

The Gospel and the God-Forsaken:
The Challenge of the Missional Church in Suburbia

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Can you hear me, Morpheus? I'm going to be honest with you. I hate this place. This zoo. This prison. This reality. Whatever you want to call it. I can't stand it any longer. It's the smell, if there is such a thing. I feel saturated by it. I can taste your stink. And every time I do, I feel I have somehow been infected by it, it's repulsive. I must get out of here. I must get free...

- Agent Smith¹

Two years ago this was how I viewed our suburban world. It was a zoo. It was a prison. I hated this place: the strip malls, the individualism, the consumerism. Certainly, I thought, Christianity is best lived in the city. I figured if I wanted to really serve God and follow the radical call of Christ I would have to move to the city. There I could better live in proximity and community. There, I could do a better job of taking care of the poor and needy at my doorstep. The city was the place where following Jesus would easily be lived out on a daily basis. This is how I thought. But God has a way of shaking things up.

Alan Roxburgh recently said in seminar, “God always shows up in the most God-forsaken places.” If one had to choose the most God forsaken place in our world today, where would that be? There are some obvious and graphic examples. We could name the atrocities in Darfur, the poor in Calcutta, or the AIDS crisis in Africa. Locally we see that this year Philadelphia has had the most murders since 1997.² These “God forsaken” places are under our noses and on the news everyday—or at least they should be. But where is the hidden, “under the surface,” poverty of our world? Despite its nice exterior of SUV’s and housing developments, could it be that the suburban world is as God-forsaken as any place on the globe? This paper will argue that it is. If this is true, what does it mean to be the church in suburban America? What does it mean to be “missional” in a context where there are very few apparent and obvious

¹ The Matrix. Dir. Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski. Keanu Reeves, Hugo Weaving and Laurence Fishburne. 1999.

² Bewley, Joel and Jan Hefler. “Four Killings Put 2006 Over 05’ Top” The Philadelphia Inquirer. 11 Dec. 2006. <<http://www.philly.com/mld/philly/16211234.htm>>

needs? This paper will begin with an overview of the important aspects of the missional church as it intersects with suburban life. It will then take a quick look at the challenges and obstacles that the suburban life presents to missional Christianity. Finally, it will explore four key areas of focus for the suburban church as it seeks to move toward a missional ministry.

The Missional Church: An Overview

Perhaps one of the most important and foundational ways to understand the missional church is to put it in the context of the trinity. David Bosch addresses this in his book

Transforming Mission:

Mission [is] understood primarily as being derived from the very nature of God. It [is] thus put in the context of the doctrine of the trinity...The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [expands] to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world...mission is not primarily an activity of the church, it is an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God into the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is a church because there is a mission, not visa versa.³

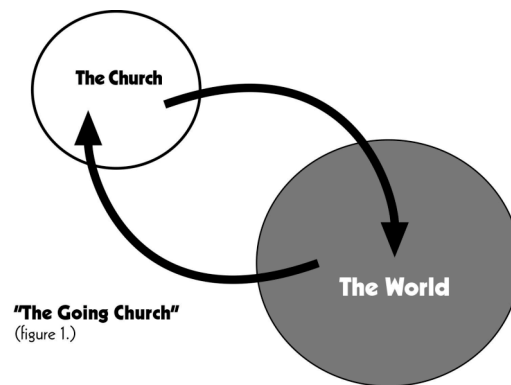
One might be tempted to make missional living a secondary result of the church’s life together instead of making it the very reason for its being. But, if we understand that the mission of the church is derived from the very nature of God and that the church’s mission flows from God’s desire to redeem the creation, then we cannot minimize it as something that is simply *part*

³ Bosch, David. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

of the church's task. It *is* the church's task. In this desire to redeem the creation, God has sent the church so that in His mission His "love and attention are directed primarily at the world."⁴

So if we can understand mission as the Father sending the Son, the Father and the Son sending the Spirit, and the Father, Son and Spirit sending the church, a question still remains: What does this look like? The answer to this question lies in being congregations that are "sent" instead of congregations that "go."

