

**Presidential Address**  
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I realize I am a generation late to claim the song, but I have to admit that one of my all-time favorites is Don McLean's "American Pie" released in 1971. In it Mclean described the loss of innocence and trust in American idealism, and I think the song has a resonance for each generation of Americans as we come of age and reflect on the changes we have seen.

What is particularly powerful about the song to me is the amount of sacred, and even evangelistic, imagery that McLean used.

At the opening of the song he lets us know that he was delivering "bad news on the doorstep." As if to remedy this bad news in the final verse, he tells us, "I met a girl who sang the blues and asked her for some *happy* news." Desperate for good news to counteract the bad news, he is disappointed because, "she just smiled and turned away." He can't even find solace in his old routines of life, as he finds out when he "went down to the sacred store where I'd heard the music years before, but the man there said the music wouldn't play."

But the most pointed lines of all come after this:

"In the streets the children screamed, the lovers cried, and the poets dreamed. But not a word was spoken; the church bells all were broken."

From McLean's point of view, as the rest of America's institutions collapsed, so did the church. The upheavals of the nation left the church just as voiceless to speak good news as anyone else. (Parenthetically, this might explain why we have seen so many baby boomers drift away from the church, or choose not to raise their children in the church. It might also explain why the mainline denominations have been losing membership consistently since the 1960s.)

As a result of the church losing its ability to share good news, even God seemed absent. McLean made this clear in the following words:

"And the three men I admire the most, the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost, they caught the last train for the coast the day the music died."

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Without a church that could speak clearly about the power, presence, and hope of God in the midst of the chaos his generation of Americans experienced, all that was left was for McLean to complete his dirge for the idealism he had lost.

This song lays down an incisive critique of the church in the United States fifty years ago and presents a powerful challenge for the church today. The United States—and the world—has continued to be wracked by waves of disillusionment and has seen even more innocence eroded during these first two decades of the twenty-first century. Have our church bells been audible in the midst of this, or are they still broken, unable to ring out meaningfully to those desperate to hear good news that will overcome the bad news around them?

This is an essential question for us to answer because the world is in the midst of a severe leadership crisis. In a time when the tectonic plates are shifting beneath us, opening chasms in culture, economics, and politics, we have very few people who are stepping forward with the capability of leading us to a new and better place. Rather, we have reactionary leaders who recoil at these changes. Instead of casting a vision of an imaginative and better future, they resort to retrenchment, active ignorance of the unfolding problems, demagoguery, elitism, populism, and even violence to try to beat back the unwanted changes.

None of this will work. We need leaders who will actually lead, awakening our hearts and minds with pictures of a new and better future and welcoming us to take the difficult journey to get there.

The corporate world has sought to fill this gap. Its answer is found in technology. The idea is that through investing in and distributing ever more advanced technology to the world's population, we will find ways to increase everyone's quality of life.

As promising as this sounds, technological change is not the same as the sort of transformation we need. This is because our capacity to engage in technological improvement is rarely matched by our ethical wisdom to wield that technology well. Even technology developed with the best of intentions can end up being devastating to life. Any number of dystopian novels point to this, as did Albert Einstein in an article published by the *New York Times* in 1946:

Our world faces a crisis as yet unperceived by those possessing power to make great decisions for good or evil. The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.<sup>1</sup>

While this quote pointed specifically to nuclear war coming from the purported goodness of harnessing atomic power, it is not difficult to apply this logic to other technologies we laud today. So, it is that corporate leadership and the technology it offers will not fill our world's leadership gap.

It is into this lacuna that I believe the church has an opportunity to step, especially in its evangelistic ministry. Put plainly, evangelists are the leaders the world needs today.

I make this bold claim based on the work of James Kouzes and Barry Posner. Based on over thirty years of research across the globe, their book *The Leadership Challenge*, now in its sixth edition, lays out five broad practices someone must engage in to be an effective leader:<sup>2</sup>

- Model the Way by articulating and practicing their core values while inviting others to make common cause with those values.
- Inspire a Shared Vision by laying out a beautiful and realistic picture of the future that excites people to accept it and work toward it.
- Challenge the Process by always being ready to listen to others and innovate, looking beyond accepted boundaries to see how to better work toward the vision while staying true to one's values.
- Enable Others to Act by promoting mutual respect among people and honoring people for their gifts.
- Encourage the Heart by celebrating successes and giving people time to relate to each other as whole human beings, not just functionaries who get a job done.

