack, etc.

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<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Timothy 2:15** Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

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## Biblical Texts Evaluated

### *The Rich Young Ruler*

One of the key passages in Claiborne's gospel theology comes from the accounts of Jesus' encounter with the rich young man or rich young ruler. I'll provide Matthew's account below. Luke's and Mark's accounts are found in Luke 18:18-30 and Mark 10:17-30 respectively.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 19:16** And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" <sup>17</sup> And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." <sup>18</sup> He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, <sup>19</sup> Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>20</sup> The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." <sup>22</sup> When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. <sup>23</sup> And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." <sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" <sup>26</sup> But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." <sup>27</sup> Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" <sup>28</sup> Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

Claiborne often refers to this story in *TIR*. Below I will provide those sections of the book where he describes his understanding of the text. These quotes are long because it is important to see them in context. I will hold off on evaluating the statements until after presenting all of the texts.

He recalls a chapel service where Rich Mullins spoke while he was at Wheaton College:

Rich stood up in chapel and said, "You guys are all into that born again thing, which is great. We do need to be born again, since Jesus said that to a guy named Nicodemus. But if you tell me I have to be born again to enter the kingdom of God, I can tell you that you have to sell everything you have and give it to the poor, because Jesus said that to one guy too..."

[And he paused in the awkward silence.] But I guess that's why God invented highlighters, so we can highlight the parts we like and ignore the rest." (*TIR* 98-99)

He then goes deeper a few pages later:

I heard one of the teaching pastors at Willow Creek speak on the rich young ruler text that Rich had talked about in Wheaton's chapel. The teaching pastor said, "Now that doesn't mean you have to go sell your rollerblades and golf clubs," and he went on to "contextualize" the teaching to show that we just need to be careful not to make idols of our things. I wasn't so sure about that. Jesus doesn't tell the man to be a better steward, or to treat his workers fairly, or not to make money an idol. He tells this highly educated and devoutly religious young man that he lacks one thing: giving up everything he owns to give to the poor. Rich Mullins used to say that's because there are a lot of people coming to the Banquet, and God doesn't want all the luggage to deal with.

#### THE UNCOMFORTABLE CROSS

I decided to look a little closer at some of the rich young ruler text, which appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. After Jesus' teaching that you must enter the kingdom like a little kid, a wealthy man comes up and asks Jesus what he needs to do, and Jesus tells him he lacks one little thing. ("Lacks" is an interesting word to use, since the rich man thought he had everything.) And what might that one thing be? You can almost see him get excited. Then Jesus drops the big one: "Sell everything you have and give it to the poor!" The man's face sinks and he walks away with his riches.

I think it broke Jesus' heart to let the man walk away. The text says that Jesus looks at him and "loves him" as he walks away. But Jesus doesn't run after the man saying, "Hey, it's a journey, just give half," or, "Start with 10 percent." He simply lets the man choose his wealth.

In our culture of "seeker sensitivity" and radical inclusivity, the great temptation is to compromise the cost of discipleship in order to draw a larger crowd. With the most sincere hearts, we do not want to see anyone walk away from Jesus because of the discomfort of his cross, so we clip the claws on the Lion a little, we clean up a bit of bloody Passion we are called to follow. I think this is why the disciples react as they do. They protest in awe, "Who then can be saved?" ("Why must you make it so hard? We need some rich folks here, Jesus, we're trying to build a movement.") And yet Jesus lets him walk away.