The church that "goes" is the church that finds its primary identity detached from the world and set apart as holy. When it does mission, it ventures into the world to share the gospel. This view of mission could be depicted with the following illustration:



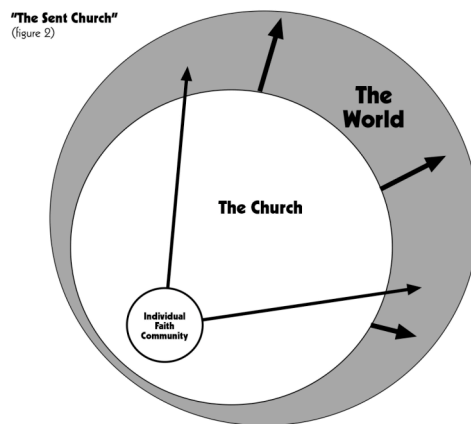
Here, the separate and untainted church rightfully understands that it needs to be a witness for the gospel. The church then takes a risky venture into the world to "do mission." After it is done with this task, it retreats back to the safety of separation in order to be refueled. Missiologist David Bosch offers a helpful critique of this idea. He writes, "Spirituality or devotional life seems to mean withdrawal from the world, charging my batteries, and then going out into the world. The image is of an automobile that runs on batteries only."⁵ He goes on to explain how this understanding of the Christian life in which the world "is primarily seen as a

⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁵ Bosch, David. *A Spirituality for the Road*. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1961), 12.

threat, as a source of contagion from which the Christian must keep himself free” leads to a view of life that is “docetic.” Docetism essentially claims that matter is inherently evil and has been rejected by all mainstream forms of Christianity.

A more helpful and biblical view of mission is seen when the church understands itself as *sent (into the world) as set apart and unified*. This view of the church and mission can be depicted in the following illustration:



This illustration comes from Jesus’ prayer in John 17. Here we see Jesus describe the church first and foremost as sent into the world. In verse 15 he prays that it would be sent, “my prayer is not that you take them out of the world.” In verse 18 Jesus states the need for them to remain set apart in their sentness, “They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.” Finally Jesus prays that they would remain unified, “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” With Jesus’ prayer as a foundation for understanding the nature of the church we see that the Church finds itself *in the world, yet set apart and unified*.

There is no advantage in trying to separate ourselves from the world. Karl Barth helpfully points out that the church is a part of world history; the gospel takes place in “world occurrence.” Somehow I grew up with the assumption that there were two histories of the world: biblical history and world history. While this was likely never explicitly expressed as truth, it is what I instinctively learned. World history was somehow profane and corrupted and biblical history was holy and redemptive. But, Barth shows that this dichotomized view of history is unhelpful to mission. The church would be “guilty of a lack of faith and discernment if it seriously saw and understood world history as secular or profane history.”⁶ Instead, he states that we simply cannot separate the church from world history. He writes, “[The church’s] history takes place as surrounded by the history of the cosmos and is everywhere affected and determined by it. Conversely, it is not without significance for the cosmos and its history that its own history takes place.”⁷

Since we are unable to fully separate ourselves from this world, by the simple fact that we exist within it, we need to think deeply about how we can still remain both distinct *and* missional.⁸ This, of course, is not an easy task. It is the very thing that Jesus passionately prayed for in John 17:11, “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name” and later in verse 15 He prays, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.” Jesus knew that the church’s involvement in the world we be a dangerous mission. Because of this, the only way we will find success in being a distinct witness in the world will be through complete dependence on the Spirit. David Bosch writes, “The involvement in the world should lead to a deepening of our relationship with and dependence on

⁶ Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics, IV.3.2. The Doctrine of Reconciliation*. (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 687.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 684.

⁸ Here Barth’s Reformed theology comes to the forefront as he argues that the reason we can be confident with our place in world history is due to the fact that God Himself is Sovereign Lord and ruler over world history.

