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Lawrence believes that the driving force propelling the church into irrelevance is its propensity reduce Jesus. Deeply researched and comprehensively sourced, *Editing Jesus*, explores the 8 ways the Jesus of the contemporary church has been edited to fit the spirit of the age.

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The Comingling of Kingdoms

“My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom . . .”

JOHN 18:36

I'm at a small gathering of academic and ministry leaders involved in a nationwide research project. Our focus is on the forces working for and against “thriving” churches in the US. “Against” appears to be winning the day.

During a break from the presentations, I join a clump of people debriefing the last session. Someone brings up a common cause for concern—the rapid “decline” of the church, not just in attendance, but in respect and esteem. “I’ve been wrestling with this,” he says. “So how do you think this all got started?” There’s a pregnant pause, then an academic dean in the group offers a one-word response: “Constantine.” Around that little circle every person is nodding their head. They are tracking the trouble facing the twenty-first-century church back to a fourth-century Roman emperor who’s often revered as a saint.

After his conversion to Christ, likely a couple of years into his reign as emperor, Constantine legalized Christian practice and signed a declaration returning church properties to their original owners. It was the first in a series of aggressive reboots in Rome's centuries-old persecution of Christians. Constantine's decisions "completely altered the relationship between the church and the imperial government, thereby beginning a process that eventually made Christianity the official religion of the empire."¹ By starting down this slippery slope, setting the stage for the comingling of the Christian faith with the political levers of Rome, the converted emperor unwittingly invited a cancer into the church. Secular political power that co-opts the language and missional purpose of the church—or vice versa—is prescriptive. It intends to prescribe-by-decree a faith that is meant to be freely invited and freely chosen. And it inextricably links political power with religious belief and convictions.

Jesus does not coerce—He invites us to “eat and drink” Him (a metaphor for intimacy) in John 6, then respond in the freedom that real love requires: “Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him” (v. 56). I married my wife not because I was coerced into intimacy with her, but because I freely chose to commit to her. But the Constantinian Heresy attempts to systematize our relationship with God, using the levers of political power and government to manufacture an “arranged marriage” characterized by a mandated morality. “Constantinian” simply reflects the comingling of state and church first set in motion during the Constantinian dynasty.² And a “heresy” is “any belief or practice that explicitly undermines the gospel.”³

A mandated faith-life undermines the gospel of Jesus and does not lead to intimate relationship with God—this is the “end game” for Jesus' mission on earth, and what He sacrificed His life to restore. Eugene Peterson, in a fatherly letter to his pastor son, calls out the leverage we use to dictate Christian values: “When the missional ‘how’ is severed from the worship ‘who and what,’ the missional life no longer is controlled and shaped by Scripture and the Spirit. And so mission becomes shrill, dependent on constant ‘strategies’ and promotional schemes. . . . But if we are going to live the

Jesus life, we simply have to do it the Jesus way—he is, after all, the Way as well as the truth and life.”⁴

The way of Jesus doesn’t preclude working through political conduits to advocate for justice, peace, moral standards, and human rights. But it never attempts to take over the levers of political control to establish by force or decree a Christian culture. It never elevates political power above the power of God.

The Idols of Nation-State Worship

How did Jesus respond to power, and how did He wield power Himself? Broadly, the answer to both questions is: *not the way we do*.

From the fourth century to this moment, God’s people have been tantalized by the promise of the Constantinian comingling of religious practice and political power. As a consequence, to use Peterson’s language, our missional “how” has been severed from the “who and what” we are worshipping. We are lured by a crafty deceit—that permission to propagate the mission and character priorities of the Christian faith *by any means possible* is consistent with the mission and character practices of Jesus.

Psychologist and clergy-abuse specialist Diane Langberg says: “I think in our country, we as Christians have ceased to think that the most important thing that we do is be like Christ, who serves the least of these. That’s not what we’ve been doing. We’ve been garnering fame and numbers and money and alignment with secular power that makes us look good. And baptizing the whole darn thing.”⁵

To undergird and sanction this church/state marriage, a majority of Christians in the US have believed the nationalist myth that America is a “Christian nation” founded by committed followers of Jesus. Yes, representatives in the Continental Congress opened their first gathering in prayer—but who were those prayers directed to? John Adams opposed the motion to begin in prayer “because we were so divided in religious Sentiments . . . [and we] could not join in the same Act of Worship.”⁶ Historian David L. Holmes notes that many of the Founding Fathers of

the United States were “Unitarians, Deists, and secularists”⁷ who were “sympathetic” to Christianity, but not particularly followers of Jesus.