Jesus doesn't exclude rich people; he just lets them know their rebirth will cost them everything they have. The story is not so much about whether rich folks are welcome as it is about the nature of the kingdom of God, which has an ethic and economy diametrically opposed to those of the world. Rather than accumulating stuff for oneself, followers of Jesus abandon everything, trusting in God alone for providence. (*TIR* 103-104)

He continues to apply his understanding in a later section:

No wonder it is easier to fit a camel through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom, as Jesus said to the rich young ruler. That doesn't mean rich people are excluded or not welcome. It means that it is nearly impossible for them to catch the vision of interdependent community, dependent on God and one another. Rich folks, while they may be spiritually starving for God and community, still believe the illusion that they are self-sufficient autonomous individuals, and that belief is incompatible with the gospel that says

wherever two or more are gathered, God is among us. And yet, "nothing is impossible," as the text in Mark 10 says. Rocks can cry out, donkeys can talk, dead people can come to life, and rich people can release their riches and enter the kingdom of God. Yes! (*T/R* 181-182)

### *The Comparison to Nicodemus*

These quotes tell us quite a bit about Claiborne's definitions of the cross, the gospel, and rebirth.

When Rich Mullins compares what Jesus said to Nicodemus about the necessity to be born again to what he said to the rich young ruler, is that an appropriate comparison? Here is the story of Nicodemus from the gospel of John:

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 3:1** Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

When the rich young ruler approached Jesus, he asked, "...what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" He sought, as is our human tendency, to accomplish his own salvation by doing whatever was required. Claiborne leaves out an important part of the story as he recalls it. Jesus refers the man to God's Law. We see this pattern<sup>39</sup> throughout the New Testament: Law to the proud and grace to the broken, contrite, and humble. The Law was given to lead us to Christ (Gal 3:24) by removing all pretense of self-righteousness and revealing to us our sin (Rom 3:19-20; 7:7) and need for a savior. When the man claimed to have kept all of God's law since his youth, Jesus knew the man needed a clearer understanding of God's law, for he had not been broken and he still thought himself righteous before God. Jesus exposed the man's devotion to his other "god" (his wealth) by telling him to go and sell it all and give it to the poor. It was a specific command to a specific individual that was given to expose his sin.

Nicodemus came to Jesus in a much different way. He came to Jesus by night, probably so that his fellow Pharisees would not see him, and he simply made a statement that he believed that Jesus must be a teacher from and with God. To borrow a phrase from Claiborne, *here* is where "Jesus drops the big one," and notice to whom it applies: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless *one* is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... unless *one* is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the

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<sup>39</sup> Jesus and the Apostles consistently brought people to a knowledge of their sin first (revealing their need for a Savior) before offering God's grace. Yes, even the woman at the well had her adultery exposed.

kingdom of God." Here Jesus is speaking a universal rule; it is not until verse seven that he applies it to Nicodemus individually.

In Claiborne's rush to disagree with the Willow Creek pastor on the extent of the action Jesus required of the man (sell it all, not a part...), he failed to grasp what the pastor was trying to tell him. By "contextualizing" the text (putting it in its context to see what the writer was talking about—usually considered a good idea) the pastor was (hopefully) demonstrating that this was a specific command to a specific individual for a specific purpose, and we can learn from it that no matter how self-righteous we may be, we are all sinners. The rich young ruler had another god and was a violator of God's Law. It is important to understand that he was not "just barely missing the kingdom." It's true that he lacked one thing and it was a big one: perfect righteousness (apart from Christ we all lack that one thing). This man could no more go and sell his possessions and give them to the poor than he could flap his arms and fly. It wasn't in his nature. It would have required a miracle, a new nature. It required a new birth.

Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus teaches that a person must be born again<sup>40</sup> to enter the kingdom of heaven. This is a universal truth. No one will enter the kingdom of God who has not been born again. On the other hand, Jesus commanded the rich young ruler to go and sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. On another occasion he told a woman to "go and call your husband and come here" (John 4:16). Neither of these is a universal command, nor was either ever intended to be a universal call.

From this point on in the book, we see that Claiborne applies the "go and sell all that you have and give to the poor" as a universal requirement<sup>41</sup>. We begin to see this in some of the texts quoted above. He follows through with the rich young ruler application: "He tells this highly educated and devoutly religious young man that he lacks one thing: giving up everything he owns to give to the poor." As if this would have been his ticket to heaven, that one act that would have completed his self-justification. If he were able, being dead in trespasses and sins, to raise himself to spiritual life, then he could have saved himself.