Why do I think evangelists can lead so well according to these practices? Because evangelists carry a message unlike any other message in the world. As St. Paul described himself and his co-workers in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 4:1, evangelists are “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”<sup>3</sup>

As stewards of these mysteries, I would argue that evangelists alone can provide the kind of leadership needed by the world today. And, it is with this leadership that the church bells will ring loudly and strongly, not just as a parochial call to belief, but as a call to a new way of being unlike anything the world experiences now.

Let me be clear about my terms here:

When I say “evangelist,” I am not just speaking of the small percentage of Christians who have the gift named in Ephesians 4:11. I mean all of us who are followers of Jesus Christ,

because all of us are called to live our faith in a way that others can see and respond to it. This is for all of us in the church.

When I say “stewarding of the mysteries,” I mean that we are not only to believe the gospel, but must allow our lives to be shaped by it so we can effectively and credibly lead others to accept it. And, per Paul’s description of it as a mystery, there is more involved here than we might usually expect. We’ll unpack that in a moment.

When I say that we as evangelists are leaders for the world, I mean that we are already equipped with all that we need to lead the people of the world to a better future. So much of leadership is not defined by flashy displays of power, but, as Kouzes and Posner point out, through forging solid relationships with others in which we can call them to live toward a common vision with common values. We have everything we need to do this right now! The question is not a matter of whether we can live into these practices of leadership, it is rather, as St. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:16, whether we will “live up to what we have already attained.”

Over the next hour, I would like to describe what is involved with stewarding the mysteries of God as evangelists, weaving through it how evangelists are also engaging in the practices that make them leaders for the world. We will do this by following the practices put forward by Kouzes and Posner.

- We start, first, with the idea that leaders Challenge the Process, looking beyond accepted boundaries to see how to better work toward the vision while staying true to one’s values.

This is not the practice that Kouzes and Posner start with, but it makes sense for us to launch here. This is because the very basis of evangelism is inviting people to a new way of living based on the gospel, which challenges the conventional wisdom of the day. What better way to do this than to lead by stewarding a mystery.

Now, the term “mystery” in relation to the evangelistic work of the church may seem strange. After all, isn’t the point of evangelism to make the gospel as clear as possible to everyone?

To be clear, the mystery that Paul speaks of stewarding is not the basic content the gospel, that God sent Jesus into the world to save sinners, but the way God accomplished this: through crucifixion. And, as we will see, that has a multitude of implications for how we order our lives and how we can lead the world.

The idea that a god would take human form to carry out that god's design is something that fits with conventional wisdom. Even pagan myths accepted it. Zeus, Apollo, and numerous other gods in Greek and Roman mythology had done this many times. Likewise, there were a whole set of demigods like Hercules and Jason and Achilles who were human and divine simultaneously. These were inspiring leaders, amazing people with their superhuman feats that invited mere mortals to follow them.

This is the conventional wisdom of the world, both then and now. Power, wealth, grandeur, and amazing feats are what identify a great leader.

However, the idea that a human who bore the fullness of God would suffer and die! That was a mystery. Contrasted to the various pagan myths, the message that Jesus Christ saved humanity through dying ignominiously on a cross made no sense. Jews and pagans alike struggled with this. All of them were used to looking for God or a god appearing in ways that were powerful and impressive, accomplishing great things. Jesus did none of this.

This was puzzling at best, and outright offensive at worst. Rather than calling people to emulate heroes of tremendous strength and greatness, the gospel called them to break with the logic of equating knowledge, power, and wealth with godliness. No wonder it was a mystery! No one would usually think like this. It was a logic that seemed hidden and difficult to explain given how the world usually works.

And so, right from the start, we see that by stewarding the gospel of the Crucified Christ, evangelists lead by Challenging the Process. They reject the longstanding logic of how to order the world by curtsying to the powerful and replace it with an innovative logic of salvation by faith in the Crucified One.

