The Victorious Church: Tree of Life for the Healing of the Nations?

Chapter Title: No Arguing with Success

*Why We Need This Book*

The title of this book is certainly an attention grabber! Yet it might seem rather controversial. I mean, the Tree of Life – wasn’t that in the middle of the Garden of Eden? Or something we read about in Revelation, growing along the River of Life in the New Jerusalem? And if that’s the case, how can it be correct to say it’s the Church here and now on earth?

*Biblical Evidence for the Church as a Tree of Life.*

Actually, the tree of life is mentioned 10 or 11 times in scripture (depending on the version we read), and though the majority of those references are indeed found in Revelation, this tree surely represents something greater than what our first impression might indicate. Take Proverbs 3:18 for example, which says *wisdom* is a tree of life, yielding better returns than gold, silver, or rubies. How could that be the case? Is it not because wisdom actually shows us how to *live* in such a way that we often end up having such material riches *along with* long life, honor, and peace?

Proverbs 11:30 is another example along this same line; “the fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and one who wins souls is wise.” In other words, just as a fruit tree produces tasty, refreshing and life-sustaining fruit, a life lived righteously produces a kind of life expressed in a person’s words, attitudes, and actions that is just naturally winsome. This kind of “fruit” attracts people, winning them or drawing them to God. That’s why wise people who live righteously tend to win others to the Lord.

Yet another example of this is found in Proverbs 15:4, “The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life.” People who live in union with God tend to speak in a wise and wholesome way that can actually give life to others.

These references all make it clear that the “tree of life” is not some literal tree growing in heaven, but rather, a symbolic source of good things that are accessible in this life, here and now.

This being the case, it is not at all misguided to say the Church is meant to be a tree of life. After all, are not all believers meant to “shine out like stars in a darkened world” and “hold forth the Word of life” to all peoples, tribes, and nations? (Phil. 2:15, 16) Did Jesus not tell His disciples to “let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds (the fruit of the righteous) and glorify your Father in heaven”? (that is, be drawn to your Father in heaven, be “won” to God, because He is good – Matt. 5:16) Is the Church not called the Body of Christ and the Temple of His Spirit, His “lampstand,” ambassador, or messenger in this present world?

After the Fall, God said that if Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of Life, they would live forever, so He cut off access to it, and banished them from the Garden of Eden. (Gen. 3:22) That tree symbolized the source or the way of eternal life. Since Christ said *He* is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn. 14:10), and Rom. 6:23 says the gift of God is eternal life in *Him*, Jesus Himself is everything the Tree of Life represents. That much should be easy to see and accept. The corollary might not be as easy to see but is nevertheless also true: Since Jesus lives and works through His Church, we are expressions of the tree here on earth in this present time.

It goes without saying, of course, that anything good we might have to offer is only good because it comes from Him who is the Highest Good, that is, God. It doesn’t *originate* with us; rather, it flows from God *through* us. Paul said, “for I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (Rom 7:18 ESV), and he also said, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God…who has made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant.” (2 Cor 3:5, 6a NKJV).

Consider some other verses that speak of Messiah as a tree: Jesus is called “the Root and Offspring of David” (Rev. 22:16) and a “shoot” from the “stump” of Jesse, a “branch” from his “roots.” (Is. 11:1) See also the references to Him as “the Branch,” (Is. 4:2; Zech. 3:8; 6:12.) We understand that He is the *root* of David because He is the Author of all life, the Creator of mankind and everything else that exists. But He’s also the *offspring, the line or stock (Gr. “genos”)* of David, because He took on human form, being born of a virgin in David’s line, thereby becoming heir to the Jewish throne.

Jesus alluded to something similar in a related passage, Mat. 22:45. There, He asked the Jewish leaders of His time how the Messiah could be both David’s Son and David’s Lord (quoting Ps. 110:1). The issue these questions address is similar. Jesus is the Lord, but also the Son of David. He is the Root but He is also the Branch. We understand the mystery in hindsight, for we know God was at work through David’s entire “family tree”! Jesus is both root and branch. He is the Tree of Life.

Another foreshadowing of Christ as a tree is found in Ex. 15:23, where the waters of a well were bitter and undrinkable until God showed Moses a piece of wood, or, as several versions (NKJV, NASU, AMP) say, “a tree,” which, when thrown into the well, *healed* the waters and made them sweet. Some commentators have pointed to this incident as a pictorial or typological prophecy of Christ’s death on a tree, where He bore the curse of sin for us that we might receive the blessing of Abraham (Gal. 3:13).

Since Jesus is spoken of metaphorically as a Tree, and He is also the Author of Life (Acts 3:15), we can connect the two and see Him as the Tree of Life. Whoever “eats” of that tree, that is, whoever partakes of Him, will have everlasting life (Jn. 6:54). Adam and Eve’s sin cut them and all humans off from access to that tree until the fullness of time, when Christ could come, atone for our sins, and grant us access once again to eternal life.

But how do others learn this good news? Where can they find out about how to be reconciled with God and then live a new life as He intends? Only in the Word of God and in the Church! Since the Church is Christ’s body, established to continue His work on earth, it is not at all out of line to think of His Church as the tree of life on earth. After all, Jesus changed the metaphor only slightly when He said (John 15), “I am the vine, and you are the branches,” going on to say, “you did not choose me – I chose you and ordained that you should bear much fruit.”

Those who are part of Christ’s Church are the ones He has chosen to bear much fruit. They are the justified ones, the ones made righteous by faith. Linking this with Prov. 11:30, that the fruit of the righteous is a tree of life and he who wins souls is wise, it appears obvious that yes, Jesus is the Tree of Life, but His Church is too. The Church, living in union with Christ, overcoming by His grace and His Spirit, is the expression of Christ’s life on earth. He is the vine; we are the branches. He is *the* Tree of Life, but the victorious Church is a Tree of Life too. We are the expressions of His life here and now.

This is made even more obvious when we consider that there are also quite a few biblical passages which refer to the righteous as trees. Consider Ps. 92:12-15, where the righteous are likened to palm trees or to cedars of Lebanon, and we’re told they are planted (NSRV) or will be “transplanted” (NLT), to the house of the Lord, and will still produce “fruit,” even in old age. The house of the Lord is the Church (Heb. 3:6), which is also the Body of Christ and the Temple of His Spirit. We find this same idea expressed in Ps. 1:3, which says the righteous are like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its “fruit” in season (the fruit of the righteous is a tree of life – Prov. 11:30). The leaves of such trees don’t wither, and all they do will prosper. Likewise, Jer. 17:8 says those who trust in the Lord are like trees planted by waters, which don’t have to fear heat or drought, because they will likewise yield fruit and not wither. There is yet another reference in Isaiah (61:3), where the prophet proclaims that the Lord makes those who trust Him into “oaks of righteousness.” Again and again, we see this metaphorical language, confirming that Jesus is “the” Tree of Life, but we, His followers who trust in Him and have His Spirit living within us, we too He has made into trees of life.

Perhaps some still feel hesitant to attribute to the Church things we tend to think only Christ Himself can be or do. But we are on safe ground in doing so, for there are several other instances where that which is attributed to Christ is also attributed to His people.

Consider for example, that besides being the Tree of Life, Jesus is also the Light of the World (Jn. 8:12). Yet, in Matt. 5:14, He told His disciples, “*You* are the light of the world.” In Is. 49:6, the Servant of Yahweh is prophesied to come as a light to the nations, a prophecy clearly referring to Jesus. Yet in Acts 13:47, Paul quoted this verse in reference to himself and Barnabas. He claimed that *they* werefulfilling the prophecy as they brought the light of the Messiah’s Gospel to Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch! His claim wasn’t blasphemous, however, for the Lord Himself had told Paul after his experience on the road to Damascus that he was being sent “to open eyes and turn people from darkness to light” (Acts 26:18). So yes, the Lord is the Light of the world, but so are His people; so is His Church!