When the disciples saw the rich young ruler turn away dejected, they were blown away. In their culture this man was no doubt considered the best of the best. The wealthy were considered to be worthy of more honor than the poor (something Jesus

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<sup>40</sup> Born again, reborn, converted, regenerated, born from above, to have one's heart of stone replaced with a heart of flesh, made alive in the spirit, etc. all refer to a sovereign work of God by grace to an undeserving sinner. It is evidenced by repentance and faith (inseparable graces that are also gifts from above—Acts 11:18, John 6:65, ... many more.).

<sup>41</sup> There are some people in Claiborne's story that still manage to own small stores, etc. He also mentions he believes God is at work among the rich folk at Willow Creek, it just depends on the chapter you are in.

proved to be wrong by his life and teaching). He was also a well-respected righteous (by human standards) man. When the disciples saw that he could not be saved, they were stricken with the realization that if he wasn't good enough, they were all in deep trouble. "Then who can be saved?" Jesus doesn't answer that it is "hard," nor does he answer that it is "nearly impossible." With man it is impossible. Thanks be to God that is not the end of the story: "but with God all things are possible" even the salvation of a rich man.

Claiborne continues to show his belief that the wealth is the issue when he says "Jesus doesn't exclude rich people; he just lets them know their rebirth will cost them everything they have... Rather than accumulating stuff for oneself..." He also strongly implies it where he states "and rich people can *release their riches* and enter the kingdom of God."

### *The Disciples*

Claiborne attempts to demonstrate how the command to the rich young ruler is the norm for all followers of Christ.

Rather than accumulating stuff for oneself, followers of Jesus abandon everything, trusting in God alone for providence. The disciples start to get it, saying, "We have left everything to follow you." (TIR 174)

What we see here is a false assumption about the disciples applied to all followers of Christ. When Jesus called the disciples, they just dropped everything and went; this is true. There is no indication that they "sold everything and gave it to the poor." Besides never saying that they did, we find reasons why they probably didn't. For instance, James and John were with their father. There is no reason to believe they went home and sold everything out from under him leaving him destitute (and the local economy with one less fishing business).

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 4:21** And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew, they immediately left their nets and followed him, but we see only a few verses later that they still have a house:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Mark 1:16** Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." <sup>18</sup> And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ...

<sup>29</sup> And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.

The bottom line here is that it wasn't about the money; it was about the gospel.

### Careless/Misleading Proof Texting

In addition to all the examples where all the significant figures are made out to be poor and oppressed discussed earlier, C&H quote a number of texts in ways that are misleading.

#### *Luke 19:11-27 -- Political Satire?*

The parables of the minas and the talents are very difficult for those who try to hold God accountable to human standards of fairness. In the gospel of Claiborne, there is great difficulty with teachings about taking from those who have few and giving to those who have many. C&H handle it in *JFP* with this footnote:

In light of this little fiasco in Rome, take a look at Jesus' political satire in Luke 19:11-27. The powerful figure in Jesus' parables doesn't always represent God or how the kingdom works but sometimes represents the way of the world, which is why Jesus doesn't begin this parable with the phrase "the kingdom of God is like ..." (*JFP* 78).

At first glance, they have a point; this parable does not begin that way. But if we go over and look at the parable of the talents, that teaches the same story, we see that it does say it is like the kingdom of God. Just follow the pronouns.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 25:1** "Then ***the kingdom of heaven will be like*** ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom...<sup>14</sup>"For ***it*** will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property...

#### *2 Kings 15 and 2 Chronicles 26 -- Horrible King Uzziah*

This misleading use of the text is only included because it is presented in a way that could lead readers to have their confidence shaken in the text as a "contradiction."

There are many different perspectives on what makes a good king, and many contradictions. For instance, 2 Kings 15 says "that Uzziah was a good king and "did what was right in the eyes of the LORD." But flip a few pages to 2 Chronicles 26 and we hear that Uzziah was a horrible king and that the Lord struck him with leprosy, which he had "until the day he died"! (*JFP* 39).