Borrowing another term from the world of management, the content of the mystery of the gospel is therefore disruptive. By this I mean that it strikes at the heart of how most people assign value within the universe, transforming the entire metanarrative they use to make sense of why things happen the way they do.

This may sound like an extreme thing for those of us who are called to be evangelists to do, but then again, the world is in an extreme situation today. It's not like the conventional wisdom of bowing to power and wealth is working well for us. Nothing less than a call to an alternative way of understanding the universe is necessary.

We can lead people toward this alternative through evangelizing about the Crucified Christ.

In order to share this alternative, we need to embody what living according to the gospel looks like. That is the only way for people to see it as a realistic alternative to replace their broken conventional wisdom. This takes us to the other practices of effective leadership.

- Second, leaders Model the Way by articulating and practicing their core values while inviting others to make common cause with those values.

For the evangelist, the primary value that we model as we steward the mystery of the gospel is that of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is thorny word these days, having been impressed into service for political debates and specific social positions. However, it is worth reclaiming because it is at the heart of the mystery of the gospel, describing first how we relate to God and then how we relate to other people. We'll be unfolding all of this over the next several practices of leadership.

If I can make a hermeneutical jump here, claiming a common logic among Paul's letters, 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5 gives us an excellent description of this view of reconciliation, specifically with God. In it, Paul wrote:

Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, <sup>19</sup> that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore *you* on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

This has a message for us as to how we engage in the practice of evangelism, which is appropriate, since part of stewarding the message is being transformed by it ourselves. According to this passage, the crucifixion of Christ shows that all people are equal in the sight of God because of our common sinfulness. This is a hard message. We find that God takes our sins—the things that we are most ashamed of and want to keep secret—and thrusts them into the open through Christ taking them on himself for our forgiveness.

And yet, this is what is necessary for reconciliation with God. Reconciliation cannot occur until the offense of one party against another has been acknowledged, confessed, and forgiven.

If we want to lead people as we steward this gospel, that means that we cannot be the stereotypical evangelists who seem to have all the answers. Instead, we are to be honest about our failings and uncertainties precisely because we know we are reconciled to God through Christ through the forgiveness of our sins.

This kind of vulnerability might seem frightening. After all, there is a certain amount of protection when we wrap ourselves in the cloak of the superior evangelist trying to help those who are in need. Yet, making that move runs counter to the very logic of the gospel that we are to share! If we are going to lead the world to a place where it desires humility over grandiosity, we must start by modeling the value of being reconciled with God through being honest about our failures above protecting our privacy and rights.

There is more, though:

Modeling the way of reconciliation also calls us to abandon our idols.

We have already seen how achievement, wealth, social status, and any other human accomplishment do not lead to glory. As such we must be careful not to allow any of these things to become idols that pull us from the way of reconciliation with God by convincing us that they will give our lives meaning.

In addition to these usual suspects, we must also beware of other idols that often masquerade as essential aspects of our identities: social categorizations. In a day when identity politics has all but polarized the cultural landscape as well as the church, leading to the brink of schism in my own United Methodist Church, it is well that we hear Paul call out these categorizations as potential idols. In Galatians 3, Paul wrote:

For you are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>27</sup> For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

I have heard this passage exegeted to suggest that those who follow Christ ought to be agnostic to how people live morally. Since we are already reconciled to God by Christ, we ought to focus on Jesus alone. How we behave or categorize ourselves has no implications for how we relate to God.

This seems to me off base, falling into the abyss of antinomianism that has long plagued those of us who hold to salvation by faith through grace.

Instead, I believe Paul's point here is that, if we value being reconciled to God by Christ, receiving the very identity of Christ through baptism, then we are to leave aside all the other identifiers. This does not mean that we cease to have nationalities, ethnicities, a social status, or a sex. It does mean that we no longer identify ourselves by these things. They describe us. They do not define us.

If we do let these things define us alongside of our baptism, they become idolatrous because we have made them equal to the work of God in our lives, seeking to reconcile our identity as much with these categories as with God's work for us through Christ. Put another way, I am a white, middle-class, American male. That is a fair description of me. The moment that I elevate being any one of these things to the level of defining me in a way that is equal to my baptism in Christ, I have committed idolatry. It is this sort of idolatry Paul calls on us to reject.

