

Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

June 14 2014: Phoenix ComiCon

When Charity turned 20, we celebrated her emergence from the teen years with a trip with her buds to Las Vegas. Faith turned 20 a few months ago, but she didn't want to go back to Las Vegas. Instead, she wanted to follow up on an interesting prospect that we encountered a year or two back on a visit to downtown Phoenix: we



noticed all these young people walking around in costumes! Turns out we were there during the [Phoenix ComiCon \[1\]](#), and those were "cosplayers". Since Faith is a "steampunk" aficionado, as well as a fan of manga and anime, she stated her preference to attend the ComiCon this year. So we did. I registered us for all four days and found a pretty nice hotel at a reasonable rate located near a Metro light-rail station.

There are three essential attractions for the pop culture convention:

- "Famous" people (such as actors), who will sit in huge gatherings and take questions and make comments about their work, and later sign autographs (for money) and have photos taken with fans (for money)
- Sessions, or seminars, or lectures, upon various topics related to pop culture, with a panel of more or less relevant persons, who will speak on the topic and respond to questions or comments from the audience
- A giant exhibition hall filled with the booths of vendors selling books, artwork, clothing, fan stuff (like toys or overpriced mementos)

Of course, there is an unofficial attraction that cannot escape mention: the opportunity to cosplay. This is the practice of creating a costume and (to varying degrees) adopting the role of some favorite character from a film, comic, video game, television show, whatever. The costume can be as minor as a hat or fuzzy tail hanging down from the belt in back, or as elaborate as a major-league team mascot's. Often the costume includes accessories, such as blaster guns, giant (cardboard or

wooden) swords, huge mallets, a bewildering variety. I would say that just over a third of the attenders were in costume of some sort, but I observed three categories: real cosplayers, unserious persons taking advantage of the opportunity to "play halloween", and (especially toward the end) mostly young women (and a few men) being exhibitionist (revealing, titillating, scandalous costumes).

We managed to see a few famous actors, such as Adam West (Batman), Burt Ward (Robin), and Julie Newmar (Catwoman) from the original '60s *Batman* television show. The girls got to see Cary Elwes (the hero of *The Princess Bride* movie) and John Rhys-Davies (from *Indiana Jones* and *Lord of the Rings*), and Jerri got to hear Stan Lee (the famous Marvel comics artist) and John Barrowman (acts in the Doctor Who milieu). The crowds waiting to get into the ballroom for these "spotlight" events were amazing; if you didn't get in line an hour or more before the program, you likely were not going to get in. I felt I had better things to do with my time.

The vendor sales area was also amazing, but as I'm not really a pop culture fan (I don't need toy sonic screwdrivers or Bobba Fett bobbleheads) and I'm not a comic book collector, and I don't want artwork (it was mostly all quite good artwork, but predominantly of seductive females) to hang on my already crowded walls, there wasn't much to interest me. I was looking around for graphic novels that *weren't* superheroes or fantasies or horror, but there wasn't much else there.

The real show was the seminars. Prior to going, we looked through the list of offerings on the website and built our "ConQuest" list, which we printed out and took with us. However, at the registration hall at the Phoenix Convention Center, we picked up the convention program and found a much more useful tabular arrangement, so we altered our pre-arrival plans a little. For the most part, we all did different things; Jerri focused on Star Wars related topics, Faith on Steampunk, and I on science and comics related topics.

Thursday

Advances in Cheaper/Private Space Travel. The speaker was a former project manager with an independent commercial space vehicle development company, and had just arrived from a Washington trip to try to influence senators as part of a [non-profit consortium](#) [2]. He showed slides of developmental vehicles from a broad range of companies and technical approaches, including SpaceX, which has already started cargo service to the International Space Station. A very interesting (and non-controversial) session.

Beyond the Movies - Star Wars in the Expanded Universe. A middle-aged woman (dressed as "Aunt Beru" from Episode IV) and a young man had encyclopedic knowledge of the complete body of *Star Wars* media, including the movies, the animated series, the books, the graphic novels, and even the role-play games, and were "in the know" about future developments by Disney (new owners of Lucasfilm Ltd.) and the backstory of the authors (and tentative authors) of third-party books and graphic novels. I kept thinking to myself, as I sat amazed at the depth of their knowledge, what a shame they have devoted themselves so completely to an artistic project that will not survive the end of the world. That, assuming they are not believers (probably a pretty good assumption), that *Star Wars* is essentially their lives. (Actually, I'm not sure how a believer could so completely devote themselves to something that ultimately doesn't matter.)

Friday

Gallifrey Falls No More. Similar to the previous day's *Star Wars* session, but about *Doctor Who*. An eclectic panel, and a chaotic barrage of questions from a very engaged audience. Similar observations about "what really matters" as the previous day. Also observing that, outside of one panel member and a small handful of audience members, nobody had any knowledge of *Doctor Who* prior to the reboot of the series in recent times. This observation was underlined by noting that of cosplayers playing Doctors that we saw, the preponderance was David Tennant and Matt Smith Doctors, with just a few Tom Baker Doctors thrown in.