Actually, 2 Chronicles 26:4 also says "And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done." There is no mention of Uzziah being anything other than a great king. His pride cost him dearly when he took it upon himself to offer incense where only a priest was allowed. This act of disobedience, piling in comparison to what good King David did, is what caused him to be stricken with leprosy.

## Closing Comments and Exhortations

### *Transcending Culture*

Claiborne and other emergents/postmoderns have helped us to see many of the unhealthy influences of the pop culture on the church. Postmoderns tend to link all of the ills of pop evangelicalism on the influence of culture in general and modernism in particular. The response they propose is to transform the church from one influenced by modern culture to one influenced by post-modern culture. How wise is it for us to trade in one incarnation of worldliness for its successor?

We don't believe in propositional truth because of modernism and the Enlightenment; we believe in it because it is clearly taught in Scripture and has always been believed/practiced by the Church.

Are creedal statements really the product of modern spirituality? Whenever this new spirituality supposedly started—whether the 1600s, 1700s, 1800s, or 1900s—statements of faith certainly predate modernism. What about Nicea, Constantinople, Chalcedon, and Ephesus, not to mention Trent, Augsburg, and Dort—all of which predate 1620? Does anyone really believe that creedal formulations began with modernism, as if Christians suddenly got obsessed with doctrine in the wake of the Enlightenment?<sup>42</sup>

In the same way, we don't believe that we should love our neighbors (and enemies) because the emergents say so—we believe and must learn to better practice it because God has commanded it. The Church is called to transcend the culture.

It is hard to believe that J. Gresham Machen's book *Christianity and Liberalism* was published in 1923 because so many of the battles he fought with modern theological liberalism are needing to be fought all over again. See if Machen's description of modern liberalism doesn't ring true for her emergent successor [*clarifications added*]:

The liberal preacher is really rejecting the whole basis of Christianity, which is a religion founded not on aspirations, but on facts [*truths we can depend upon*]. Here is the most fundamental difference between liberalism and Christianity—liberalism is altogether in the imperative mood [*what we have to do*], while Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative [*what Christ has already done*]; liberalism appeals to man's will, while Christianity announces, first, a gracious act of God<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)*, Moody. 2008. p. 151.

<sup>43</sup> Machen. p. 47.

The fundamental fault of the modern Church is that she is busily engaged in an absolutely impossible task—she is busily engaged in calling the righteous to repentance. Modern preachers are trying to bring men into the Church without requiring them to relinquish their pride; they are trying to help men avoid the conviction of sin.<sup>44</sup>

### *Some Encouraging Signs*

There is a contingency of younger Christians like Kevin DeYoung who are, in a sense, rebelling against the rebellion:

I know that some in my generation have a hard time with truth claims. But I'm convinced there are just as many of us—Christians and not—in our postmodern world who are tired of endless uncertainties and doctrinal repaintings. We are tired of indecision and inconsistency reheated and served up as paradox and mystery. Some of us long for teaching that has authority, ethics rooted in dogma, and something unique in this world of banal diversity. We long for Jesus—not a shapeless, formless, good-hearted ethical teacher Jesus, but the Jesus of the New Testament, the Jesus of the church, the Jesus of faith, the Jesus of two millennia of Christian witness with all of its unchanging and edgy doctrinal propositions.<sup>45</sup>

There are also young adult oriented ministries like “New Attitude<sup>46</sup>” and their emphasis on “humble orthodoxy” who are pursuing authentic Christianity without abandoning the essential truths that define it. This is from their “What is Humble Orthodoxy?” page<sup>47</sup>:

Humble orthodoxy is a commitment to believe, live, and represent biblical truth with humility.

#### Believe

We believe that God has revealed Himself in Scripture and that His revelation reaches its culmination in the Person and work of Christ on the cross. God's truth in Scripture should not be redefined or reinvented. Our role is not to redefine truth but to receive God's truth.

#### Live

We believe that the truth of the gospel transforms not only what we believe but how we live. Biblical truth doesn't merely inform us, it introduces us to a person who changes us.