The reason that we often want to hold onto these categorizations for how we define ourselves is because, like all idols, they make us think that we have greater power than we actually do. If I can wield my nationality, race, or sex in a certain way, that gives me power I can use in how I relate to others. However, as we have already seen, this is exactly the sort of power that the mystery of the Crucified Christ disallows.

To fail in rejecting the power of these idols is to fail in our leadership of bringing the world to an alternative reality of reconciliation with God by failing to steward the mystery of God well. We are neither challenging the process of how people understand the world nor modeling the value of reconciliation with God through the Crucified Christ.

So, to model the way, we need to start by letting the transformative work of the gospel change those of us who are stewarding it first.

However, if we are going to lead people to reject the power that they believe they have through these idols, what do we have to offer them in its place? There is the value of reconciliation with God that involves accepting the basic equality of people as we receive the forgiveness of our sins. But, is there anything more?

This brings us to the next trait of effective leadership:

- As leaders, we need to Inspire a Shared Vision by laying out a beautiful and realistic picture of the future that excites people to accept it and work toward it.

As it turns out, when we steward the mystery of the gospel, we have a far more beautiful future to offer people than anything they can receive elsewhere.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Paul makes it clear that the visions offered by the various idolatrous powers are only using "human wisdom." In other words, they may promise good things, but they never help people break out of the trap that causes them to value some people more than others. There is always a need to devalue someone else so I can feel better about myself.



The gospel is not this. Its logic points us to a completely different understanding of the universe in which one loving God reconciles people through humility rather than heroic action. And, in so doing, makes all people equal in their ability to receive that salvation by faith.

In offering such a dramatically different vision, the gospel makes it clear that it is not just one more idea among many, or one more slogan to be rallied around. Rather, the gospel is the very power of God. According to Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 2:4-5:

And my speech and my preaching *were* not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in human wisdom but in the power of God.

To steward the mystery of God calls us to be humble, but it also calls us to expect the power of God to be present in the world. We are not just trying to live and speak in a way that people find meaningful, we are living and speaking in a way we believe God will come through to transform others by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is essential, as it sets apart the vision we are casting for others to follow from the conventional wisdom. Our vision is of a universe in which there is a God that not only reconciles us as individuals, but of a universe that is held in the omnipotent hands of God. Moreover, that God is active, shaping and transforming the universe. This explains why we are so intent on leading people to challenge the ways that they understand the universe, because we understand that the universe itself is not a set thing. Rather, it is something that is subordinate to God. To define our vision by what is created rather than by the One who created it makes no sense.

Put another way, we are not just trying to help people envision a slightly better version of the universe as it is, we are opening their eyes to see a completely reborn universe that is defined by the powerful and gracious God who created it and redeemed it.

This means that we can be bold in our evangelism. Rather than fearing that people will not accept our evangelistic efforts, as so many Christians are because they feel like sharing their faith would be socially awkward, we can step forward to share our message and live our humble lives with the assurance that God is active in the world.

Of course, boldly stepping forward to demonstrate humility and reconciliation might seem like a recipe for being derided by the people around us.

The Bible agrees.

As Paul and the other New Testament authors assure us, we certainly will face persecution from those who do not want to receive our message.

And here is where we find out another facet of the mystery we steward. By humbling ourselves to accept the Crucified Christ, we not only experience reconciliation with God, we also place ourselves in a situation where we encounter the Resurrection of Christ.

This is an essential part of the mystery. Without it, our disruptive message of reconciliation is, at best, so much idealism. Being freed to be reconciled with God at the cost of giving up our idolatry and rejecting conventional wisdom would be too pricey if all we had was the assurance that God is exercising power in the *present* world.

However, God is not only active in the present. God has also prepared the future for us so that how we live now will determine how we live then.

If the Gospel of Jesus crucified draws us together to lay down our idols and acknowledge our common need for forgiveness by faith through grace, then the Resurrection is the common hope that guarantees God has the power to overcome not only our personal sins and idols, but to overcome evil and death once and for all. As Paul explained in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:

I declare to you the gospel...<sup>2</sup>by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you...<sup>3</sup>For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,<sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures...<sup>24</sup> Then *comes* the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power.<sup>25</sup> For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet.