Ask a Detective: Sherlocked Edition. The panel was four teenage cosplayers (as Moriarty, Molly, Watson, and Holmes) and a real private investigative detective. The audience was mostly middle-school-age girls and a few adults. The adults posed real questions to the real detective who gave real (and interesting and informative) responses. The young people asked sappy fan-type questions to the cosplayers who made their own sappy, cosplayer fan-type responses. Other than hearing from a real detective who appreciates the BBC *Sherlock* show, and seeing the intelligence-strangling fan dynamic playing out in young people, it was not worth the hour.

It All Started with a Big Bang. The panel was four women who were professors and students at ASU and other local schools, specializing in astrophysics and astrobiology (more of this later) and a young man who is a graduate student and has his own [science blog](#) [3]. The topic addressed was the feature of the current state of the "Big Bang" cosmology theory known as "inflation". The main speaker made a very fair assessment of the problem with the cosmic microwave background

radiation (which she improperly introduced as "proof" that the Big Bang happened) - that it is very uniform everywhere, whereas if the universe had expanded "normally", the different parts would have taken on different temperatures due to the impossibility of transferring energy at the speed of light over the distances involved. The solution to this problem is the proposal that, shortly after the initial "bang", the parts of the universe exchanged energy at short range at the speed of light, and then expanded at rates much faster than the speed of light, preserving the initial temperature-equalized condition, until the expansion slowed to its currently observed rate much slower than the speed of light. I wanted to ask if there were physical or mathematical explanations for how the universe could possibly expand faster than the speed of light, and what could drive this behaviour, but I didn't get the chance. Once she mentioned that the mathematics of "inflation" provided the possibility of "multiverses", the audience jumped right on it. Clearly, the science-fiction fans had a keen interest in exploring the possibility that their alternate science fiction universes could actually exist. I very much appreciated how the main speaker emphasized the point that the "multiverse" concept was only mathematical, and without observable evidence (which by definition is not available), it isn't science. She also mentioned that there is currently a discussion about the nature of science in her circles. This is news to me; there was no debate in the astrophysics and "philosophy of science" classes I took at UofA.

Toward the end of the session, as the panel took questions from the audience, a woman at the back identified herself as a science teacher, and stated that some of her students objected to the teaching of "Big Bang" theory as an attempt to convert them to atheism. One of the panel members made a weak suggestion that it didn't need to be this way, since the "Big Bang" merely posits how the universe had a beginning, and not what caused it. I think I am with that science teacher's students on this one (and, doubtless, other things they are taught in their public school science class).

Saturday

Close to Home: Stories of the Solar System. The panel consisted of two astronomy professors and two science fiction writers. They didn't really present anything; they merely took questions from the audience. There were a few interesting points made, including how fiction writers are concerned that some discovery may invalidate their story while they're writing it, but once they finish and get it published, they don't worry anymore. Also how scientists are just as much in the imaginative speculation business as writers, but expect that as their theories are disproven, their ideas are forgotten, unlike the ideas of the writers which get committed to published books. Nothing else particularly controversial or thought-provoking.

Comics and Graphic Narratives. A teacher at Central Arizona College (which is Pinal County's community college system), who is a comic book fan (with a particular appreciation for Batman), has started a class on "comics as literature". Some of his students were there with their PowerPoint class projects. I've got no doubts that comics can be literature, and I suppose the well-established storylines (like Batman and Superman) could be as influential with modern readers as Swift or Bronte or Poe have been in previous generations.

FameLab: Exploring Earth and Beyond. Most of the sessions were at the Phoenix Convention Center, but the hotels associated with the event also had sessions in their meeting rooms. The Sheraton hosted a FameLab session, which was part of a broad strategy by NASA to encourage young scientists and science educators to be science communicators, apparently concerned that Americans are scientifically illiterate. In other words, government-sponsored atheistic materialism indoctrination. Nine young people made three-minute presentations on some subject they were interested in (*without* the aid of projection aids), and a panel of three judges assessed who the best communicator was. This appears to be an effort to raise up new Bill Nyes and Carl Sagens. The topics were mostly astrobiology (the search for life on other worlds, or speculation on what sort of life we might find) and paleontology (such as, humans hunting mammoths in the Ice Age). However, the last speaker, Moishe, presented on "Jews in Space!", or his own theories of "astrotheology", how the prospect of extraterrestrial life would be received by the world's religions. This presentation was very much unexpected, and produced uneasy responses from the judges.

I was thinking, wow, an intentional effort (by the government, unfortunately) to produce popular speakers on behalf of "science" (atheistic materialism). Would that the Christian community were as serious at engaging the culture... which perhaps there are some para-church organizations who might already be doing this (Answers in Genesis? World Magazine Institute of Journalism?). Sure isn't the establishment church - except for "evangelism" or "missions", and even that not very intentionally.

Sunday

Classic Comics in the Modern Age. This was taken as a lark; I was wondering what "classic comics" meant - *Prince Valiant? Flash Gordon?* If I had actually read the session description in the program, I would not have wondered - "classic comics" by Dark Horse Comics: *Groo, Nexxus, and Elfquest.* The creators of these thirty-year-old storylines were there. The *Elfquest* writers were a husband and wife team. They

all had interesting aspects of controlling their work, particularly their passion for NOT signing over copyright to a comic publisher. As an Open Source (or Free Software, really) advocate, I understand their concern. It was interesting, but not particularly useful.