God, and the deepening of this relationship should lead to an increasing involvement in the world.”⁹

If we continue to follow Jesus’ prayer, we see that the church cannot stop at seeing itself simply as distinct in the midst of world history. It must also understand itself as unified if it desires to have an effective witness in the world. Jesus’ prayer clearly states that our unity is a major part of a potent witness. From the illustration above (illustration 2) we see that while the individual church must see itself as sent into the world, it must also see itself as sent into the world along with the church catholic. Again, Barth provides some helpful commentary on this topic. He writes:

[the Christian] is united to [other Christians] by the simple fact that, since there is only one work as the Word of God and only one Mediator between God and man self-declared in his activity, the content of his witness cannot be other than that of theirs, nor the content of theirs other than that of his. He and they may have received, and may take up and discharge, their ministry of witness in very different ways. But they cannot possibly be apart in this ministry. They cannot be monads or private disciples operating in their own strength.¹⁰

Barth makes the important point that though there are different churches taking on quite different contextual expressions of the gospel, all churches and Christians are still united in their mission. This, of course, is the case whether they are aware of this fact or not.

The missional church therefore needs to derive its very nature and mission from the nature of God as the One who sends. As the church is being sent, it needs to express its mission

⁹ Bosch. *A Spirituality for the Road*. 13.

¹⁰ Barth. *Church Dogmatics, IV.3.2. The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 683.

as a unified body (locally and universally) that is sent into the world as a distinct representation of the Kingdom of God.

As we move into our discussion about the missional church and the challenge that the suburban context creates, we must first understand that all mission is contextual.

Contextualization is defined by Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost as “the dynamic process whereby the constant message of the gospel interacts with specific, relative human situations.”¹¹ They go on to write that this:

Involves the examination of the gospel in the light of the respondent’s worldview and then adapting the message, encoding it in such a way that it can become meaningful to the respondent...it is primarily concerned with presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people’s deepest needs and penetrates their worldviews, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain in their culture.

Here, Frost and Hirsch bring out one of the most important aspects and challenges of contextualization. As we “do church” in a specific culture we will be challenged to look at that culture and see which aspects of it are anti-Christian and which aspects are helpful to Christianity. As we take this task seriously in the suburban context I think we will be surprised to see there are some distinct ways the suburban church has inadvertently and unknowingly capitulated to the culture. Of course, this does not mean that all of suburban life is anti-Christian, but the focus of this paper will be on the “anti-Christian” aspects of the culture. The next section will seek to look at the suburban world and bring to light some of the challenges that the suburban missional church faces in this particular context.

Our Context: Suburban America

¹¹ Hirsh, Alan & Michael Frost. *The Shaping of Things to Come*. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 82.

The suburban world is a unique place. It mainly developed in a post World War II culture. After the chaos of the Second World War, people sought suburbia “as a peaceful place of solace and refuge” and “a modern-day promised land.”¹² Images of the television show “The Wonder Years” come to mind when suburbia is described this way. In this show and others like it (“Leave it to Beaver” for example) safety, security and a home on a quiet street seemed to be the ultimate end. Struggles were not so much about death, starvation or where the next meal was going to come from, but more about not being cool at school or about winning the affections of the cute girl down the street.

As the suburbs grew, the major promise of this world was the single-family dwelling. When explaining the growth of the suburbs, a major motivating factor in moving from the crowded city was the prospect of owning a single-family dwelling. Albert Hsu writes in his book *The Suburban Christian*:

Central to suburban housing and living is the core philosophical idea of American individualism. In this notion of the American dream, the ideal is that every individual family has their own plot of land, yard and picket fence to separate them from their neighbors, defining mine as mine and yours as yours...in the 1950s individualistic single family houses were seen as the American antidote to communism.”¹³

Often times we decry the evils of the suburban world without realizing that it developed out of a specific time, place, culture and set of needs. As one reads a fair account of the development of suburban America, it makes sense that people would be seeking refuge, safety, and security.