Yes, representatives declared that a “spirit of universal reformation among all ranks and degrees of our citizens” would “make us a holy, that so we may be a happy people.”⁸ And we point to the early appointment of a Congressional chaplain, and Congress’s decision to sponsor publication of a Bible, as religious cornerstones in our foundation.⁹ But Thomas Jefferson famously edited away all accounts of the supernatural in his copy of the Gospels and did not believe in the divinity of Jesus.¹⁰ And many Congressional representatives, according to Holmes, often opposed the message of the Bible and, like Jefferson, denied the divinity of Jesus.¹¹

The Founding Fathers forged a vision for a nation based on Judeo-Christian ethics, but not on the person of Jesus. The Constitution these American patriots created is a governing marvel, admired by the world. Its genius is balancing freedom with accountability, but it is not sacred Scripture. It was written by people who elevated European philosophers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the Baron de Montesquieu, not by people who elevated the teachings of Jesus above all others.¹² And it is not the foundation stone for a New Jerusalem.

The practice of nation-state worship encourages fealty to false idols, just as the people of God have been tempted to do through history.

We vote for the laws and lawmakers that best represent our values as Christians, but we don’t entrust political power as the hope of our salvation or the lever that transforms hearts.

Isaiah prophesies that the Messiah will carry the government “on his shoulders” (Isa. 9:6). The Hebrew word translated “government” means “dominion, power, or sovereignty through legal authority.” The Trinity invests the Son with the responsibility for redemptive “governmental” impact into the world—the heavyweight mission to “make all things new.” We are dependent on the “government” of Jesus, not human government, to transform the hearts of people, which transforms culture.

When we wrest this mission from Him, shifting the weight of transformation to political control, it's quickly obvious that our shoulders aren't big enough. When political structures and political strategy and political goals drive our faith, the weight of governing collapses our weak shoulders.

It's not whether we vote Republican or Democrat or Independent, it's whether we have an idolatrous relationship with human governmental control. We vote for the laws and lawmakers that best represent our values as Christians, but we don't entrust political power with the hope of our salvation or the lever that transforms hearts. And we don't expect coercive tactics to catalyze moral reconstruction in the hearts of people. After reading several biographical books about Martin Luther King Jr., pastor and author Dr. Timothy Keller was struck by the civil rights leader's refusal to use coercive power in his struggle for justice:

[King wrote] you can turn your firehoses on us, you can beat us, and you can take us to jail. And we're not going to spit on you. We're not going to speak to you in disdainful language. We're going to love you, but we're going to disobey your unjust laws until you change them. People more conservative than Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The idea of civil disobedience is terrible," but people who were more liberal than Martin Luther King Jr. said, "This idea of nonviolence is crazy." [But King] was saying, "I want the results of the king without the methods of the king—the methods of coercion and power. . . . Likewise, to be followers of the Servant, we [pursue] the results of the king without the methods of coercion and power."¹³

So we ask ourselves, "Which is sovereign in my life—my political ideals or my submission to the values and priorities of Jesus, already clearly defined in Scripture?" The distinction is really about our posture toward ideology—are we worshipping (and therefore submitting to) the unedited

The distinction is really about our posture toward ideology—are we worshipping (and therefore submitting to) the unedited Jesus, or our strongly held political beliefs that require us to edit Him?

Jesus, or our strongly held political beliefs that *require* us to edit Him? When the two are in conflict, which one “wins”?

When we refuse the Constantinian approach—a comingling of religious faith and political control—we can honor our political beliefs but trust Jesus to carry the weight of transformation in the world. We humbly subjugate our preferences to the lordship of Jesus, rather than editing Him to fit our preferences. And if we refuse, however subtly, we have (by definition) stopped following Him.

The Church Regnant and the Church Remnant

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, Yahweh reminds us: “My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts. . . . And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8–9). Nowhere is this contrast more obvious than in the way so many contemporary Christians think about power and practice it in the real world. We have invested ourselves in political salvation narratives, on both the right and the left, because we believe real power is best expressed through human systems of control, not through the lifestyle of submission, sacrifice, and Spirit-dependence Jesus taught and modeled. For example, most Americans think the founders intended for the US to be a prescribed “Christian nation,” and almost half think it *should be*. This belief opens wide the door to the excesses of those who believe in Christian governance, not merely Christian influence.¹⁴