Similarly, we know that the Lord is the Fountain of living water (Ps. 36:9; Jer. 2:13; Jn. 4:10.) Yet in Jn. 4:14, He tells the Samaritan woman that whoever drinks the water He gives will thirst no more, but that water will become in him or her a well, springing up to everlasting life. The water comes from God, but the well will be *within believers*. A few chapters later, in Jn. 7:37, the Lord says that if anyone comes to Him and drinks, rivers of living water will flow from within them. These rivers of living water originate with God, but will flow from *believers*, that is, from the Church.

In Ez. 47, the prophet is shown a temple from which an ever-expanding river is flowing. Yet the New Testament says clearly that *we,* Christ’s Church, are now the temple of the living God (1 Cor. 3:16, Eph. 2:21; 1 Pet. 2:5), so that river Ezekiel saw is meant to flow from us!

In the New Jerusalem, the city of God (which is, by the way, also the Bride of Christ, Rev. 21:8-10 – please note; the City *is* the Bride, *is* the Body, *is* the Temple), the river of living water flows from the throne of God and through the middle of the city (Rev. 22:1). But we, the Church, *are* that city, as St. Augustine so famously wrote in his book, *The City of God*. The imagery is beautiful and inspiring as we also consider that a river flowed through the Garden of Eden and out to the rest of the world (Gen. 2:10.) Likewise, Ps. 46:4, 5, speaks of a river flowing through and making glad the city of God.

So, the Lord is the Fountain of living waters, without any doubt. But when we come into union with Him as Lord and Savior, living waters flow from Him *through* us, and out to the world. The Lord is the Source, but we are His outlets here on earth. Even so, the Lord is the Tree of Life, but so is the Church, because of our connection or union with Him. As Ps. 1 says, we are planted by the river, and yield our fruit in season, the fruit of the righteous, bringing life to those with whom we come in contact. The leaves of the tree in Revelation 22 “are for the healing of the nations.” There won’t be any need for healing in heaven – so it stands to reason that such healing must be something the tree (Christ’s Church) brings to people here on earth!

Perhaps the clearest proof that the Church is a tree of life is demonstrated by what Christ has called His Church to be and do. We know that Jesus Himself went around healing the sick, proclaiming the good news, and casting out demons. He bound the “strong man” and plundered his “house” (Mat. 12:29), which means He came to destroy the works of the devil. (1 Jn. 3:8) He went about “doing good, and healing all who were under the devil’s power, because God was with Him” (Acts 10:38).

But after His resurrection, He then commissioned His Church *to continue what He had started* by being His witnesses, going throughout the world proclaiming His Kingdom, discipling nations, healing the sick, and casting out demons, destroying the works of the devil. He promised us that “the gates of hell will not prevail” against His Church (Matt. 16:18), a promise which speaks of “the Church militant,” victoriously *advancing* against the enemy’s strongholds. The Church has been called and commissioned to do what Christ was called to do, (with the one exception being His work of atonement on the cross.) It is not blasphemous to say such things or to say the Church is a tree of life here on earth, commissioned to bring healing to the nations.

On the contrary, it is very important that Christians understand these things and think on them often, because it is essential for the Church to understand her mission and function in this world. There are obviously many teachings in the Bible, and all are of value. Yet we do not assign the same importance to all of them. Some doctrines are considered essential, such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the Fall, and salvation through grace by faith. Unfortunately, ecclesiology, the doctrine of the Church, has not often been thought of as an essential doctrine, but I would argue, it needs to be!

Over the 2000-plus years of the Church’s history, believers have sometimes been confused about what the Church is and what her role should be among the nations. Our present time is a time of great confusion about many things, and this certainly includes the concept of the Church. Since we face a crafty and persistent enemy, whom Jesus called “the father of lies,” we must be aware that he will do all in his power to weaken, erode, or distort our concept of essential truths such as the nature and mission of the Church. Thus, we collectively write this book as a call to reconsider ecclesiology, to reconsider what the Church is and what she is called to.

*The Church’s “self-image” relates to her understanding of end-times and prophecy.*

How the Church has seen herself and her mission has affected her impact in the world. Today there is a great deal of writing about the last days, and especially about the Millennial Reign of Christ. There are obviously many views on this, so the subject has become controversial. Some are pre, some post, and some amillenialist in their perspective. (Others are pan-millennialists, believing whatever happens, it will all “pan out” in the end!) This is not a book about the last days, and we will not present our opinion one way or the other; that isn’t our focus.

What is important about these belief systems for our purposes is the connection often made between them and how the Church sees herself and her mission. We mention the issue of eschatology here, not to argue for a particular view, but rather, because of the fact that the Church’s understanding of the future has often affected how she lives and works in the present.

I will explain the connection later in this chapter, but first, a bit of history. The greatest evidence that the Church is the Tree of Life for the healing of the nations can be clearly seen in both the Book of Acts and in the 2000-plus subsequent years of Church history.

*Historical Evidence for the Church as a Tree of Life.*

In the Book of Acts, we see the early Christians speaking out boldly to their society in general as well as to both religious and governmental authorities. The latter wasn’t something they actively pursued. It mostly happened because their evangelistic and disciple-making activities brought them into conflict with these authorities and they had no choice but to speak to them directly. We have several incidents in the first chapters in which Peter, John, and others had to testify before various authorities. (Acts 2:14-47; 4:7-18; 5:21-41)

We see the same in the life of Paul. From his earliest days as a disciple, Acts portrays him actively speaking to his own people, the Jews, and also to those of other nations seeking to convince them to follow the Jewish Messiah. In the process, we see him boldly speaking before Roman authorities and Herod Agrippa, trying to influence them (Acts 13:7; 26:29). He spoke before the Areopagus, a Greek governmental council in Athens, (Acts 17:19). We see him standing up for his rights as a Roman citizen, and even challenging magistrates who had overstepped their bounds according to Roman law (Acts 16:37; 22:25).

In the story of the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:31 ESV), there is an interesting reference to friends of Paul who were called “Asiarchs,” a Greek term describing provincial leaders. This implies that he must have interacted with those in positions of authority in his attempts to disciple them. The Church has a different agenda for society than the world’s authorities do. This always brings her into conflict, for she seeks to change the world, to disciple the nations.

This general trend continued and expanded during the ensuing centuries, to the point that the Church actually “Christianized” the Roman Empire. Church fathers even influenced Roman emperors, starting with Constantine. They taught such political leaders, sought to guide them, and at least one, Ambrose of Milan, even refused communion to an emperor (Theodosius I) because his actions as emperor had been sinful. Thus, the Church even disciplined a governmental leader, demonstrating that no one was above the law, and that God was above all earthly authorities. Augustine on occasion actually called on government authorities to enforce the Church’s decrees regarding doctrine. Over centuries of time, a variety of interactions between the Church and state resulted in a variety of approaches and positions being taken. For example, one historian has even said that, “In the West, the popes were practically emperors, whereas in the East, the emperors were practically popes!” (*Christianity Through the Centuries*, 196)

It may be easy in hindsight to point to what we today consider extremes or errors regarding Church and state that prevailed during this long struggle. For our purposes however, it’s important to note that regardless of what one thinks about these different approaches and struggles, many or most Christians of those times conceived of the Church as a “militant” body, clashing with the established order, yet destined for ultimate victory as she boldly and aggressively sought to disciple (and transform) the nations. Many held to millennial positions which saw the Church as the people in whom Christ was ruling and reigning now, that is, they saw the Church as the Kingdom of God on earth. As such, they also believed it was the Church’s mission to pray and work for the extension of that Kingdom in this present age.