Spirituality in Comics. This was the winner of the convention. The panel was (a) a former minister turned comic artist, (b) a former Southern Baptist turned eastern martial arts philosopher, and (c) an older fellow who talked a lot without saying much. The session started with a video of comic panels with religious themes. Then the rightmost panelist explained that he had suffered an accident that threatened his ability to draw, and in the ensuing crisis of faith, he reconsidered his Southern Baptist roots (obviously not very deep roots), became active in some branch of martial arts, and became enamored of the embodied philosophy, which now informs his comic storyline, *Bushy Tails* (apparently a take on "bushido", the way of the samurai). Most of the hour was monopolized by two audience members who engaged the talkative panel member in a running discussion to no particular point.

Finally, I got an opportunity to ask, "Given that everyone has a worldview, or is searching for a convincing one, do you think your worldview appears in your art, either directly or indirectly?" The former Southern Baptist nodded his head in understanding. The middle guy rambled on for a while, and then declared, "I don't trust anybody who says they have a corner on truth. Nobody has any business claiming to have absolute truth!"

The people around me were nodding their heads in agreement... utterly unaware that the artist had just declared his worldview: The truth is, nobody has the truth.

I would expect his art to reflect his worldview unconsciously or indirectly, perhaps with an ambiguous morality. After coming back from the convention, I came across this [Briefing by Albert Mohler \[4\]](#) that makes the same point. Certainly in the exhibition hall, I saw a lot of moral ambiguity, or moral relativism. The point of the session was "spirituality in comics", but even without the overtly religious symbols and subjects in a comic strip, the consequence of religion - *morality* - is certainly present in the comics being sold by the vendors - and bought by the pop culture fans represented by those people in the session who were agreeing with our "practical agnostic" panel member.

Evolution off the Rails. The last session I went to was billed as "what the human species might become", obviously a reference to the science fiction subject of continuing human evolution. In fact, it was mostly astrobiology: What are the basic necessities of life (a solvent (like water), a source of energy (like the sun), and nutrients (like minerals or

carbon dioxide)? What might life be like with different necessities on other worlds; for instance, under the ice pack of Jupiter's moon Europa? And here are some examples of strange life with different energy sources and nutrients around the volcanic vents at the bottom of the deepest parts of the ocean. Strange life forms like tube worms and blind shrimp.



Strange life forms like the [barreleye fish](#) [5] that lives in the twilight zone in the deep ocean, with a transparent skull, whose eyes are enclosed inside the skull and are aimed up to catch the silhouettes of prey above it.

Or the [stoplight loosejaw](#) [6], who has red bioluminescence glands, rather than the usual blue or green, and a hinged lower jawbone that allows the fish to devour prey larger than its mouth. Red light does not transmit through water as well as blue or green, so while the light



does not allow the fish to see very far, it also does not alert other creatures whose eyes are more sensitive to the blue or green light. These creatures are possibly a challenge for creationism, but they certainly are no cakewalk for evolutionism, either (but it is far easier for me to believe that the strange configurations of fish differ from related species by the *loss* of genetic information than by the *spontaneous generation* of genetic information). In fact, the strange eyes of the barreleye sparked a discussion about the complexity of the eye. The main speaker on the panel responded that the complexity of the eye is often offered as a counterexample to evolution, but "we know, given enough time, anything is possible". So I got to see actual academic evolutionists doing the non-scientific handwavey "given enough time, anything is possible" routine!

After the last session, we joined the masses of people leaving the convention, caught the next Metro train back to the hotel, and left Phoenix for home. All in all, it was an interesting experience, and eye-opening to the spiritual state of popular culture and its devotees. Will I go back? Maybe; I'm not all that motivated. Perhaps my daughter is, and she can go back with her friends if she likes, but I suspect that as popular culture continues to decay, in the absence of counter-acting true revival in the Christian church in the United States, that the

ComiCon will become more outrageous and more deviant and separated from truth.

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1. www.phoenixcomicon.com
 2. space-access.org
 3. badastronomy.com
 4. www.albertmohler.com/2014/06/10/transcript-the-briefing-06-10-14
 5. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barreleye
 6. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoplight_loosejaw
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May 4 2014: *The Monuments Men*



It has been out for a while, so it's already at the cheap theatres, but Jerri wanted to see it, so we went last week to see [The Monuments Men](#) [1], the story (produced by George Clooney, directed by George Clooney, starring George Clooney, and based on the book of the same name) of a group of art experts during World War II who accompany the Army into Europe to try to rescue the great art treasures of Western Europe from destruction or theft. It was pretty good, considering it was set in the war period, so we get a lot of mid-40s cultural clues and *Saving Private Ryan* style themes in the combat theatre. It was, as you might expect, essentially a morality piece, contrasting the barbarism of the Nazis to the altruism of the (mostly) Americans. There were two themes that caught me by surprise, since I had never heard

of them before, and I am naively assuming that they came from the

book and are therefore "true": first, that since Germany had already been partitioned between the Western Powers and the Soviet Union, as the Soviet army advanced from the east, Russian units were collecting Nazi-stolen artwork and sending it back to Mother Russia as "war reparations". Second, Hitler issued a "Nero Order", specifying that, upon his death, should he die, all the art treasures were to be destroyed. The tension in the story, therefore, is a race with the "enemies" to find and save the art treasures before they are re-stolen or destroyed, and we see scenes of Russian troops piling paintings into army trucks, and Nazis throwing paintings on bonfires or torching them with flamethrowers. The theatre where we were viewing this film was sparsely occupied with mostly older viewers, and I suspect that one or two were overcome by their emotions upon seeing the Nazis burning Rembrandt and Picasso paintings, and left the theatre in tears.