Here is a powerful message, indeed. We are not just offering a message of personal reconciliation with God, nor even of one in which we can encounter God in the present world, but one that states the entire creation we live in will be utterly reconciled by the power of God for all eternity. The world is not a place where negativity and evil run rampant, but is in the waiting room of being redeemed fully. Christ's resurrection was the first fruit that demonstrated this redemptive power. We now live awaiting its full consummation.

To steward this message is the stuff of leadership! It inspires people, offering them a future that is both beautiful and that is realistic because it is grounded in the work God has already done through Jesus Christ. It gives us the ultimate reason for why they should challenge the conventional wisdom of the day, confessing their sins, abandoning their idols, and letting go of the need to be better than others. It gives them assurance that all will be well, and so the striving

and competing of this world is actually a destructive distraction that draws us away from the fullness of what God provides for us. It invites people to enter into a story that grants them meaning now and glory in eternity.

One other thing:

Stewarding the mystery of God that includes the Crucified and Resurrected Christ means that our evangelism ought to be joyful and hopeful. Joy is the assurance of knowing God is present with us now, even when things are difficult. Hope is the assurance of knowing God will lead us to something better even when we cannot see it. We, of all people, ought to be inspired by our own message so as to cultivate joy and hope. By this, others will see the reality of the presence of God in our character.

Our world is mired in fear today and is desperate to hear a message of genuine joy and hope. It is ready to be led by those who steward that message. We can do this.

But this brings us to a very real concern. Evangelism, as faith in general, is often accused of providing high sounding ideas without any real capacity to enact them. Up until now, it seems that this is what we have been doing. We have spoken about how the content of the Christian faith is a mystery that challenges the conventional wisdom of how we value ourselves and make sense of the universe, calling us to be reconciled with God as we live toward a vision of resurrection glory.

These ideas do challenge our view of the world, but they challenge it so much that it seems questionable whether we can enact them.

This brings us to the next practice of effective leaders:

- We Enable Others to Act as those who are faithful to the gospel both inside and outside of the church.

Leadership involves casting the grand visions that inspire people. It also involves forging relationships with people, so they can work together toward that vision even when there is substantial resistance. As stewards of the mystery of God, we need to do this, starting with those who are already committed to the mystery inside of the church, but who may not have fully grasped it, and then reaching to those outside of the church.

In reaching to those inside the church, we are just like Paul when he wrote to the Corinthian Church. He did not question that they are Christians, nor that they had accepted the gospel. He did, however, challenge them to grow into the fullness of the gospel they had accepted by

recognizing just how different their approach to the world should be based on faith in the Crucified and Resurrected Christ.

Likewise, we must enable other Christians within the church to act in accordance with the gospel. How do we do that?

Of course, all the usual means we have of calling people to receive God's grace are important: preaching, worship, education ministries, the Sacraments, and other means of grace. However, I want to lift up one specific activity that is especially important to pulling together Christians in a local church community to live into their role of stewarding the mysteries of God: How we use our resources.

Stewarding the mystery of God involves stewarding our actual resources within the church, both financial and otherwise. This gets practical very quickly!

The conventional wisdom that the gospel demands we abandon places its emphasis on amassing wealth and prestige. Even with the gospel's admonition on this point, congregations and even denominations, find it hard to buck this conventional wisdom. It is good and well to talk about challenging the ways we assign value in the world, but in the end, we live in the real world and we want our numbers to go up. Our congregations are more valuable the more people, dollars, and programs that they have.

We are not the first to think this way.

The wealthy Corinthian Christians were convinced of their righteousness because of their physical blessings. They believed that they were fundamentally better than others because of their wealth and social status. Paul took aim at this, making it clear that their salvation came just as much by faith in the Crucified One as anyone else's. Far from being indicators of God's greater favor for them, their physical blessings were given to them so they could *serve* other Christians who did not have as much.

In making this claim, Paul showed that stewarding the mystery entails the leadership practice of Enabling Others to Act. It allows us to see our gifts and blessings not as things we hoard to demonstrate we are of greater value than others, but as means by which we can join with other Christians as a body and support one another in being faithful to God.