Dr. Keith A. Mathison, professor of systematic theology at Reformed Seminary in Sanford, Florida, writes of the prevalence of these theological approaches throughout the Middle Ages and into the modern period. It is particularly noteworthy, he points out, that the Puritans as well as Reformed theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held to theological views which saw the Church as destined to be victorious and to transform the world through discipleship. We can see from history how it was those theological views which motivated them to seek to disciple their nations and bring healing and change to them. They fully believed they were commissioned as Christ’s Church to disciple nations and bring them more into line with God’s will in all areas. (<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/millennial-maze>) See also *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science*, Peter Harrison, 1998, and its references to Puritan theological views and their impact on their society. 105, 106, footnote on 207.

Again, the point is not to argue eschatology, but to take note of the concept of the Church and its mission that these people had, and how this affected their work and effectiveness in the world. Our focus isn’t *eschatology* but *ecclesiology*. The only question we seek to answer here is, in those years when we can see that the Church most powerfully transformed nations (primarily Western Europe) did this concept of the Church they had (the Church militant, the Church Victorious), did that concept play a significant role in the great impact they had? (I will explain the connection with millennial views a little further on.)

For now, we argue that, when the Church in general believed it would be ultimately victorious in discipling the nations, that was the time period in which Western Europe was shaped and what we know as Western Civilization slowly developed. Christians with this sort of mind-set believe and have believed that God’s command in Genesis 1:28 to “fill the earth and subdue it, exercising dominion…” was basically reiterated and expanded when Jesus gave His “Great Commission” to the Church, saying His disciples were to “go into all the world and disciple the nations” (μαθητευσατε παντα τα εθνη – Mat. 28:18-20).

To disciple nations (as opposed to just winning some disciples *out* of the nations) means to teach God’s ways for all realms of life, so that entire nations begin to live as God would have them. We maintain that this was the predominant view of the early Church through the Middle Ages and into the modern era. Christians of those times held to the belief that Christ is ruling and reigning in His Church now and working through His people to bring all aspects of life in this world under His dominion (see also 1 Cor. 15:24, 25). When Christians predominantly understood the Church to be “the Church militant,” or as we are calling it, “the Victorious Church,” with a commission and mandate to disciple nations here and now, they took powerful strides to influence entire nations and the world in general in an indisputably positive way. (footnote: There are many who would disagree vehemently with the assertion that this influence was positive. This will be addressed in another time and place.)

*Sources Corroborating the Idea of the Church as a Tree of Life*

There are enough books and other materials testifying to the reality of the positive influence of the Victorious Church to fill a library. In this short chapter, I can mention only a few, but would urge further study to confirm this concept.

I suppose I first began to learn about the Church’s impact through D. James Kennedy’s two books, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?* and *What If the Bible Had Never Been Written?* In those books, Kennedy describes the influence the Bible and the Christian Church has had over the centuries upon such things as the abolition of slavery, the elevation of women, respect for human life, the creation of humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross, Boy Scouts, the YMCA, the creation of hospitals, and the development of the greatest educational institutions of the world. (He mentions that the University of Paris, of Bolgna, of Oxford, Cambridge, Yale, Princeton, and Harvard were all established by Christians to educate and thus disciple the nations, and to prepare ministers.)

I continued learning about these things as I was serving as a missionary with Youth with a Mission on the border of Mexico. I read how Celtic monks preserved literature and learning from Thomas Cahill’s *How the Irish Saved Civilization* and how the Church spread throughout the world through Ruth Tucker’s *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya.* Loren Cunningham’s *The Book that Transforms Nations* informed me of some unexpected places biblical teaching had an impact, like Japan and Norway. Another missionary, Dr. Ralph Winter of the US Center for World Mission, mentioned a book by sociologist Rodney Stark, saying all Christians should read it because it taught how science and the scientific method only really developed in the Christian worldview.

My interest piqued, I purchased the book Winter mentioned, *For the Glory of God,* and was so impressed and informed that I went on to purchase several more of Stark’s books, *How the West Won, The Victory of Reason, America’s Blessings,* and *The Rise of Christianity.* These works documented how Christian influence molded and shaped the West, transforming it from one of earth’s most backward and barbaric regions into being the avant-garde, the freest and most prosperous region of earth. Stark makes it very clear; it was the Church and the teaching of the Word of God which was a Tree of Life, transforming how Western Europe thought, what the people valued, and how they ran their families and communities, in their daily work and studies and government, and more. This is what changed an area of the world that had always been backward and barbarous into the region that was the freest, most prosperous and most innovative. (footnote: some today dislike saying any region of earth is “better” than any other. However, many studies prove that Western societies are considered “better” places to live, as evidenced by the millions who seek to migrate there from many other parts of the earth.)

This reality has been corroborated and affirmed over and over again, by innumerable writers and sources. On a trip to Europe in 2017, I even read it on a plaque in a little theme park in Belgium called “Little Europe.” In that very public and certainly “nonreligious” place, I found written (rather matter-of-factly) that Western Europe was undoubtedly shaped and molded by Christianity. I was surprised to see such a “politically incorrect” statement in an amusement park, since some in our day might find it offensive. Yet what that plaque said is something any honest student of European history must admit.

One such student is atheist and author Tom Holland, who, in his book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, spends 542 pages presenting and defending this undeniable thesis. He points out that even the standards by which atheists like himself have sought to criticize or judge the Church are inescapably *Christian* standards. “To live in a Western country is to live in a society still utterly saturated by Christian concepts and assumptions…Two thousand years on from the birth of Christ, it does not require a belief that he rose from the dead to be stamped by the formidable – indeed the inescapable – influence of Christianity.” (13)

Tom Holland is not by any means the only non-Christian to admit this “inescapable influence.” Many modern thinkers have agreed and said as much. Billionaire Elon Musk recently tweeted about the devastating impact he believes it will have upon Western Civilization if we lose Christianity. Journalist and public thinker Douglas Murray has expressed in many formats the positive influence that Christianity (and Judeo-Christian influence in general) has had on Western Europe and the United States. Jordan Peterson is another public intellectual who in his many YouTube interviews has often expressed the conviction that good fruit has come from the Judeo-Christian “tree.”

David Gress, in his classic *From Plato to NATO* recognizes the influence of Christianity and the Christian Church upon Europe and the West’s development. He mentions, for example, the irony that, when the West had finally “won” the Cold War, “The new liberals did not want to hear or tell” that story, preferring to spin their tale of “abstract principles to be enforced in some future never-never land of perfect liberty.” He says that in this, they were like “the children of the French Revolution, who believed that genuine democracy could be realized only beyond the historical conditions that had accompanied the only real democracy the world would ever know – Christianity and the private property of capitalism.” (461) What historical conditions brought about “real democracy”? Christianity! The Church was the Tree of Life that had brought that healing to the West.