They were simply reacting to the world in which they lived. Of course, this does not mean that

¹² Hsu, Albert Y. *The Suburban Christian*. (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2006), 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 39.

suburban development did not come with some major consequences. Andres Dauny in his book, *Suburban Nation: the Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* writes:

For the past fifty years, we Americans have been building a national landscape that is largely devoid of places worth caring about. Soulless subdivisions, residential “communities” utterly lacking in communal life, strip shopping centers, “big box” chain stores, and artificially festive malls set within barren seas of parking; antiseptic office parks, ghost towns after 6 p.m.; and mile upon mile of clogged collector roads [are] the only fabric tying our disassociated lives back together...¹⁴

This individualism and escapism has led to the suburban world’s most powerful religion: Consumerism. Hsu perceptively notes, “The very housing structures of suburbia itself contribute to consumer culture because of the primacy of the single-family home. Rather than the homestead being a place of production, the single family home is a place of consumption, necessarily fueled by wages to support a consumption-centered lifestyle.”¹⁵ He goes on to keenly note that since the single-family home is not self-sustaining, it depends on others to produce the goods to keep it going. It is not cost efficient (or possible) to produce things like one’s own eggs, electricity and or milk so we must instead purchase them. The single family home then “because it is dependent on consumption for its continued existence, ensures the endless perpetuation of consumer desire.”¹⁶

A Christian Response

This is the world in which God has called us to contextualize the hope of the Gospel. So what is the answer for the church in the suburbs? There are at least four main ways the default

¹⁴ Duany, Albert. *Suburban Nation: the Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. (New York: North Point Press, 2000), x.

¹⁵ Hsu., *Suburban Christian*, 75.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*,75.

suburban lifestyle needs to be challenged. First, we need to speak out against the suburban value of extreme individualism and call Christians back to community. Second, we need to deconstruct the value of consumerism in way that leads instead to sacrificial living. Third we need to question the suburban value of safety and comfort and judge it against the call of the gospel. Finally, we need to understand how our individualism and consumerism lead us to neglect the hurting and needy people in our neighborhoods and cities.

Reject Individualism.

We can expect that if we live in an individualized world, we will struggle with having an individualized church. Individualism is extremely hurtful to mission. First of all, the individualism of our culture can lead to an over-individualizing salvation. Darrell Guder in his book *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* discusses how the church needs to be converted away from a reductionistic view of the gospel which uncritically adopts an individualized worldview into its theology. Guder writes:

As the gospel proclaimed by the church has been reduced to individual salvation, that salvation itself has become the purpose and program of the church...its worship centered on the message of individual salvation...more and more the clergy became the special caste of Christians who managed everyone else's individual salvation.¹⁷

Of course, there is no denying that a major part of salvation is the individual aspect. Because of this, emphasizing the fact that Jesus came to redeem individuals is obviously in and of itself not a problem. However, when we only emphasize the individual nature of the gospel we miss out on the bigger picture of the redemptive narrative of Scripture. Jesus came not only to save individuals, He came to redeem all of creation. Churches that focus primarily on individual salvation tend to lose focus on this aspect of the church's calling. The church's call to be a

¹⁷ Guder, Darrell. *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 133.

“sign, witness and foretaste” of the coming Kingdom are often overlooked when our only concern is getting people to heaven when they die. Here Jesus’ prayer that the Father’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven can be a real and practical manifestation of the local and global church.

One other way mission suffers from individualism is the loss of an emphasis on our public and unified witness. A simple illustration comes from a song that many young children learn called “Fishers of Men.” Our individualistic worldview is clearly seen in the hand motions that we teach our children. We teach them to fish like we do today. This, of course, is done with a fishing pole a fishing line and flashy lure while standing alone on the shoreline. While this is a completely legitimate way to fish, it is not the kind of fishing that Jesus was referring to when he told his disciples He would make them fishers of men. Fishing in Jesus’ time was much different. In those days, fisherman used large nets instead of poles and lures. From the Biblical narrative we can see that these nets were not the kind that could be lifted by one man who might be fishing all by himself. In fact, these nets could become so heavy that a whole team of fishermen could not even lift them.¹⁸ The most important point to notice here is that fishing in Jesus’ day was inherently a communal venture. Without other fishermen it was almost impossible to take in the catch. This has major implications for how we typically view evangelism in our day. We need to find ways to move from an individualized witness to a more robust and powerful communal witness.