Just two days before the 2020 US election, in a charged cultural atmosphere frothed by division, *Christianity Today* president Timothy Dalrymple published a widely talked-about opinion piece highlighting the two approaches to power prevalent in the church—the “Church Regnant” and the “Church Remnant.” Those who identify with the first camp, says Dalrymple, “place a higher value on the acquisition and use of political power. . . . Winning political power means protecting the Christian way of life and sowing seeds of truth and goodness into culture, and thus bringing God’s blessing upon the land. Losing political power

means the culture spirals into deepening immorality and untruth, eroding the foundations of society and leading to greater suffering for all.” In contrast, for those in the Church Remnant, “the kingdom of God is less about the acquisition of power than the divestment of power, laying down our rights and privileges as Christ did (Philippians 2) in order to serve the powerless. In other words, Christendom is not the kingdom, and representing Christendom is not the same as representing Christ.”¹⁵

Those who push the priorities of the Church Regnant intend to use human systems of control to force an outcome that God seems reluctant to bring about. For example, when Christian morals and ethics are commonly rejected in the culture, those in the Church Regnant believe they can reverse that momentum by mandating Christian governance. So a change in who governs, and how they govern, is the answer.

People who invest in this strategy tacitly fall into the mistake made by Abraham in the Old Testament. Remember, Abraham’s defining act of disobedience is his impatience over the promises of God—he’s been told he will have a family and land, but late into his life he has neither. So, with his wife Sarai, he decides to circumvent God’s delayed provision and exercise human control over the promised outcome, “going into” Sarai’s Egyptian maid Hagar to produce the heir God has not delivered (Gen. 16).

Likewise, many in the church today believe it’s imperative that we “birth” a Christianized culture using the “Hagar” of political control. For example, those who identify as the most active churchgoers, holding to a “literal” interpretation of the Bible, believe the US government should “advocate Christian values,” “fund faith-based organizations,” and “allow prayer in schools.”¹⁶ Christian cominglers don’t want the government to broadly advance religious beliefs and practices through political control

We believe real power is best expressed through human systems of control, not through the lifestyle of submission, sacrifice, and Spirit-dependence Jesus taught and modeled.

unless, of course, those religious beliefs are solely Christian. “Allowing” prayer in school is a misnomer, for example—no one is preventing people from praying in school. But supporters of prayer in school want teachers and administrators to have a green light to lead students in Christian prayer, though the student population is diverse along the religious continuum. In effect, that means a Christian teacher praying a Christian prayer can require all kids to participate (or at least be exposed to) a Christian faith practice. There’s just no precedent in Jesus for this kind of mandated participation. The opposite is true—Jesus invites but never forces faith practices. Why? Because followers *choose* to follow. They are not *required* to follow.

Some in the Church Regnant advocate for mandated Christian practices because they are weary of God’s slow-moving reclamation project among humankind. If people will not wake up and adopt God’s values and priorities, they argue, then we need to force what He seems unwilling to force. This is the subtle shift into the Constantinian Heresy—and it’s what makes its contemporary form, the Christian nationalism ideology, also a heresy.

According to a definitive study on the prevalence of this ideology among Americans, about a third of the population are fully or partially supportive of it,¹⁷ and that percentage skyrockets to two-thirds among white evangelical Protestants.¹⁸ It is, simply, a power-grab camouflaged by religious language and symbols—an ideology that assumes its foundation in the person of Jesus, but does not reflect the way of Jesus.

So, to resolve the dissonance between Christian-y tactics and the model of Jesus, the Church Regnant bends the words and ways and symbols of Jesus to support a worldview that *seems* Christian but is actually secular (or humanist) at its core—“the Kingdom of God without the King,” as Australian pastor and cultural philosopher Mark Sayers describes it.¹⁹ It’s the advancement of an ideal Christian/political culture with an edited, reduced Jesus as its figurehead, but not as its Lord.

Tim Smith, formerly on the pastoral staff of Mars Hill Church in Seattle and eyewitness to the rampant abuse of religious power that led to

the church's spectacular implosion, says: "If Jesus came today in America, we would do to Him the same thing that Jewish leaders did back in His day, because we have a counterfeit version of the faith based on other values than what Jesus has. And if Jesus showed up, He wouldn't keep us in power the way we want to be, and we would kill him. . . . The Church of His name has just become so distorted and deceived, and has adopted so many values that are contrary to Him. We need to follow Jesus—[that's] what we need to do."²⁰

The Church as a "Political Tool"