Harvard historian David Landes, in his *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, likewise makes many (albeit oblique) references to the influence the Church has had on the development of Western Civilization, its prosperity and culture. He writes of “European exceptionalism,” attributing it to “an amalgam of classical legacy (Greek and Roman), Germanic tribal laws and customs, and Judaic-Christian tradition.” (33) He also mentions how “this Judaic-Christian tradition entered explicitly into the European political consciousness,” and “made Europe very different from civilizations around.” (35) In addition, he writes of “the Church as custodian of knowledge and school for technicians” which “gave rise on monastic estates to remarkable assemblages of powered machinery” which increased productivity and prosperity. He lists three Judeo-Christian values which directly led to the economic development which caused Europe to surge ahead of the rest of the world. (58)

Robert Spencer, in the introduction to his book *Empire of God*, states categorically that, “the Judeo-Christian tradition is the foundation of western civilization.” He further makes the claim (which I have chosen for the title of this chapter), that, “There is no arguing with success. If the United States were to last as long as the Roman Empire, it would have to continue as an independent country, with political and cultural continuity, until the year 2899.” (xiv) In making such a claim, he is attributing the success of that empire to the fact that it became Christian, and therefore, that it was the influence of the Church as a Tree of Life which sustained it.

Indian philosopher and reformer Vishal Mangalwadi in his books, *The Book That Made Your World, This Book Changed Everything*, his audio series, “Must the Sun Set on the West?” as well as in many YouTube lectures and dialogues, presents myriad examples to demonstrate the Church and the Bible’s profound effect upon the West and the rest of the world as well. I was first made aware of him while pastoring a church in Texas. My oldest daughter sent me his audio series, “Must the Sun Set on the West?” I listened, fascinated, as he spoke of the principles which, though they had made the West great, have today been ignored and abandoned.

In *This Book Changed Everything*, he mentions a statue in Switzerland of a man holding a book. Most of the inhabitants of that city he questioned no longer knew who the man was and had no idea what the book might be. He turned out to be a reformer named Vadian, and the book was the Bible. In the rest of the chapter, Mangalwadi explains how the truth of that Book totally transformed this man and his country, though the moderns living there now seem to have forgotten. It was that biblical education which “created Europe’s unique identity and trained Europe’s peculiarly *rational* religions leaders, who laid the foundation of the modern world. Equipping people to love God and neighbor bore fruit in technological, agricultural, medical, legal, and economic outcomes.” (12) The Bible and the Church’s teaching of it “bore fruit.”

The Church is a Tree of Life. This general thesis is not held only by Mangalwadi. It is the inescapable conclusion of many. Innumerable books expound upon the themes Mangalwadi mentioned in the above quote.

For example, Dr. Jay Richard’s book, *Money, Greed, and God* looks at how biblical teaching transformed life in the very practical areas of economic development, business, commerce, and capitalism in Western Europe. Richards explains that before Christian influence came, riches were not so much *produced* as they were *taken*. Empires and kingdoms were like devouring beasts, becoming rich only by enslaving and robbing neighboring peoples. It was through the influence of the Church that European societies began to *create* wealth instead of stealing it. (7) This gradually came about because of such things as the very different perspective Christianity brought to the dignity of work, the division of labor, the promotion of honesty in business dealings, frugality, investment, and the securing of property and intellectual rights. (7) Business, the economy, work, these may seem worldly and unspiritual, but they are essential to life, and biblical teaching has brought healing to them and lifted millions out of poverty. (168)

Filmmaker and author Dinesh D’Souza has made these same points in print (as in his books, *What’s So Great about Christianity, The Big Lie*), and onscreen in some of his film productions.

The Church has been a Tree of Life for the healing of the nations in its efforts to bring physical healing to the world. Christ Himself, of course, was the Great Physician and healer. His early disciple St. Luke, the evangelist and author of a gospel and the Book of Acts, was known as “the beloved physician.” (Col. 4:14) The early disciples went about praying for and healing the sick, and the Book of James exhorts church elders to continue this practice of praying for them and anointing them with oil so they might be healed. (Ja. 5:14, 15)

Early Christian believers were the first in creating hospitals. St. Basil of Caesarea, an ancient city in what is present-day Turkey, started one with over 300 beds in AD 369. Motivated by the love of Christ, Basil and his fellow monks dedicated themselves to serve and heal the sick and infirm.

It was the Church’s expression of love and service to those who were suffering that facilitated its ever-expanding impact on society in the early centuries of its existence. The Roman world of that time was often cruel and inhumane, a society in which the weak and the sick were despised, and abortion, infanticide and poisoning were widely practiced. The Church, motivated by Christ’s example and presence within them, changed these patterns and trends to the point that, by the end of the 4th century, even the emperor known as Julian the Apostate wrote that if the pagans wanted to win back their culture, they would have to learn to care for the sick and poor in the community as well as the Christians were doing. <https://www.cmf.org.uk/resources/publications/content/?context=article&id=827>

Since those early years, the list of contributions to health and healing by Christians has grown. Charlemagne ordered that every cathedral should have a school, a monastery, and a hospital built along with it. Various monastic orders built such hospitals, and the monastic “Rule of Benedict” taught them to tend to the sick as Christ would if He were physically present. (chapter 36, [https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-geneseo-humanities1-1/chapter/the-rule-of-st-benedict-chapters-26- 50/#:~:text=Before%20all% 20things%20and%20 above,that%20they%20are%20being%20served](https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-geneseo-humanities1-1/chapter/the-rule-of-st-benedict-chapters-26-%2050/#:~:text=Before%20all% 20things%20and%20 above,that%20they%20are%20being%20served) )

Many initiatives in health care came about through the Church, as documented in such books as *The Healing Imperative*, by Mike Aquilina, or *Health,* *Healing*, *and the Church’s Mission,* by William M. Swartley.) Monks studied the medicine of their times to better minister to the sick, and some monasteries eventually even provided training for physicians. The Franciscans became famous through their great sacrifice in serving the sick and dying during the Bubonic Plague in Europe. Long is the list of Christians who served in nursing from the orders of nuns like the Sisters of Mercy or the Protestant deaconesses of Kaiserswerth, Germany in the early 1800s, to nurses like Florence Nightengale.

The Church also fostered medical research from the early monasteries through the development of universities and beyond. Anton van Leeuwenhoek, a Dutch Reformed Calvinist, is known as the “father of microbiology” because of his interest and study of the microscopic world, using microscopes he himself had made. Roman Catholic Louis Pasteur pioneered the study of molecular asymmetry, discovered that microorganisms cause fermentation and disease, and originated the process of pasteurization. Quaker Joseph Lister (yes, the mouthwash Listerine is named for him), advanced our knowledge of how illnesses spread and developed aseptic practices of surgery. Physician Thomas Sydenham, “whose Christian convictions shaped his practice of medicine and motivated him to find better treatments to alleviate suffering,” wrote exhortations to other physicians, urging them to carry out their service with consciousness of God. He is known as the “father of English medicine,” and a founder of clinical medicine and epidemiology. <https://www.str.org/w/the-english-hippocrates> Various other Christians are recognized for their breakthroughs in anatomy, in surgery, anesthetics and antibiotics.

One of the founders of Methodism, John Wesley, a preacher rather than a physician, put together a manual of cures he discovered during his rounds as a traveling evangelist. This work was titled, *A Primitive Physick*. As Rodney Stark points out, “It was only as Christian texts and teachings were acted out in daily life that Christianity was able to transform the human experience so as to mitigate misery.” (*The Rise of Christianity* 213)

The Church as the Tree of Life has produced a great variety of good “fruit” through the ages. What, for example, inspired the building of the beautiful cathedrals of Europe, or the development of the fine arts or classical music? Michelangelo, Leonardo de Vinci, Rembrandt, and so many other artists and sculptors we might mention were either directly commissioned by the Church or inspired by biblical themes. Likewise, so much of what today is known as “classical” music, such as that of Beethoven, Bach, Handel, or Mozart was influenced by the Word of God and the Church. Even the musical scale itself was invented by a Benedictine monk named Guido de Arezzo.