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<sup>44</sup> Machen. p. 68.

<sup>45</sup> DeYoung. pp. 116-117.

<sup>46</sup> “Na exists now to help Christians believe, live, and represent the truth with humility. We do this in two ways: the big annual conference (<http://newattitude.org/conference>) and the ongoing conversation (<http://newattitude.org/blog>) here on the website.” All from: <http://newattitude.org> web site.

<sup>47</sup> <http://newattitude.org/humbleorthodoxy>

Represent

We believe that the gospel demands humility from those who represent it. We want to represent the truth not merely as those who are right, but as those who have been rescued.

Forget reinvention. Embrace a humble orthodoxy.

*Final Exhortation*

In the introduction I encouraged readers to take Claiborne's advice to stay anchored in the Church. Younger readers have grown up in a different time and culture than we old folks have. What Scripture calls "worldliness" has changed flavors but Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8).

The gospel is not ours to reinvent, deconstruct, or even edit. It is ours to proclaim.



## Appendix -- Statement of faith from The Simple Way Web site.

### **Our Commitments**

#### **Scripture**

We recognize the Bible, composed of the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament, as inspired of God, the supreme and final authority in faith and life. We submit ourselves to carrying out our mission under this authority and seek to apply biblical principles to all facets of human aspiration and action.

#### **The Church**

We affirm that the Church is a unit with many parts, forming one body (1 Cor. 12:12). The Church is the body of the followers of Jesus, inclusive of persons of all cultures, races and nationalities. We value and unite with local congregations in establishing the Kingdom of God and carrying out the work of Jesus.

#### **The Trinity**

We echo the Nicene Creed in our belief in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, both perfectly divine and perfectly human, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, God from God, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, in Heaven and on earth, and who because of our sins became human, suffered, died, rose, ascended, and will come again to judge the living and dead; and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord the giver of life, one with the Father and the Son, and to be worshipped and glorified.

#### **Humanity**

We believe that people are created in the image of God. We believe people are created to love and to be loved. We also believe that humanity is fallen, and Jesus died and rose in order to save humanity. Humans are incapable of holiness and perfect love without the sacrifice of Jesus.

#### **Evangelism**

We affirm the importance of calling all persons to personal faith and faithful discipleship in following Jesus Christ. We recognize that this is done both with words and without them.

#### **Justice**

We acknowledge with sorrow the brokenness of the world at personal, national, and international levels, and we seek justice, reconciliation and transformation in all arenas of life. In these politically, economically, socially, and religiously decaying times, justice is needed to bring hope, wisdom, and grace. We also realize that the evils of poverty and oppression exist on two levels, the individual and the structural, and we work for justice in both facets.

### **Need**

We believe that there is enough. Those with plenty can meet the needs of the poor, if s/he who can gather much will not gather too much (2 Cor. 8:13-15). We believe that the Kingdom of God is free of poverty and oppression. We echo and attempt to live out Christ's prayer that the "Kingdom come and will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We believe that begins now, with Jesus' followers, and continues throughout eternity.

### **Community**

We believe that humanity is created for community. God is a community, a Trinity, a plurality of oneness. And we are created in that image. Jesus modeled this community with His disciples, as He lived and as He sent them out and taught them to live. We wish to return to the community like that of the early church in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35. We believe that in this type of community, reconciliation happens. God is establishing a new community, a new Kingdom.

### **Love**

We recognize the mystery of love. Ultimately, our mission is to love -- to love God and to love people. This is the greatest commandment, embodying God's law. All sin stems from not loving God or not loving people. Loving God and loving people are intricately connected and utterly inseparable. We also acknowledge that pure love is God. The greatest act of love is introducing someone to Love, in the person of Jesus.

Here is where I would have placed the theological materials from *universityofthepoor.org* if the site had not been down for the duration of my study. Check back at *objectivegospel.org* (under Iron Sharpens Iron) to see if I've had the chance to review some of this material.