Paul makes this clear in explaining why the Corinthian Church should give to poor Christians in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 8:

<sup>13</sup> Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. <sup>14</sup> At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, <sup>15</sup> as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”

To steward the gospel well means stewarding our resources for the common use of the people of God. It means sharing what we have much of *and* being open to receive when we are lacking.

This view of stewardship not only breaks the conventional wisdom of valuing those with more over those with less, it also breaks down the cult of the congregation that we have developed in the church.

Local congregations are certainly critical to sharing the gospel in a meaningful way on the ground, but they also can become serious impediments to stewarding the mystery of God when sustaining and growing them becomes idolatrous. This is not hard to have happen, because the culture has so inculcated in us the value of competition and success by numbers. The ultimate goal of this is to reach celebrity status! Our congregation will be the one mentioned at General Conference or in Outreach Magazine. Our congregation will have its pastor invited to work with politicians and high-profile people.

If we steward our resources with this goal in mind, then we are stewards of the cultural fantasy, not of God’s mystery! No matter how well we articulate the vision of Christ, our use of resources shows we do not really believe it.

By Paul’s argument, our numbers are indicators of what God has given us to share with others or point to where we need others to share with us. How we budget our resources ought to reflect this.

I am not entirely certain how creating a budget would look using this logic of each congregation being linked with another. Perhaps it would look something like asset-mapping, with each congregation laying out what it had available to share in the common ministry of the gospel, and then the congregations determining how they might best utilize what is in the common pot of assets to do the work God had given them. This might even lead to the group of congregations giving birth to new congregations in places they feel are not sufficiently reached with the gospel.

While I may be short on specifics here, I am certain of this: if congregations could find such an open-handed way of operating, it would be a witness to both the people in the church that the mystery Christians are called to steward can be enacted now. It would also be a witness to the larger world that an alternative way of living and using our resources is possible.

And this brings us to the second broad relationship we have to make as we lead by enabling other to act: We show that we can live reconciled lives with those who are outside of the church.

If we steward a gospel that only points people to God, and not also to each other, then we misunderstand the core of the gospel.

Since the mystery of God is that the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ overcomes the conventional wisdom of how we judge each other's worth, equalizing us as those in common need of God's grace, the door is open for us to relate to everyone in a new way whether they are Christians or not. This is a point that Paul drove home in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5 where he described the ministry of reconciliation, "Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh."

One of the ways we can do this is by demonstrating that we are not provincial or parochial in where we acknowledge the goodness of God breaking into the world. Paul made this point in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3 when addressing how the Christians in Corinth were debating with each other over who the best teacher to follow was: Peter, Paul, or Apollos:

Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: <sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. <sup>23</sup> And you *are* Christ's, and Christ *is* God's.

Since the fullness of God's goodness is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we not only can break down the walls that divide us because of the reconciliation God makes available, but we can claim goodness wherever we find it as ours because the source can only be Jesus Christ. *This is even true if we find it among people who are not followers of Christ.*

E. Stanley Jones, a Methodist missionary through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and one of the greatest workers for reconciliation among all people, made this point. Drawing from Paul's teaching in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3, Jones argued that Christians have both liberty and law. They have liberty to claim all good things that God offers so long as they remain in Christ; that is the law. So, Jones explained, "All great religious teachers are yours. Here the gospel offers intellectual

and spiritual liberty. Provided we remember whose we are, we are free to take from all religious teachers whatever of light and truth they have discovered and realized.”<sup>4</sup>

Based on this thinking, Jones was willing to sit at the table with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists and rejoice in the goodness he heard from their teachings while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of accepting Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world.

Being stewards of the mystery of God does not make us narrow-minded people who insist that everyone see things our way and who refuse to learn from others. Rather, we recognize that part of the mystery is that we are always looking for who and what might draw us more fully into the Christian faith because God is active in all places and people through the Spirit.

In this way, we enable people outside the church to act by inviting them to recognize the good work God is already doing in their lives. We do this both as teacher and learner, in boldness to share the remarkable goodness of the gospel and in humility to receive the goodness of God from others. In both ways, we step forward as a leader, calling people to a renewed vision of themselves and the values of their lives.