Literature has been hugely affected as well. There are so many works of literature that were either 1) the direct result of biblical influence, such as Dante’s *Inferno*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost,* Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 2) are filled with biblical references, such as Wyss’s *The Swiss Family Robinson* or Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, reflecting the predominantly Christian culture of their times, or 3) are infused with biblical language. Shakespeare was so saturated with a biblical worldview, for example, that there are some 1,350 direct references to scripture or scriptural principles in his works. Many have pointed out that without biblical knowledge, it’s impossible to even *understand* his works, and certainly not possible to fully appreciate them. <https://udpress.udel.edu/book-title/biblical-references-in-shakespeares-plays/>

Even our everyday speech today, in what is considered a post-Christian era, remains filled with such biblical references as “to sow the wind and reap the whirlwind,” or referring to a conflict as being a “David and Goliath” matchup, or such expressions as “the blind leading the blind, the handwriting on the wall, a drop in the bucket, or beating swords into plowshares.”

Many have recognized the influence the Church has had upon government. Western democratic societies are certainly not perfect. In fact, someone has said, “democracy is the *worst* form of government in the world, except for all the other forms of government.” But it is so important to recognize that in ancient times, there were only kingdoms and then empires. With some rare exceptions, these were ruled by autocrats who considered themselves gods. The leaders of those times ruled over their people, often ruthlessly, and the wealth and labor of the masses all went to enhance the lifestyle of the ruler or the ruling class. What caused this deeply entrenched system to change, and why did these changes only take place in Western Europe? Why did more representative forms of government arise only there?

Representative democracies, for example, did not arise in the Muslim world, the communist world, or the Hindu or Buddhist worlds. It was the influence of the Bible and the Church that produced this obvious and drastic difference! Reformer John Wycliffe wrote on the flyleaf of his translation of the Bible, “The Bible is for the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” (footnote: Though Americans commonly attribute this to Abraham Lincoln, it was actually Wycliffe who first expressed it. A colleague of Lincoln’s heard about this in a series of lectures and later shared his notes with Lincoln.) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/who-coined-government-of-the-people-by-the-people-for-the-people/2017/03/31/12fc465a-0fd5-11e7-aa57-2ca1b05c41b8_story.html>

The Bible teaches that all are created in the image of God and will give account to Him. It teaches that governments are ordained of God and meant to serve His purposes on earth. The people of ancient Israel were told to choose or elect responsible people from among them to serve their needs. (Deut. 1:13-18) This tradition continued through the Church, especially during and after the Reformation.

Ulrich Zwingli so influenced his town of Zurich, Switzerland that it became “virtually a theocracy.” (*The Church from Age to Age*, gen. ed. Edward Englebrecht, p 456) John Calvin brought biblical principles of governance to Geneva, Switzerland, first, in how the Church itself was governed. This was then extended outwardly to the community. “All sorts of rules and regulations were instituted to make Geneva a saintly city.” (Ibid, 470) Those principles brought a healthy, healing influence to the city and the region which has continued to the present day.

The Bible teaches self-governance, that all people must learn to first rule themselves and maintain order in their families. From that foundation, it also teaches people to choose wise leaders who can rule them in their community, city, state or province, and nation. In the Torah, the “instruction” God gave Moses, we find the principle that rulers were to have authority only with the consent of those they led. (Deut. 1:13-17) David also taught this same idea, along with the concept that all earthly rulers were to think of themselves as representatives of God, ruling under His authority and ultimately accountable to Him. (2 Sam. 23:3) No other ancient people lived under such government or could enjoy such “fruit.”

As the reformers taught these principles, the Church became a Tree of Life in the realm of government, which is why Western Europe and the United States have representative democracies today. No other part of the world developed such governments. Biblical influence is what caused the Puritans to revolt in Britain and change their government there.

Later it was these Puritans, and particularly the early Pilgrim immigrants to New England, who so influenced the founding and the Constitutional government of this nation. This is attested to even by secular authors such as Colin Woodard in his book, *American Nations*. Many Christian authors have done extensive study on this as well, such as Stephen McDowel and Mark Beliles in their book, *America’s Providential History*, and David Barton, founder of the organization known as Wall Builders. The Puritans’ views of ecclesiology, such as their belief that it was the Church’s responsibility to bring in the Millennium, motivated their efforts to influence government and transform their society in a biblical direction.

Perhaps one of the greatest examples of this sort of impact is the story which inspired the hymn and the modern movie, Amazing Grace. Through the efforts of devout Christian men like William Wilberforce (encouraged by Christian leaders like pastor John Newton and others) slavery was abolished and outlawed in Britain. An online article by BBC news puts it this way: “His (Wilberforce’s) Christian faith prompted him to become interested in social reform…” The article goes on to list his many efforts in a variety of spheres to 'renew society,' yet he is best remembered, of course, for his untiring efforts to abolish slavery. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/wilberforce_william.shtml>

Many are unaware that outlawing slavery cost the nation of Britain not only untold millions of pounds as they transitioned their economy from slavery, but also, even the lives of many of their military personnel who died in enforcing the law on the high seas. Though in the beginning, outlawing slavery seemed impossible, it was finally accomplished at great sacrifice by a Christian nation, not by a Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or secular nation. It was the victorious Church, revived through the Great Awakening, that eventually won the battle and brought healing to the terrible, open wound of slavery. Many Christians in America were also involved in this effort. These Christians didn’t have a concept of “private religion” which only affects one’s inner, devotional life. They believed the Church was to disciple nations.

Another area where the Church so greatly impacted the world is in the development of the modern scientific method. I mentioned earlier how missiologist Ralph Winter first opened my eyes to this by highlighting sociologist Rodney Stark’s account of it in *For the Glory of God*. Stark explains why the scientific method itself only arose in 16th and 17th century Christian Europe.

A recent Jordan Peterson podcast on Daily Wire also made this point. While interviewing Oxford mathematician John Lennox. Peterson, a psychologist, said, “it’s incontrovertible that the universities developed out of the monastic centers, and science, rather than opposing Christianity, came out of that mindset. The natural world was intelligible to the inquiring logos, because it was *created* by the Logos. It had an intrinsic logic. In the Christian worldview, studying the natural world would be beneficial to man. It would be comprehensible because created by the Logos who also created man’s mind. It was actually man’s moral obligation to study it.” He went on to say these were “axiomatic statements predicated on the Christian faith and were the preconditions for the emergence of science.”

Though he admitted to wrestling about the truthfulness of this line of thought for several years, he now recognizes it is “incontrovertible” that “one has to believe in the comprehensibility of the natural world to the human logos because The Logos created both. You have to believe in all this to even get the scientific enterprise going.” John Lennox then responded that he’d never seen any conflict between science and faith and recited from memory a quote from C. S. Lewis to the effect that, “Men became scientific because they believed they would find natural law. And they believed in natural law because they believed in a lawgiver.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfI2se3O80Q&t=4093s> Rodney Stark put it this way: “Christianity was *essential* to the rise of science, which is why science was a purely Western phenomenon.” (Stark, How the West Won, 304)

Again, a library of books and other sources make this clear. Most of the earliest and greatest scientists were themselves Christians: Francis Bacon, Louis Pasteur, Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, Robert Boyle, Michael Faraday, Gregory Mendel, Blaise Pascal and the list continues to the present day. Historian Peter Harrison documents this in his *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science,* (1998), and lists a number of other works which make the same point in his bibliography. (see page 5 of same)

This didn’t happen instantly; it took generations, and there were many factors that caused this development. But it grew out of the influence of the Bible and the Church. The resulting scientific revolution brought us into the modern world. The fruit of this “tree” continues to bring life to us, even extending our lifespans. Science provides us with healthier foods, life-saving and enhancing medicines, drugs, and medical equipment, and with pure water, refrigerated meats, more sanitary cities, rivers, and seas, healthier/safer childbirth and infancy, and the energy to protect us from the dangers of climate and disease.