Jesus was not about sending his disciples out by themselves into their individualized world to “share the gospel” so that people could “go to heaven when they die.” Rather, he was sending them out to be a communal, public witness to the Kingdom that he was announcing and inaugurating. If we are going to challenge the individualized nature of suburbia, we are going to

¹⁸ John 12:5-7. New International Version.

have to make some intentional efforts to find ways to be more communal in our witness together as fellow church members and as fellow churches.

Deconstruct Comfort

The second value that we need to think critically about in the suburban world is the value of comfort. Suburbia is set up so that we only need to interact with those whom we desire to interact with, keeping the rest of the evil world at arms length. The suburbs were attractive because they enabled one to leave the poverty and discomfort of the city behind. But is this view of comfort congruent with the gospel? In Luke 9 Jesus says, “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has no place to lay his head...follow me...no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” This passage serves as a very countercultural text for our suburban world. We have already seen how the single-family dwelling is one of the promises of the suburbs that we all pursue. Here we see Jesus challenging us to put our potential home ownership in proper perspective. It would seem a little preposterous to claim that Christians should not own homes. At the same time, we need to reconsider the value we place on the comfort of a home. It is clear from this passage that physical comfort is not a primary value for a follower of Jesus.

We can also see that the early church did not place physical comfort as a primary value. In 2 Corinthians 11, the Apostle Paul writes that he has been in prison, flogged severely, exposed to death, beaten with rods three times, stoned once, shipwrecked, in danger from bandits—not to mention his own countrymen—the sea and false brothers. The poignant part of this passage is Paul’s use of these experiences as examples of how he could boast—if he wanted to. Here Paul is placing a value on these things over and above comfort.

Uncritically accepting comfort and safety affects more than just our personal discipleship and mission. It also has great impact on the mission of our community. Church communities seeking to maintain and find comfort for their members will quickly lose the mission they started with. Michael Frost claims:

Timidity squashes our missional impulse. It causes us to withdraw from any grand sense of purpose for fear of upsetting the delicate balance of conflicting egos currently residing in each church. Christians surround themselves with fellow churchgoers, so that their church's only goal is to maintain equilibrium....such timidity and anxiety leave the church as nothing more than a retreatist, frightened, ineffective organization.¹⁹

Churches seeking to maintain safety for their members usually avoid any risk for the sake of the gospel. Because of this, they are unable to think critically about contextualization. Instead, they simply do as they have always been doing. Or, they do mission as it was done in the past despite the fact that the culture has changed. In reality, safety and security are the ultimate goal; mission is secondary at best.

If we are going to find ways to be missional in suburbia, we need to cultivate individuals and communities willing to take risks for the sake of the gospel. We need to tell stories of people who have taken risks for the sake of following Jesus. We need to build into our community an ethos of change, challenge, risk, and perhaps even persecution. Of course, as we do this, we understand that the gospels do talk about Christ taking care of our needs as well as the comfort of our souls. Our communities do need to be places of refuge along with being places of risk. But, if we are never taking risks, a community of refuge is not quite as needed and necessary.

¹⁹ Frost, Michael. *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 124.

Confront Consumerism

The third suburban value that we need to think critically about is consumerism. The argument could be made that our individualizing and comfort seeking have developed out of the deeper problem of consumerism. Consumerism is a term used to describe the effects of equating personal happiness with purchasing material possessions and consumption.”²⁰ It is easy to see how consumerism works against the gospel. We should equate personal happiness with Jesus Christ, not our possessions.

In Luke 9 Jesus tells his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life must lose it and whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet lose or forfeit his very self?” Ron Sider in his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* argues that consumerism developed because Charles Darwin “convinced the intellectual world that the entire history of life on this planet is simply the result of blind material forces accidentally producing chance mutations that through natural selection produce evolutionary change. Nothing exists but this material world, which we can count and measure.”²¹ If we adopt this view, the spiritual things of this world, which cannot be measured, become less valuable.

Very few Christians, if any at all, would argue that their happiness comes from material things; and they also do not argue that the world has developed from evolution. However, we may have adopted more of this worldview than we realized. Debt, with certain exceptions, can be a decent indicator of the level of consumerism that has influenced a person or family.

²⁰ [www.wikipedia.com <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism>](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism)

²¹ Sider, Ron. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 88.