It was this morality aspect that I personally found most interesting about the film, as a tacit statement of values. Stokes (Clooney) pitched his proposal for the "monuments men" operation to the American civilian commanders as "saving the basis for western civilization that the Allies were fighting to preserve", the idea that, if we won the war but destroyed everything that makes Western civilization what it is, we have really lost. You might have expected art experts (scholars, painters, sculptors, architects, critics, and so forth) to have this passion about art, and there is at least one French woman (played by Cate Blanchett), who agrees, and "works" (to the point of being accused after the War of being a collaborator) with the Nazis in order to secretly catalog the stolen art and capture clues about their destinations. Of course, the film was made to communicate that value to the general viewing audience, and it works well, unless some viewers used to bucking the trend ask, "is it the art that is really the basis for Western civilization?"

There was another theme present in the story, of whether art is worth dying for. This question is raised by the civilian commanders at the beginning of the film. During the film, the Monuments Men plead with fighting unit commanders to spare churches and public buildings of architectural significance and to avoid shelling places where art treasures might be, but the officers refuse on the grounds that they are there to win battles and preserve the lives of their men. Of course, a few of the Monuments Men do die (although more in futility than actual defense of art works or to prevent theft). At the end of the film, the civilian leaders ask if saving the art was worth men's lives. Years later, as he visits a church where one of the art pieces he rescued is housed, an elderly Stokes (played by George Clooney's own father) says "Yes".

I suppose great art might in some sense be worth dying to save, because it is a significant aspect of Western civilization - but this great

art, especially the altarpiece of the cathedral of Ghent, or the Madonna and Child statue at the church of Bruges, or the da Vinci painting of the Last Supper on the church wall, all of it, is only a *derivative* aspect. The context of the art gives the story away: The altarpiece is in the *cathedral* of Ghent. The Madonna and Child statue is in the *church* of Bruges. Yes, Renoir and Rembrandt and da Vinci all created "secular" artwork, not affiliated with Catholic or Christian themes, but it was their western culture arising out of that Christian consensus, or that "Christendom", that made all the rest of it possible.

Is only Western or "Christendom"-influenced art significant art? No; of course we have the awe-inspiring works of China, Japan, and the Far East, or even the great Buddha statues in the near east (that the newer barbarians, the Islamic fundamentalists, are destroying with artillery because they are "idols"). Even the cave paintings of prehistoric (and pre-Christian) Europe is art. Humans make art, regardless of their cultural heritage - but they make art because they themselves are made in the image of God. They may be fundamentally wrong about the truth, and their cultures that motivates their art may drive them in opposite directions from the truth, but they are what they are created to be. At the same time, it is foolish to mistake the art that the culture makes as something that produces the culture itself. This is a causality error. If the art of Western civilization is worth preserving, it is because it was produced by Western civilization, which itself was produced by Christianity.

Which makes the entire situation paradoxical. *The Monuments Men* film was produced by Hollywood - and there are few entities in our contemporary culture that are more dedicated to the elimination of the influence of Christianity than Hollywood.

So what is really worth protecting? What is worth dying for? The heroes of World War II fought and died to prevent the barbarism of the Third Reich from taking over the world. They fought to defend *liberty* - and, of course, liberty is another derived aspect of our Christian-influenced western culture. It is admirable, even necessary, to fight and die to preserve the derived aspects of western Christian-based culture, but too often the thing itself is mistaken for the thing that caused it. It would indeed be a travesty to save the trappings (the art and the ideas) of Western civilization, but to destroy the cultural foundations that produced them.

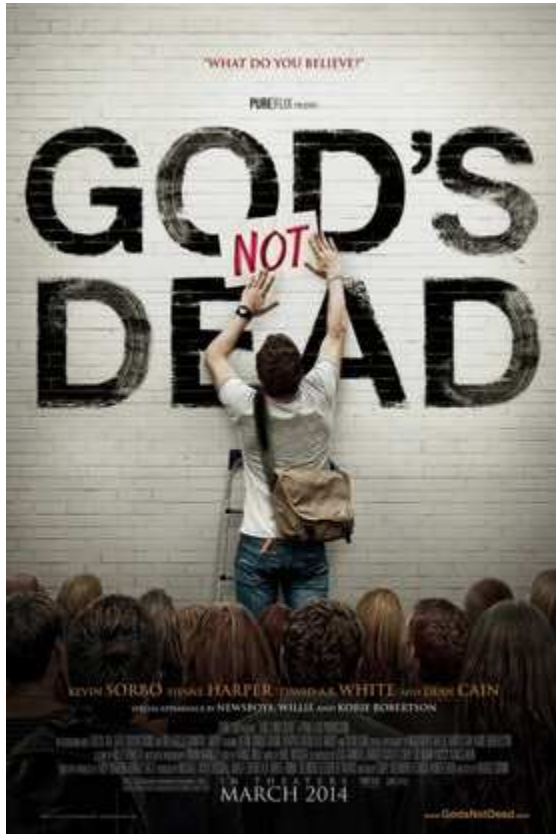
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1. www.monumentsmen.com
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March 31 2014: A Christian Movie for Christians

This past weekend, Jerri and I went to see the recent movie [God's Not Dead](#) [1], becoming the latest contributors to box office receipts of a film that is doing quite well in spite of the critics' dismissive prognostications. It was a pretty good film, and it didn't hurt that Kevin Sorbo, who played Hercules in one of Jerri's favorite old television shows, was in it. I was also intrigued that it was filmed in Louisiana, rather than the usual Atlanta, Georgia environs.