Being intentional about building relationships with those who are not Christian and spending time listening to them is the way to do this. So often, we tiptoe around this relationship building either because we believe that we are making friends with an ulterior motive—we aren’t really interested in the person, we just want to get them to accept Christ—or because we are afraid these people will undercut our faith with their own. However, based on the mystery we steward, neither is a concern. We are meeting them ready to hear, receive, and celebrate the goodness that they have in their lives. And, in return, we are ready to share the goodness we have with them. In the midst of this, we trust that God’s Spirit will be active to reconcile us to one another and to God. There is no guilt-tripping or condemnation or ulterior motive or potential apostasy involved!

Imagine the kind of leadership that this witness could provide in our current culture. In a day when people feel pressed into polarized ways of thinking and when nuancing how we view other people is often frowned upon as weak or unfaithful; a living, breathing example of Christians who could share openly with each other and approach non-Christians with the assumption of encountering goodness in them would be amazing. It would be the kind of example that people would want to follow. They would want to learn more about the mystery that sets us free from

the fetters of this broken and angry age and lets us live with an eye toward goodness in ourselves and others.

This leads us to a final act of leadership: encouraging the heart.

- We need to Encourage the Heart by celebrating successes and giving people time to relate to each other as whole human beings, not just as functionaries who get a job done.

If the temptation for Christians is to idolize congregations, the corollary to that is the temptation to see individual Christians as nothing more than functionaries who get the work of the congregation done. They are like priests, feeding the always open maw of the congregational idol with their time, their expertise, and their money.

Good leaders understand that this is not how to treat people. Instead, they treat people as whole human beings, not just those who serve an organizational purpose. We need to do the same.

If all we have for people who come to our congregations is the opportunity to become members, which opens up the opportunity to sit on committees or volunteer for congregational events, then we are not being good leaders. We are certainly not leading them based on our stewardship of a mystery that challenges the conventional wisdom.

We need to find ways to invite them to begin stewarding the fullness of the mystery even as we celebrate the fullness of their lives.

How do we do this? By changing the metrics we use to determine if we are being effective Christians.

Right now, as we have already said, our metrics tend to be based on the congregation as an institution (how many members, how much giving, how many programs). There is nothing wrong with tracking these, but these only consider institutional health, not whether people's lives are transformed. What we need are a new set of measurements that consider how people are taking on the mantle of stewarding the mystery of God in their daily lives.

Here is the thing: these new metrics must be focused on what people do outside the church. In other words, we would measure how they allow the logic of the gospel to guide them in their daily lives. Are they meeting people who are not Christian and engaging in meaningful conversations with them? Are they praying for God's power to be present in situations they encounter? Are they sharing their personal resources rather than hoarding them?



Questions like these are undoubtedly far more intrusive to individuals than even the annual fundraising drive is, but they also show that people really are becoming stewards of God's mystery in a way that the mystery is influencing how they relate to other people. And, if it is doing that, that means that they are likewise in a position to be an effective leader who inspires people with a life that challenges the conventional wisdom by modeling the value of reconciliation with a vision of glory granted through the Crucified and Resurrected Christ.

And, when we see this happening, we should celebrate it! Sadly, celebrations are not what most of us associate with the church, much less evangelists. From the images of the weeping televangelist, to the bullhorn-toting man shouting about God's love on the city streets to the scolding church matron refusing to let the children take too many cookies after worship, Christians seem to be anything but a happy bunch. It is little wonder that people are not so excited to accept our vision of glory if our practice of life right now looks so dreary!

In fact, though, we do know how to celebrate on some level. We have celebrations in the church when people join or are confirmed, so we know how to acknowledge when someone has done something that strengthens the congregation as a whole. What I am suggesting is that we extend this by celebrating people's whole lives, not just their lives related to the institutional church.

By setting up metrics that honor how people serve as stewards and leaders in their interactions with others outside the church, we also set up a means for helping them recognize how God is intervening in their daily lives. That, in turn, would help people articulate how, when, and where they see God honoring their stewardship through being present in power to transform people or situations.

The congregation should take time to celebrate these experiences. Doing so gives people a chance to claim how they are relating to God and others in ways they often would not have been able to, or even been able to articulate, before such celebrations. It also would allow Christians to encourage each other with these stories, letting each other know that this mystery, as disruptive as it is to daily life, really does work. God shows up in power to bring reconciliation and move people to glory.