Unfortunately, today Christians are in debt as much as the rest of the world.²² Much of the debt in our lives comes from the “need” for bigger televisions, the newest iPod, the latest designer clothes, or perhaps this year’s newest vehicle. The church needs to be active in calling its members into check if they have uncritically adopted the “you are what you consume” theory of modern, suburban life.

Pursue Justice

The fourth challenge the church has in the suburban world is to radically address issues of poverty and justice. The fact that suburban people do not naturally engage in these issues is congruous with the other three issues already stated. If a suburban Christian’s main focus on salvation is receiving life after death, and if he/she is unknowingly placing physical comfort and materialism above the radical and risky call to follow Jesus, then it is not a surprise that the poor, disenfranchised, and needy are left to fend for themselves. We have come to the suburbs because we did not want to look at the poverty of the city. It has become too easy to ignore the fact that there is poverty all around us, even in suburbia!

A recent study showed that more and more poverty is moving to the suburbs. The study stated, “The suburban poor outnumbered their inner-city counterparts for the first time last year, with more than 12 million suburban residents living in poverty, according to a study of the nation’s 100 largest metropolitan areas.”²³ This is a startling statistic and the suburban church must take note. We have already argued that the church cannot ignore issues of justice because the gospel is more far-reaching than individual salvation. If the church in the suburbs is truly going to be the church, it must begin to think creatively of ways to serve the needs of today’s

²² Martin, Allie. “Burkett Says Misplaced Priorities at Crux of Debt Problem.” Agape Press. 14 Aug. 2001. <<http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/8/142001g.asp>>.

²³ Associated Press. “Poverty Moves to the Burbs.” Northwest Herald. 06 Dec 2006. <http://www.nwherald.com/articles/2006/12/07/news/nation_and_world/doc4577dca355ee6260795087.txt>

“orphans and widows.”²⁴ It would be helpful for us to think about mission in terms of justice and evangelism together. Ron Sider writes, “think of the impact if evangelical giving to empower the poor here and abroad became so substantial that the first thought that came to people’s minds when they heard the word ‘evangelical’ was ‘Oh, yes, they are the people who are dramatically reducing poverty around the world.” He goes on to say that “evangelism and concern for the poor have gone hand in hand in the great revivals of the past.”²⁵

Are we going to stop acting like poverty doesn’t exist? Are we seriously going to argue that we cannot help the poor when we are the richest people in the world? A family with an income of about \$45,000/year is currently in the top 1.75% richest people in the world.²⁶ Considering that a \$45,000 salary will hardly afford someone a typical suburban home in a major metropolitan area, this statistic is very telling. We see again how many of the issues discussed in this paper are distinct but not separate when we realize that even though we make more money than the majority of the world we still find excuses not to help the poor. Perhaps this is because we are so consumed with debt from living individualized and consumer driven lives that we are not able to give to the poor!

What Now?

So what are we to do? Ron Sider states our challenge clearly when he says, “Precisely because we love culture, we must be countercultural. Precisely because we follow Jesus our churches must be loving disrupters of the sinful status quo rather than comfortable clubs of conformity.”²⁷ We have a monumental challenge if we are going to contextualize the gospel and live as missional communities of faith throughout suburban America. We cannot flee. We

²⁴ The Bible. New International Version, James 1:27.

²⁵ Sider. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 119.

²⁶ <<http://globalrichlist.com/>>

²⁷ ²⁷ Sider. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 104.

cannot get out of here. This is where we live. This is where God has called us. And this “God-forsaken place” that we have been called to desperately needs the Church to stand up and be the Church. We need to be a Church that truly exists for the sake of others. We need a Church that gives up luxury so that others may have necessity. We need a Church that rejects the lone ranger mentality and lives in sacrificial and compassionate community. We need a Church that views money as a resource of God’s Kingdom and not an object to be consumed. We need a Church that trusts the Spirit and takes risks for the sake of the Gospel. We need a Church that comes together to care for the poor in their backyards as well as those in the city.

Perhaps, if we are careful to listen to the voice of the Spirit’s leading, we will see the power of the cross and the Resurrection can transform a place as cold and hard to the gospel as suburban America.

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