The film takes its title from the Newsboys musical tour of the same name. In fact, the christian characters all gather at the *God's Not Dead* Newsboys' concert and enjoy the *God's Not Dead* Newsboys' song, during which the concert-goers are all invited to text "God's Not Dead" to everyone on their cellphone contacts list (and everyone in the movie audience is, too). The story is primarily involved with three characters who face challenges to their Christian faith, and how they deal with it.



Josh is a freshman who enrolls in a philosophy class led by a strident atheist, Professor Radisson, whose first act is to require all the students to convert to atheism by writing "God is dead" on their papers to hand in. Josh refuses, and accepts the challenge to defend his belief in God before the entire class in a series of short lectures to be performed at the end of the regular class time.

Mina is a former student who is in a romantic relationship with the same Professor Radisson in spite of her Christian beliefs, on the condition that she will not speak of her beliefs. At a dinner party for his fellow (atheist) faculty friends, her atheist boyfriend boasts about his plan to destroy the faith of his freshman student, and she breaks the agreement and confesses her belief. His condescending treatment of her (for spoiling the wine, not for her beliefs) results in her departing the scene and rethinking her relationship.

Ayisha is an Arab girl who works on the campus and has encountered Christian teaching via Franklin Graham podcasts. When her traditionalist muslim father finds out, she has to choose between renouncing her faith or being cast out of her home.

(There is also a subplot of Trisha, a doctrinaire vegan ("Meat is Murder") writer who executes an "assault interview" of one of the Robertson ("Duck Dynasty") couples on their way to a church service. She later learns that she has terminal cancer, and as a result is dropped by her materialistic, narcissist boyfriend (who is also Mina's brother), and later come to peace with the help of the Newsboys band members. I don't know what the point of this subplot was; it was entirely irrelevant to the "God's not dead" theme.)

Now, of course, I'm going to play the movie critic and point out some problems I noticed with the story and character development:

1. After the challenge, and unsure of what to do, whether to just write out the "God is dead" phrase on the paper and duck the entire issue or to drop the class or to rise to the challenge, Josh finds himself in an ornate old church sanctuary after hours. The pastor notices him, learns of his dilemma, and offers verses along the lines of "if you deny Me before Men, then I will deny you before my Father in Heaven". Josh then goes off and does his apologetics research... on his own. He doesn't ask the pastor for advice or direction; he doesn't even think to, and the pastor doesn't offer - just a word of spiritual advice and a guilt-trip, and leave him on his own. I suppose this is the evangelical assumption; pastors are for handing out spiritual advice.

2. After the disastrous dinner party, Mina has a lunch appointment with the same pastor. After hearing her story, he offers her some psychological "counselling" of identifying her attraction to her boyfriend as an attempt at finding approval. He then suggests that she should look for approval in Christ. He apparently knows she is a professing Christian. There is no suggestion that her lifestyle is questionable, or that there is any need for repentance, or promoting an alternative to her lifestyle. After giving her some spiritual advice, he leaves her on her own.

3. Somehow, Ayisha ends up in the same pastor's office at his church building, tearfully explaining her predicament. He offers her spiritual comfort, but no offer of assistance with her new-found homelessness. Again, all the church is good for is handing out spirituality.

4. The pastor is being visited by a missionary from Africa, and they have a plan to go out of town on some sort of pleasure retreat involving roller

coasters. The car fails to start. After having a rental car delivered, the rental fails to start. A replacement rental car fails to start. Of course, everyone in the movie audience can spot divine providence, but the pastor can't. Must just be a freak chain of coincidences. On the fourth try (after all the above apparently unrelated pastoral activities), they approach the original car, and the missionary requests that they put the bags in the trunk as a demonstration of "faith". Of course, the car starts. The explanation is "faith". But faith is not just believing that things will work right, it is trusting that God will accomplish what He says; however, they are both so far oblivious to the working of divine providence.

5. For the most part, the movie is free of the evangelistical "preaching" that is common to Christian films targeted at an unbelieving audience. At the end, however, after the atheist professor is hit by a car in the street exactly next to the car with the pastor and the missionary, the pastor is able to come to the atheist and lead him to a "saving profession" just before he dies of his internal injuries. Again, the plea is to "accept Jesus Christ as his Saviour" without any call to confess his sin (which everyone certainly has apart from the atheism in this case of which the pastor was ignorant). This is more of what pastors are for - getting people saved by bringing them to a point of profession.

Now, in spite of all these niggles, the really outstanding and memorable part of the film (apart from the showcasing of the Newsboys) was the apologetic presentations that Josh made before the philosophy class. If churches and pastors would prepare young people in such matters before they got to university classes, there would be less fallout from even atheist professors.