In the spring of 2022, Andy Stanley, pastor of arguably the most influential evangelical church in North America (Atlanta's North Point Community Church), grabbed headlines after this incendiary quote from his book *Not in It to Win It* surfaced: "The moment our love for or concern for country takes precedence over our love for people in our country, we are off mission. When saving America diverts energy, focus, and reputation away from saving Americans, we no longer qualify as the ekklesia [church]. We're merely political tools. A manipulated voting demographic. A photo op. . . . We give up the moral and ethical high grounds."²¹

Stanley is merely restating theological orthodoxy ("You shall have no other gods before Me"—Ex. 20:3 NASB), but it's headline material because he's speaking from "the belly of the beast." He's a lightning-rod evangelical leader exposing a twisted departure from the historic values and priorities of his own movement. He is firing a warning flare over the heads of those who have repurposed the way of Jesus into a political power narrative.

Researcher and political scientist Ryan Burge says 40 percent of those who identify as "evangelical" actually attend church once a year or less.²² If we use churchgoing as a surface marker for commitment, this means "evangelical" has devolved from a statement of belief into a political label, propagating the cancer brought on by the Constantinian Heresy. And that cancer is eating away at the church's mission, passion, and purpose—undermining Jesus' prayer that His body would "be one as we are one" (John 17:22). The apostle Paul knew the church would be vulnerable to this attack, especially

if its “immune system” was weakened by religious propaganda and division: “But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another” (Gal. 5:15).

While the source and symptoms of the comingling cancer are overt on the Christian right, the left has its own more subtle and dispersed expression. Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary, says: “Progressive Christians feel very strongly about the central idea of the fundamental equality of human beings, the preciousness of the Earth and economic justice—that we all deserve to be treated equally and to have the conditions for our flourishing as the baseline starting point for our lives together.”²³

These theological pillars have seeped into the Christian left’s political positions on abortion, socialism, immigration policy, LGBTQ rights, wealth disparity, and climate change. The rhetoric around these issues, like the rhetoric coming from the evangelical right, promotes only those aspects of Jesus that fit a certain political salvation narrative. Jesus engages people with shocking kindness and inclusion, but He’s also brusque to some (“It isn’t right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs”—Mark 7:27) and exclusionary to many (“I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me’”—Matthew 7:23 NKJV). (More on the progressive wing of the church and its aversion to the hard edges of Jesus in chapter 2.)

For those who’ve been swept up into this heresy, salvation is a party platform that uses Jesus as a means to an end. Russell Moore says: “When ‘winning’ is the primary objective, one can justify any allegiance, immorality, or idolatry as ‘necessary’ to achieve the goal. Can that sometimes produce political or social ‘wins’? Yes—in the same way that an embezzling banker can get rich or an adulterous spouse can have sexual pleasure. But what is at the end of all that? What happens to *you*?”²⁴ Jesus has told us what will happen when we twist the truth about Him to get what we want: “What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?” (Mark 8:36).

In decoupling itself from the priorities and practices of Jesus, the Church Regnant has cut itself off from the lifeblood of morality. A branch cut from a tree will still look like a branch, even (temporarily) have the

feel of a living thing, but over time, with its source of life gone, it will shrivel into deadness. We don't "win" anything when we use religious language to leverage our political goals and excise the Spirit, value system, and intentions of Jesus from the equation.

When the Barna Group asked a cross-section of Americans if they could think of a *single* positive contribution the Christian church has made to society, one-quarter said they couldn't (even though nearly every outreach to the poor and needy in our society can be traced back to Christian roots).²⁵ Much of America suspects that our shining "city on a hill" is morally bankrupt—the sobering consequence of a church that has forgotten its mission and ignored Jesus' clear example of political restraint. Abraham's act of disobedience with Hagar leads to enmity, betrayal, war, and division—and we are now experiencing a church whose fixation on secular power has led to enmity, betrayal, war, and division. Those who have woven political power into the threads of the gospel say they are Christians, but they are not following Jesus. Because a passion for Christendom is not the same as a passion for Christ.

David French, the respected conservative political commentator and *New York Times* columnist, says: "To be sure, some of the best people in public life proclaim the name of Christ. But so do some of the worst. While some of the most important fights for justice have been led by Christians . . . some of the most destructive political and cultural forces have been loudly and proudly led by Christians as well."²⁶

How Jesus Relates to Political Power

After the feeding of the five thousand on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the astonished crowd works itself into a political frenzy over Jesus: "Surely this man is the Prophet we've been expecting" (John 7:40). And Jesus, recognizing the political forces building like a tidal wave about to wash over Him, and aware the crowd intends to install him as king by force, "slips away in the hills by himself."