That these and other life-transforming developments came about because of the influence of the Christian Church is documented very thoroughly by many scholars and authors. That the Church of those centuries saw itself as destined to be ultimately victorious in transforming (discipling) nations is also well documented. But as is often said, that was then; we live now, in the 21st century. What mind-set does the Church have today?

*Has Anything Changed?*

The Church has served as a Tree of Life for the Healing of the Nations for centuries whether or not most Christians conceived of themselves and their mission in this way. But we would argue that in fact, the Church has been most fruitful when Christians *did* understand their responsibility to disciple nations and actively sought to carry that assignment out.

Unfortunately, it seems that many today do not have this same mind-set. Of course, there are and always have been many who are openly hostile to Christianity and the Church. The religious leaders of His time even called Christ Himself a blasphemer and Beelzebub (Matt. 10:25; 26:65). They actually saw Him as such a *danger* to His people that they delivered Him over to the Romans to be crucified! (Jn. 11:48) Likewise, His great apostle Paul was called a troublemaker and a “pestilent fellow” who caused problems wherever he went (Acts 24:5, 6). A majority of Jewish society vehemently opposed him, and one Roman official even called him crazy! (Acts 26:24) Decades later, the Roman Tacitus called Christianity “the deadly superstition,” one among “the shocking and shameful things” which flow into the city of Rome. He explains that the Christians were “hated for their crimes” and reports that they were brought to trial for hatred of the human race.” It’s no surprise many still have such attitudes today, for that great adversary of the Church, the devil, hasn’t changed.

<https://brill.com/display/book/9789004428249/BP000008.xml#:~:text=Tacitus%20calls%20Christianity%20%E2%80%9Cthe%20deadly,hatred%20of%20the%20human%20race>.

Though the Church has always faced opposition from within and without, three historical developments have particularly weakened her influence. These developments have made it so that many in the world have not seen the Church as a Tree of Life, and many in the Church have ceased to function as such.

*Mind-set Changes that Have Most Affected the Church*

The first reason many both inside and outside the Church have a problem seeing its positive influence is that there has been a systematic attempt to obscure that influence and revise history. The greatest push-back against the notion of the Church as a Tree of Life began during the so-called “Enlightenment,” an intellectual and philosophical movement that dominated Europe during the 18th century. The more radical element of this movement held a clear bias against the Church and religion, and a desire to be rid of its influences. They created the narrative of history most of us in the West have been taught for generations. Though in more recent times, their version of history has largely been debunked, many still haven’t heard the news, so the propaganda continues to affect all of Western society. What were the tenets of their narrative?

First, they saw history as divided into three rather distinct periods, ancient, medieval, and modern. (Someone has described this as conceiving of time as if it could be divided into distinct bodies, the way water might be divided into lakes, while in reality, time is more like a continually flowing river.) Secondly, they saw Western Civilization as originating with the ancient Greeks, who then passed down what they had developed to the Romans. Third, they saw Christianity as a “pernicious ancient myth” which came to prominence during the Roman Empire, but strangled or stifled that civilization’s progress, leading to its Fall, and creating thereby the so-called “Dark Ages.”

Fortunately, in their view, this Greco-Roman influence was able to reemerge in the Renaissance, (the “rebirth,” of that Greco-Roman heritage), which was followed by “The Enlightenment.” It was only through these developments that the Church’s “yoke” could finally be cast off by the enlightened, antireligious, and truly scientific thinkers of that age, and mankind could begin to be liberated.

The contrast between these views of history is stark. One group sees the Church as the *problem*, holding back civilizational progress until a few liberated non-conformists were able to break the chains and release humanity from the bondage of religious superstition and into the “sunlight” of free and unfettered thinking. It was these free-thinkers who created an “Age of Reason” and scientific inquiry by fighting an uphill battle against religion, which, in their telling, always opposes science and progress. Enlightenment “philosophes” saw history this way, and later writers such as Edward Gibbon and Will Durant perpetuated and popularized this version. In our day, this version of history is seen as “gospel truth” among a wide range of people.

And yet, this narrative is demonstrably false. The Church’s influence has been positive, creating rather than thwarting growth and development. Diligent reexamination of ancient and Medieval sources has resulted in new and better understanding, and more and more scholars are pushing back to debunk this narrative. In our day, there is broad acceptance (in some circles at least) of a completely different history.

For example, David Gress, in his book *From Plato to NATO*, argues very convincingly that in fact, Greek and Roman civilization was nothing like Western civilization in worldview, religion, philosophy, government, or social life. Mexican-American professor Francisco Gil-White makes this same point on his website, The Management of Reality, as well as in many videos on his YouTube channel, and in his writings. Jordan Peterson, in a recent podcast, described this false narrative as a “propaganda campaign” of biased antichristian thinkers. As already mentioned, sociologist Rodney Stark has demonstrated and documented in detail that in fact, it was the influence of the Church that molded and shaped the West, not Greco-Roman civilization.

Matthew Gabriele and David Perry, in their book *The Bright Ages* (2021) confirm that the “narrative” of three distinct ages and a Renaissance or rebirth from 1,000 years of darkness by returning to the “light” of previous ages was a “propaganda campaign” that was “spectacularly successful.” (246) They also confirm Stark’s findings that the so-called “Dark Ages,” is a myth, as the title of their book demonstrates. There never was such a period. It’s just another aspect of the erroneous false narrative we’ve been told, a version of history that just isn’t true! (*The Bright Ages*, p x, xiv, 248)

Nevertheless, the damage has already been done by this propaganda, in that it that has influenced the minds of millions. Many have come to accept clearly erroneous ideas, such as the notion that science and religion are opposed to each other. While researching the contribution the Church has made to healthcare and the medical field, for example, I discovered numerous online articles and websites that clearly portrayed the Church as the *obstacle* to medical science and advances in healthcare, instead of what it really has been, a Tree of Life to alleviate human misery. These false notions still cause many, including even Christians, to think of Christianity as anti-progress, anti-intellect, and anti-modern.

Two other developments have been especially damaging to the concept of the Church as the Tree of Life, both of which began in the middle of the 19th century and developed in the early 20th century. I am referring to two seemingly unrelated issues; the modernism-fundamentalism debate, and the onset of Dispensational theology.