Now, even here, there's a bit of a niggle, as the first presentation connected the "Big Bang" with a Creator. The idea that the "Big Bang" theory is an acceptable interpretation of Genesis is not universally accepted, and is in fact problematic. All the same, this movie was about dealing with challenges to belief, and not about exploring scientific creationist ideas.

And finally, the movie ended with too many loose ends. Would Josh and Ayisha get together? Would Trisha survive her cancer, or even become an authentic Christian disciple? What would happen to the freshman philosophy class after the professor's death? Would Josh' grades in other classes suffer because of all the effort he put into the visual effects of his apologetics presentations?

The primary observation I took away from the film was about the audience. Other, earlier "Christian" films are transparently aimed at unbeliever audiences, to present the gospel message and encourage the

"profession" by modelling it on screen. Of course, nearly the only people who went to "Christian" films were... Christians. It would appear that *God's Not Dead* represents a turn to appeal directly to that Christian audience. Judging from the income from even the limited number of theatres and showings the film has seen, this was a good move.

Better would be for Christians (producers, directors, actors, crew, studio artists, and so forth) to strive to just make good movies, and let the overt evangelism take place after the closing credits.

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1. godsnotdeadthemovie.com

March 1 2014: Praying for Church Transformation

Even though I am hanging mostly with [Tucson Reformed Baptist Church \[1\]](#) these days, I'm still a member of [First Southern Baptist Church \[2\]](#), and I attend the Sunday evening prayer service. This, what my wife and my parents tell me (who are more engaged FSBC members than I am), and my contacts with some of the leaders lead me to recognize three things:

- FSBC is a very important church in Tucson
- FSBC's potential for influence is badly crippled by their devotion to traditional methodologies
- There is still hope as long as people are praying

That said, I'm still laboring under this disappointment: They know they are shrinking, that they need more members, that they have a mission to reach the community with the gospel, so they have kicked off an "outreach" project to the neighborhoods around the church building (even though no current church member lives in them). The dominant objective (that is, the objective of most of the people involved in the project) is to go door-to-door sharing the gospel. So far, they have not had much success. I am not at all surprised, since the other groups that go door-to-door - Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormon missionaries - are universally loathed by residents of all neighborhoods all over the city. We have a complete failure to understand *missiology*, clinging instead to our failed traditional methods and assumptions. Then I have to sit there in the prayer service listening to these people asking God to bless their misguided efforts, and to bring more church members into the "outreach" project. I can't agree with these prayers. I wish there was a way to get across the idea of what I think needs to be done, and it isn't only me who thinks so: [Doing Missions In Your Own Back Yard \[3\]](#).

Here is another instance of me knowing that the paradigm needs to change but being entirely unable to exert any meaningful influence toward a change because of the strength of the paradigm already in place. Plus, I have no influence because I am an outsider, a rebel. I would have to (pretend to) adopt the current paradigm to be accepted by the others in order to come into a place where I could be heard - which is where I was last time, as the youth pastor, but if the rest of the church just doesn't want to hear it, there will be no change. I'd have to be the senior executive pastor in order to influence any change.

For Christmas this year, my older daughter gave me this book, [The Shaping of Things to Come](#) [4]. It seems to be one of the seminal works of the "missional church" movement. I haven't gotten very far, so I'm not quite sure what "missional church" means; when I have encountered the term elsewhere, it seems to be more evangelism-focused (presenting the gospel in terms that the local culture can understand) than holistic-church. This is another of my problems with evangelism in the context of the traditional institutional church; there is no actual disciple-making. Once having won a convert through the evangelism (however improperly or non-missional the execution), what do you do with her? Apparently: get her to be a "church-person" - sit in the pew, develop a taste for hymns, take sermon notes, maybe sit in a Sunday School class and learn shallow Bible lessons, pray improperly, and eat doughnuts. This is all part of the broken paradigm that I believe needs to change but can do nothing myself to change it. I haven't gotten very far in the book, except to learn that this is second edition. Apparently, the first edition was somewhat notorious for "ripping" on established churches as unable to change, and directing the "missional" message at new plants and start-ups as the only hope - something I have been suspecting myself. However, in the almost ten years since the first edition, the authors have been pleasantly surprised to discover that some large established churches *have* managed to transform (at least in part) to more of a "missional" methodology.



This is good news to me. Perhaps a church *can* undergo paradigm change. I will therefore continue to pray for this church, even though my prayer is not something they would agree with, while their prayers are not anything that I can agree with. The one thing that we can *all* agree with is for God to direct the current search by a special committee for a new senior executive pastor. If an outsider like me cannot change the paradigm, perhaps a suitably-minded pastor can, with the influence and authority that goes with the position. If he survives the opposition of those who do not want to change. If he recognizes that he must subvert the dominant paradigm instead of challenging it head-on. Works for me. I would serve under that kind of pastor.

So I guess I've got my prayer focus cut out for me, even on Sunday evenings, even if I have to keep it to myself.

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1. www.tucsonreformedbaptist.org
2. www.fsbctucson.net
3. www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2007/02/doing-missions-in-your-own-backyard-cultural-prolegomena
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February 2 2014: What is "Preaching" and is it Necessary?