Celebrating this way would have two effects: First, it would help rescue the Christian faith from professionalization. Too often, hand-in-hand with the cult of the congregation, is the idea that Christianity can really only be practiced by people who have given themselves full time to

the ordained ministry. By equipping people to recognize the presence and power of God in their everyday lives and interactions, we help them claim their role in leading people to a better future regardless of their education, training, or job.

Second, my strong guess is that if people become more dedicated to the stewardship of the mystery of God in their daily lives, they will have a lot to report about how God is showing up and doing amazing things. That means the church would be a place marked by celebration. There would still be time for lament, contemplation, and other activities, but a consistent melody of joy would be detectable through it all. This would be an incredible witness for those in the world. Who wouldn't desire to be part of a place people who experience such joy so regularly?

This, then, is what it means to be stewards of the mystery of God. It is to be those who carry with us an alternative wisdom that casts down the false idols that enslave us and breaks through the meaningless categorizations that reduce our humanity and hold us apart from one another. This wisdom is grounded not only in the verbal message of the gospel, but in the power of God to send Jesus Christ as the incarnate one to die and rise again.

This is a beautiful depiction of what God has done and the reconciliation it makes possible with God and among people. Clearly, we have a song worth ringing out from our church bells!

The question is, are we ringing them in a way that anyone can hear and understand them. To do this, we come back to the issue of leadership. To steward the gospel well, we must not only understand what it is, but understand how to lead a broken world that is fraught with idols and divisions into the glorious light Christ offers us. By modeling the way to stay firmly committed to our message of the Crucified Christ, using our resources in a way that promotes the common good rather than just building up one congregation over another, relating to people with the expectation of greeting and sharing the goodness of God with them, and celebrating how we see God in our daily lives, we generate a powerful example for people to follow.

Yes, you say, but is it enough? My suggestion seems to argue for lots of local and grassroots level activities, nothing grand. There is no bid for political power or overhauling the economy. There is no effort at shaping geopolitical or military strategies.

That's true, but that is also Christian.

The Roman Empire did not legalize Christianity at the outset. First, thousands of individual Christians and local Christian gatherings witnessed to the mystery of God in their own unpretentious, simple ways: by sharing their wealth, feeding widows and orphans, caring for the

sick, and gathering for meals and teaching. There is nothing heroic here. Just the simple, humble offering of gifts for the betterment of one another and for those in need outside the church.

And yet, in these very simple acts, God moved with remarkable power. Miracles were performed, the sick were healed, the dead were raised, and lives were transformed.

This was so powerful that it brought the swift attention of Rome. They clamped down hard, fearful of the disruption it would bring to their well-ordered empire. Yet, like a steady dripping of water on a rock, the Christians persisted and persevered in their stewardship. It was not easy, and many suffered because of it. But, their perseverance paid off. Over decades the hard rock of paganism and conventional wisdom gave way until the Roman Empire understood itself as largely Christian.

At the very beginning, to make this happen, Christians needed to understand the power of the mystery they were called to steward. That's what St. Paul called them to do. That's we are called to do again. With clarity about our stewardship, we can lead our world out of the pain it is in to a marvelous new light.

Let me end by returning to my question about the song. What if the church had been able to provide leadership for Doc McLean and the others of his era? Perhaps the song would have ended thus:

And in the streets the children screamed,  
the lovers cried and the poets dreamed,  
But a word of grace was spoken,  
the church doors all were open.

And the three men I admired the most,  
the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost,  
they blessed us to the uttermost  
and assured us that death had died.

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<sup>1</sup> Telegram sent by Einstein to several prominent Americans on May 24, 1946 and reported in "Atomic Education Urged by Einstein: Scientist in Plea for \$200,000 to Promote New Type of Essential Thinking," *The New York Times*, vol XCV, No. 32,263, May 25, 1946, 11.

<sup>2</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, sixth edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2017), ch. 1.

<sup>3</sup> All biblical references will come from the *New King James Version*.

<sup>4</sup> E. Stanley Jones, *Christ at the Round Table* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1953), 305.