Regarding the first, non-Christian author Colin Woodard, in his book *American Nations*, presents interesting insights, arguing that America was actually founded by very distinct groups with distinct values and agendas. He agrees with many Christian historians in saying that New England was predominantly founded by devoted Christians who sought to forge a Christian nation built upon biblical precepts. These Christians, many of whom were Puritans (though there were other groups as well), had faced many battles in their British homeland as dissenters, and they clearly came to the New World with the idea of building it into a “city on a hill.” Their Christianity was mostly postmillennial (Mathison, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/millennial-maze> ), so they understood they were commanded by God to disciple the nations and transform society to bring Christ back to the earth. Woodard calls their religion “Public Protestantism,” that is, it was to be lived out in the public square and was to influence all aspects of life. (267) According to Woodard, other regions of the country, such as what he calls the Tidewater and the Deep South regions, as well as New York City and environs, held to a more “Private Protestantism,” which had to do with inner beliefs and devotion rather than influencing such spheres of influence as the political realm. (264)

Merging their own religious orientation with the developing narrative of their times (i.e., the supposed conflict between scientific and religious thought), Woodard describes how these New Englanders’ mind-set gradually changed. While retaining their hopes of transforming the world, some began to think of the Church as actually standing in the way of progress. He writes, “Over the course of 250 years, many descendants of the New England divines came to believe the world could not achieve purity if an established church was suppressing dissent, because faith had no meaning if it was coerced. Much of the Yankee elite turned to Unitarianism, an offshoot of the New England church that embraced scientific inquiry and the pursuit of social justice… Harvard was secularized in the 1870s, while the Yankee-run American secular union fought to ban religion from public schools.” (270)

Woodard continues, “The mainline Public Protestant denominations based in these regions accommodated scientific discoveries about the age and formation of the earth and the evolution of life by adopting an allegorical rather than a literal interpretation of scripture. Still, in the early 20th century, it was not at all uncommon in these nations for educated people to argue that churches should wither away altogether to make way for the triumph of scientific reason.” (271)

Woodard says though some expected it, this didn’t happen (in the US at least; it did in Northern Europe) because there was a counter-reaction which is still very strong today, a backlash of “Private Protestantism.” He mentions the famous “Scopes Monkey Trials,” William Jennings Bryant, and the prohibition of the teaching of evolution in the schools. He continues, “the fundamentalists spent the 30s and 40s organizing themselves, building Bible fellowships, Christian colleges, and a network of gospel radio stations. Unnoticed by North America's opinion elite, their numbers grew through the 1950s while membership in mainline Protestant churches declined. Secularism was in retreat as well, its champions fighting only to keep the state, not the people free from religion.” (271)

This development, now known as the “modernism-fundamentalism debate,” is well documented. To the evangelicals, the present-day descendants of the fundamentalists, it might appear that this was indeed a tremendous battle, but one which ended in a big victory for their side. However, this is not really the case. In fact, serious damage was done to the Church in this controversy which few of us have noticed or recognized. As so often happens, whenever there is upheaval and a split occurs among Christians, something is lost due to the separation. Both sides of this division have lost something very crucial and the Church’s impact in the world suffers because of it. Allow me to explain.

Whereas “Private Protestants” kept the very crucial understanding that individuals must personally repent and come into relationship and union with Christ and His Church, what got left behind was what the Puritans and early Church understood, the duty to transform culture, to disciple the whole nation, to interact in the broader world, and not just remain contentedly in their Christian conclaves. As a result, their concept of Church is seen as unconcerned for peoples’ real needs and therefore, irrelevant rather than a Tree of Life, bringing healing.

Meanwhile, the “Public Protestants” retained their sense of responsibility to be active in the public sphere, to work in the legislatures for example, to pass laws, to strive for social justice, to create a better world more in line with God’s principles. What they left behind was the very connection with God through repentance, rebirth, and conformity to biblical principles which could make their efforts in that direction wise and truly workable in the long-term. Thus, their “Church” is a tree uprooted and far from the river of life.

Another “wave” crashed upon the Church and came into prominence just before the modernism-fundamentalism debate erupted, yet its impact continues to this day. Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned how different eschatological views Christians have can sometimes affect their understanding of the Church’s role in the world, and consequently, her effectiveness. It is precisely this sort of phenomenon to which I now refer.

The “wave” which has so affected the Church today is the theological position known as Dispensationalism. This view was first taught and popularized by John Nelson Darby, an Anglo-Irish preacher who reached a very broad audience in both Europe and the US. He made at least five trips to the US in the period from 1862-1877, during which he preached widely. His last days doctrines became very popular. That popularity and acceptance then grew tremendously through a reference Bible created by Cyrus Scofield. This Bible was filled with Scofield’s notes from this dispensational viewpoint, which helped to spread dispensational teaching far and wide.

In more recent times, writers such as Hal Lindsay, Tim LaHaye, and John Walvoord, popular preachers like John Hagee, and seminaries such as Dallas Theological Seminary have established dispensationalism even more firmly. The Left Behind series of books and films were some of the most popular in history. Certain aspects of the dispensational view of the Church and the future are still widely held today among evangelicals in the US and Latin America as well as other parts of the world. (Pastor/author Sam Storms, in his book *Kingdom Come*, wrote that in a Christian bookstore he visited, while the section on prophecy and last days had 117 titles, 102 of them were from the Dispensationalist perspective. (p 43) Storms graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary himself.)

Though a secular author, Colin Woodard understands the impact of this doctrinal position and mentions it in his book, writing, “Private Protestants…believed the world was inherently corrupt and sinful, particularly after the shocks of the Civil War. Their emphasis wasn't on the ‘social gospel,’ an effort to transform the world in preparation for Christ’s coming, but rather on personal salvation, pulling individual souls into the lifeboat of right thinking before the Rapture swept the damned away. Private Protestants had no interest in changing society…” (*American Nations*, 264)

Tom Woods, a popular libertarian writer and podcaster also has noted its impact, dedicating a whole podcast to a discussion of it with a Lutheran theologian. <https://tomwoods.com/ep-2413-bad-theology-israel-the-rapture-and-the-end-times/>

Dispensationalism affects the Church’s effectiveness because it generally teaches that the Church is destined to gradually lose the battle for culture and society as darkness takes over. Therefore, Christians shouldn’t expect to have much impact in the world. Rather, they should understand that things are destined to go from bad to worse as Satan and his minions gradually establish more and more control.

Dispensationalist Thomas Ice has compared this “Church Age” in which we are currently living to the first coming of Christ. In His first coming, Christ was rejected and crucified, and through His apparent defeat, that is, through His death, He bought our redemption. Likewise, Ice maintains that in the current time, the Church is destined for humiliation and suffering. We will bear witness, some even through martyrdom, but we should not expect to be “victorious” in the sense of changing this present evil world. As Israel rejected their Messiah in His first coming, even so, the world will reject the Church and only a few will be saved. (Lu. 13:23, 24) <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1073&context=pretrib_arch>

Our argument here is that those who see the Church as gradually being marginalized and overcome by the Antichrist’s reign tend to be more passive and inward-focused, while those who understand that the Church must be victorious and reign in life through Christ tend to focus outwardly and seek to transform the world. Many who embrace Dispensationalism do not actively seek to disciple the nations, for that, in their view, is a hopeless enterprise. Rather, they seek only to rescue individuals *out* of the nations by preaching a gospel of individual salvation. This way of looking at things has drastically hindered the Church’s effectiveness.

*Discipling the Nations, the Church’s Mandate*

As mentioned earlier, the idea that the Church is to disciple nations comes from a literal translation of the Greek text of Matthew 28:19, “Go into all the world and disciple all nations,” (μαθητευσατε παντα τα εθνη). This is quite different from simply seeking to disciple individuals *from* all nations. Matthew Henry, in his commentary on the whole Bible, says the meaning here is clear: “do your utmost to make the nations Christian nations;” writing further that the nations should be made…subjects of Christ’s Kingdom…scholars in His school, and members of His army, fighting against the powers of darkness.

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Christians with this understanding of the Great Commission seek to actually disciple or educate whole nations, teaching, influencing, and molding them to live in obedience to Christ’s commands. As this is carried out, it will bring the nations out of darkness into light. It will bring healing to them.