Since leaving the church where I, as the volunteer lay youth pastor, had a disastrous personal encounter with the "*Already Gone* youth-apostasy phenomenon (more than 80% of that youth group dropped out of church upon graduation from high school), I have been drifting about, visiting various churches and actually rejoined my old family church, First Southern Baptist, which I found in the throes of upheaval due to an misguided pastor who came to Tucson from Georgia (complete cultural mismatch) and who was possessed of an exalted sense of authority over church policy in defiance of the established bylaws and "constitution" (sounds rather like the current U.S. president...). "Rejoined" in name only, for I found it hopelessly shallow and mired in their familiar traditions. My "membership" at this point consists of being concerned for their direction and committed to pray for revival or reformation, but I already have experienced the utter lack of positive influence of an oddball in a traditional intitutional church. Thus, I continued to drift...

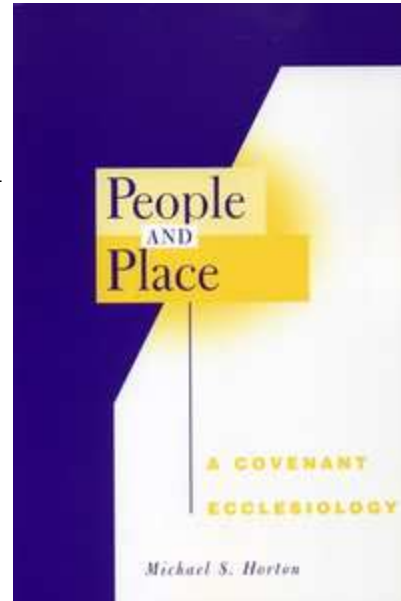
and have fallen in with [Tucson Reformed Baptist Church \[1\]](#), which has an excellent Sunday School, but is otherwise just as traditional and non-intentional as any Southern Baptist church or start-up that I have had any dealings with. With this distinction: as "reformed", TRBC is *confessional*, holding to the [London Confession of 1689 \[2\]](#) and Calvin-inspired reformed theology.

There are some interesting aspects about the Reformed ideas about church operation relevant to the topic that has recently arrested my attention:

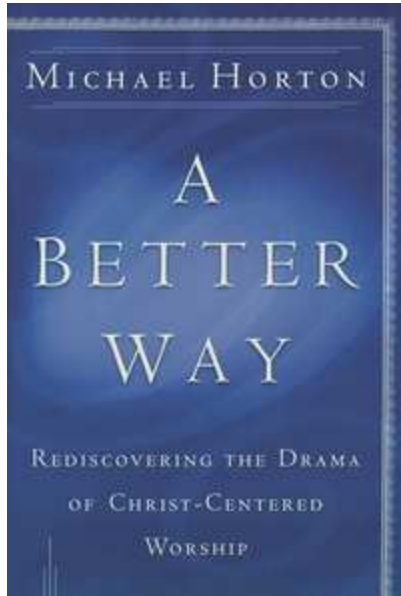
- Per Calvinism, humans are "totally depraved" and incapable of coming to Christ for salvation through any effort of their own. The Elect are saved when God grants them faith through His grace. God, through Christ's work of atonement, does it *all*; we bring nothing to the transaction.
- God uses "means" (or methods not obviously miraculous or supernatural) to bestow this grace upon the Elect. Thus, "preaching" and the Sacraments (at least, the ones Baptists observe; Communion and Baptism) are *means of grace*.
- Reformed ecclesiology includes the "Regulative Principle of Worship": In order to preserve "Christian Liberty" (another Reformed concept), believers are not required to observe anything beyond what is commanded in Scripture - thus, the Sunday Morning "worship" service and all the "elements" in it must be limited to those commanded in Scripture.
- Another Reformed concept is "elements" versus "circumstances" in the church or the liturgy: "Circumstances" are non-essential artifacts of culture. Take 'em or leave 'em. I suppose this might include the style of music. "Elements" are things either explicitly set forth in Scripture or "can be reasonably deduced" from Scripture.

Well. This adds a dimension to my pragmatic view of "preaching" and the "worship service" that I had not previously considered for [my ideal church \[3\]](#). Maybe there is more necessity to "preaching" than I was allowing. I asked the TRBC pastor, Rob Cosby, about this. He generally agrees with my observation that there are no "prooftexts" in the New Testament explicitly commanding "preaching" as practiced in the contemporary church (i.e., a sermon delivered to the believers in a Sunday Morning church service), but warns me of the dangers of looking for "prooftexts". He then recommended to me two books by his favorite Reformed theologian, Michael Horton, to help me resolve the matter. I obtained both and read through each carefully.

The first of these is [People and Place](#) [4], which is the fourth installment of a series on the essentials of Christianity and the Church. It is a very scholarly book, with lots of six-syllable theological terms (and more than a few philosophical terms) thrown around. There are two major sections. The first is the portion relevant to the present concern, dealing with the "elements" in the church, how the church is created by the Word, and not vice-versa. Some about the Sacraments, mostly about the Word. There is an unmistakable connection making "the Word" or even "preaching the Word" almost or fully a Sacrament, even to the point that the sermon, as it is *spoken* (big emphasis on speaking and hearing as superior to seeing and/or reading) by a "lawfully-called" preacher, actually gains the same authority and power as if God had spoken it Himself. Whoa. Not clear whether Horton, or Calvin, or some other Reformed notable holds this opinion; Pastor Cosby assures me that Horton does not.



The second portion is about the Church, including such subjects as "catholicity", "holiness", and "apostolicity". There are some great comparisons between Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed or Covenantal ecclesiologies on these and other topics. I appreciated the mention of the Barna organization and the Emerging Church, even in a negative light, as promoting an "individual" practice or even an "enthusiastic radical" (seeker-sensitive) approach. Interesting, but not relevant to the present concern.



The second book is [A Better Way](#) [5], which is a more easily-digested "popular" book on the same subject. Horton is a remarkably versatile theologian who can dial his output to suit his theological peers or the less-sophisticated laity as the need arises. I thought this book (which was actually the book I received and therefore read first) was more suited to the point than the heavier one. The first chapter opens with the concept of the "worship" service being a "Covenant Renewal Ceremony", which I thought was pretty much laying it on the line, and not talking around it at 10,000 feet, like the other book seems to. There is a later chapter that sets out the "elements" of a Reformed service,

including such things as "reading the Law", "confession and absolution", the "Lord's Supper", and, of course, "preaching". The last chapters recognize the *Already Gone* phenomenon, engaging Millenials, the role of evangelism or "Outreach", and some observations of how the church could be more *effective* and *intentional*.

The first *People and Place* book doesn't really address the necessity of the sermon; it assumes it, or implicitly defines it or equates it with "The Word". The second *A Better Way* book at least makes the attempt to justify the practice from Scripture:

Romans 10:14-15: People must hear before they can believe; the hearing comes from preaching, and the preacher must be sent. Okay, I have no problem with this... as far as it goes. Such preaching *can* be performed in a church service on Sunday morning, but for unbelievers (which it *seems* are the subject of Romans 10), this is pretty ineffective. "Preaching" like Peter did at Pentecost or the house of Cornelius, or like Paul did at the Areopagus, or like Philip (a deacon, *not* an ordained elder or missionary or preacher) did one-on-one with the Ethiopian, are much more effective employments of the technique and more supported from Scripture. I'm not seeing how redeemed people, already in the Covenant, having already received "saving grace", need the ongoing ministry of preaching. Not to mention that this is *preaching of the Gospel*, not the usual three-point sermon, part of some "work through the book of N" series, that church-going believers are typically subjected to. At least at TRBC, there is a segment of the liturgy for "Law and Gospel" in which the Gospel is actually *preached* (more or less) - but this is not the later, longer *sermon*, which is really a Bible *teaching*.

Acts 2:42: The Jewish believers after Pentecost were devoting

themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to Communion, and to prayer. "Apostles' teaching" here is equated with "delivering sermons". I find this passage particularly thin, because the early disciples were hanging around in each others' homes or at the temple - not in a once-a-week "worship" service, and not in any location where an apostle could deliver a sermon to them. I see "devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching" more in line with James 1:22 - "Be doers of the Word, and not just hearers".

This is a problem I see in both Horton books - the equivocation between "ministry of the Word" and "delivering a sermon". Laying aside what "preaching" means - if the Apostles were ministering the Word to the early disciples who were devoting themselves to it, if Paul instructed Timothy and Titus to "preach *and* teach", it was to the larger goal of changing lives. Of leading the elect to *obey* what Christ commanded us (Matthew 28:20). Of actually *making disciples*. Seems to me that the Reformed responsibility of pastors to "administer the means of grace" is an "element" that is deduced from Scripture on very thin terms, when the explicit command is to *make disciples*. I'm sure the Reformed pastor would claim that by "administering the means of grace", he is in fact making disciples. I reply: I'll believe it when I see it. There's been a lot of sermons in a lot of churches in the West over the past fifty to a hundred years, and a lot of grape juice and crackers passed out, but we have a pretty wide apostasy going on in the West (and not just among teenagers) in spite of it, to say nothing about a broadly recognized shallowness in believers, and I don't see the Reformed tradition bucking the stats.

There is another problem, though. In my "ideal church" thoughts, I suspected how much the "worship" service and the sermon in particular were mostly traditions that, in this case, the Reformed people were defending as being Scripturally-commanded "elements". I'm used to seeing traditions defended from Scripture. My own Southern Baptist denomination had a long and ugly history of justifying southern slave-owning from Scripture. My own Southern Baptist background is still denouncing all drinking of alcohol as sinful, with Scripture to back that up. And... Michael Horton is a Presbyterian. In both books, he justifies infant baptism from Scripture, something my Reformed Baptist friends do not accept. It isn't just a mistake, it isn't just Horton or a peculiar Presbyterian thing; it is a denominational tradition that goes back to the Reformation itself, likely from Catholic practice before that, and is still being justified by deduction from Scripture. Horton makes a better case for infant baptism from Scripture than for the "preaching" of sermons. Therefore, ultimately, I remain unconvinced that my earlier analysis of the "worship" service and "preaching" is in much need of retraction or even revision.

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1. <http://tucsonreformedbaptist.org>
2. <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/bcf/confession.html>
3. <http://dlormand.us/church.html#31Jul10>
4. <http://www.wtsbooks.com/people-and-place-michael-horton-9780664230715>
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