Jesus came to disciple the nations. Some find that hard to believe, since He only ministered to His own Jewish people. But the fact is, He began with His own nation because Israel had been undergoing a process of discipleship since Moses first brought them out of slavery in Egypt approximately 1400 years before Christ’s advent. Naturally, He began there, calling individuals from that “discipled” nation as the first members of His new covenant people, the Church. After intensely discipling them for 3 ½ years, He then commissioned them to disciple *all other nations*.

These early disciples carried out that commission and spread Christ’s message about His Kingdom into the whole world. For a variety of reasons, some known, others unknown, they seem to have had their greatest impact in Western Europe. That is, the Church was most victorious and most clearly seen as the Tree of Life in that part of the world. The greatest proof we have, therefore, that Christ’s Church *can* disciple nations is the history of Western Europe and the United States. To again quote Robert Spencer, “There is no arguing with success.” (xiv)

It is our responsibility now to understand this history, recognize and shake off these mind-sets that have hindered or neutralized us, and renew our commitment to carry out the assignment Jesus gave us.

While we recognize the difficulties inherent in our commission, it might help us overcome any negativity if we realize that the nations *are* *already* being “discipled” by the devil and the world, and not the Church. They are being discipled into postmodernism, relativism, and secular humanism. They are being taught that we are products of blind, undirected evolution and are mere physical beings without any purpose other than what we invent for ourselves, and without any concept of absolute truth to live by. This “discipleship” is occurring in our public schools and universities, through social media, through the arts and entertainment people partake of, and in countless other ways. Others have been “discipling” the nations with these harmful and false teachings for generations. Can it really be the case that the Church has nothing better to offer them?!

The Church is not perfect. When we look within, it’s easy to feel that we are not up to this huge task. But the truth is, we *are* the only hope there is for the world. We are the Tree of Life Christ has planted to heal these nations. The river of the water of life we offer flows from God’s throne within us. It is not we ourselves that we preach. We proclaim Christ as the true Source of all blessing. (2 Cor. 4:5) But we must realize that His plan A to bring this life to the world *is* the Church. There is no plan B! The sooner we realize this and align ourselves with it, the better for all concerned.

We call ourselves the victorious church because Romans 8:37 says in all the tribulations and problems of this world and life, we who are believers are “more than conquerors through the One who loves us.” According to 1 John 5:4, everyone born of God “overcomes the world.” In the short epistles to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2 & 3, Jesus speaks His promises to “whosoever overcomes” or is victorious. Revelation 12:11 says, “They overcame him (the devil) by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” NIV Our victory was won by Christ, but it is manifested and made visible when we recognize that we share it and testify to it. It is made manifest if we don’t love our own lives in this world to the point we would shrink from the confrontation and the battle (and perhaps even martyrdom) required to bring this victory to the world.

We’ve seen how the Church brought healing to the nations of the ancient and Medieval worlds. Like over two billion believers on earth, I have personally witnessed this in my own life and family. In my immediate family of myself and four siblings, there was drug and alcohol abuse, there were two divorces, and two of my sisters attempted suicide more than once. This motivated our mother to seek answers. She found them in Christ and began to grow through discipleship in the Church. Two years later, my father also became a believer. Then they both prayed for us, their children, and one by one, we were all saved.

Since my own conversion and “healing,” I have been privileged to see the fruit of this “tree” in places all around the world. In Cambodia, I visited a center where former prostitutes were being discipled, so that they could escape the sex trade and live lives of dignity. The Church there is bringing healing to these women and their families. At a Christian maternity center in the Philippines, then later, in the streets of the town where it is located, I saw this same healing ministry. In Kazakhstan, Peru, and Ecuador, I have visited drug rehab centers where the Church is bringing healing unavailable by any other means. In a variety of jails and prisons around the world, I have seen Christians working to change lives and bring healing to inmates. As I’ve traveled and been involved with missions organizations in many countries, I’ve seen the healing influence of The Tree of Life, the Church, all over the world.

This is all quite real and concrete to me. It is not theory. Just yesterday, as I am writing, I encountered women in front of a Sam’s store in my home state of Florida, raising money for a home for healing of women battling addictions. The very same day, I was in contact with a woman from Mexico working with a foundation that brings healing to victims of sex-trafficking. These are very up-to-date and real examples of the Church’s healing ministry.

It goes without saying that this is never carried out in a vacuum, so that the influence is all positive without anything negative, consisting only of steps forward, with none taken in a backwards direction. Like all things human, the Church can and has been corrupted, contaminated, weakened, and misled. It has at times advanced and performed its function well, bringing healing. At other times, it has been complacent, has abdicated its position and function, has gotten things wrong. At times we overwhelm our enemy; at other times, he pushes back, and overwhelms us, temporarily. In the present day, the Church is still advancing in many parts of the world. But in the West, her effectiveness has been hindered by fierce opposition without, and wrong thinking within. In some points, we have faltered and ceased to be the Tree of Life we’re called to be. Some have even allowed themselves to be so deceived as to join the other side.

It is our sincere hope that this book might play a part in helping the Church rise up victorious again. Our prayer is that she might have the right “self-image,” and be reminded of her purpose and calling. May this book help Christians see what has hindered them, shake those influences off, and once more boldly advance to disciple the nations as Jesus commanded us to. May the Church be continually reformed and revived so that she may bear good fruit, the “fruit of the righteous,” and continue to be a Tree of Life for the healing of the nations.

Notes: *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science*, Peter Harrison, Cambridge University Press, 1998  Harrison lists the following works which make roughly the same point as his book on page 5: Dorothy Stimson, “Puritanism and the New Philosophy in 17th century England,” *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 3 1935, 321-4, R. F. Jones, *Ancients and Moderns*, (St. Louis, 1936): Robert Merton, ‘Puritanism, Pietism, and Science,’ *The Sociological Review*:28 (1936) 1-30; ‘Science, Technology, and Society in Seventeenth-Century England,’ *Osiris* 4(1938) 360-632. For discussions of the thesis see G. A. Abraham, ‘Misunderstanding the Merton Thesis,’ *Isis* 74 (1983) 368-87; Charles Webster (ed.) The Intellectual Revolution of the Seventeenth Century (London:Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); R. Hooykass, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 135-60; P.M. Ratansi, ‘The Social Interpretation of Seventeenth-Century Science,’ in *Science and Society 1600-1900,* ed. Peter Matthias (Cambridge University Press, 1972) pp. 1-32; Richard Greaves, ‘Puritanism and Science,’ *JHI* 30 (1969) 345-68; Douglas Kelmsley, ‘Religious Influences in the Rise of Modern Science,’ *Annals of Science* 24 (1968) 199-226; Leo Salt, ‘Puritanism, Capitalism, Democracy, and the New Science,’ American Historical Review 73 (1967) 18-29; Charles Webster, The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform 1626-1660 (London: Duckworth, 1975), see esp. pp. 484-520. For a more recent restatement, see Webster, ‘Puritanism, Separatism, and Science,’ in David Lindberg and Ronald Numbers (eds.) *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (University of California Press, 1986), pp. 192-217. Further discussions may be found in John Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 82-116; Richard Kroll’s introduction to *Philosophy, Science and Religion in England 1640-1700*, ed. Richard Kroll, Richard Ashcroft, and Perez Zagorin (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1-28; Lotte Mulligan, ‘Puritanism and English Science: A Critique of Webster,’ *Isis* 71 (1980) 456-69; Elizabeth Einstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 2 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1979), II, 636-708. Also see numbers of these journals devoted to the topic: *Isis* 79 (1988), and *Science in Context 3* (1989).