With the prospect of a political/religious comingling movement laid before Him, Jesus *escapes*. Why? Because the kingdom He is inaugurating

is focused on influencing the heart, not secular levers of power. He will transform culture by transforming individuals—inviting them into the beauty of His presence, fueling their passion, then scattering them like salt to season the world.

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus tells the people of God. “But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor?” (Matt. 5:13). Salt is a small thing that alters the experience of a big thing. The followers of Jesus cannot assimilate with the ways of the world without losing their ability to season. Jesus’ yeast metaphor works the same way: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman used in making bread,” He says. “Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough” (Matt. 13:33).

Those who support and further the goals of God’s kingdom comingled with the kingdom of political power—who advocate for a government-mandated adherence to Christian religious expression—are trying to make salt the meal, not the seasoning. They are baking a loaf of bread using yeast as the main ingredient. The church is meant to be a redemptive outpost in the wider culture, never the dominant “ingredient” in that culture. Salt remains small, though its power to season is outsized and profound. That’s the point of Jesus’ reference. He could have said the church is meant to be the “flour” of every culture—the primary ingredient. But He doesn’t. When we try to mandate adherence to the values of “the Kingdom of Heaven,” making it the dominant ingredient, it’s no longer salt used to season. It’s no wonder the wider culture is gagging on what the Christian nationalist ideology is serving up—comingling the kingdom of God with the kingdom of political power is like stuffing its mouth with salt.

On trial before Pilate, hours away from His death on a cross, Jesus says: “My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). The leaders of earthly kingdoms fight for power, consolidate power, and scheme for political survival. Jesus does none of that. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus rebukes Peter’s panicked attempt to defend Him. Peter swings his sword at the armed mob that comes to arrest Jesus, cutting off the ear of the high

priest's slave (John 18:10). If Jesus intends to lead a political insurrection, Peter's bravado will be hailed as the spark that set off a revolution. Instead, at a moment when the need for expected forms of power and control seem obvious, Jesus rejects them. And He restores the harm caused by Peter's attempted rebellion by healing the man's ear.

A kingdom "not of this world" does not use the sword of secular power to defend or advance its mission by force—in his rebuke of Peter, Jesus says: "Put your sword back into its sheath. Shall I not drink from the cup of suffering the Father has given me?" (John 18:11). Jesus is rebuking his friend for trying to leverage human power to further the kingdom of God, rather than accepting the self-sacrificing path of transformation that He is determined to walk.

Before Constantine, the church was mercilessly persecuted and the "cost of discipleship" was real, not rhetorical. The followers of Jesus drank from His same "cup of suffering." And, under this great duress, the gospel of Jesus spread throughout the world, upending every institution from the inside out. John Ortberg writes: "Normally when someone dies, their impact on the world immediately begins to recede. But . . . Jesus' impact was greater a hundred years after his death than during his life; it was greater still after five hundred years; after a thousand years his legacy laid the foundation for much of Europe; after two thousand years He has more followers in more places than ever."²⁷ All of this happened because the church operated as salt and yeast in the wider culture. But the attempted Christian elevation of secular power over the inside-out transformation of the human heart undermines this salty kingdom-of-God strategy—a defeat masquerading as victory.

In Iran, for so long a notoriously harsh environment for those who publicly follow Jesus, more Persian people have come to faith in the last ten years than in the last ten centuries. For scores of Iranian Christians living under a repressive regime that punished and martyred believers, drinking from the "cup of suffering" wiped away the circumstantial rewards those in the West expect to receive from living the Christian life. What's left is the beauty of Jesus Himself. David Yeghnazar, a leader in the "underground" Iranian church, describes what he saw in the courageous leaders who first

risked their lives to share their faith in the face of persecution: “First of all they were deeply in love with Jesus, that was very evident. . . . If you really want to build something, first of all, it starts with loving Jesus. They had an absolute conviction that no matter what the opposition was, no matter what the obstacle was, that He could make a way. . . . That kind of faith that comes out of love, really.”²⁸

Political power could never leverage the kind of cultural change that has accompanied this improbable Christian renewal—put another way, spiritual revivals are never catalyzed by political control. Instead, in Iran, average people are simply sharing the love they are experiencing with their average friends and neighbors. That’s how the church experiences exponential growth—one by one and inside-out is the Jesus way.

And so the way of the unedited Jesus invites us, simply, to sheath our swords and reject political power as a controlling means to the kingdom of God’s redemptive ends. The Church Regnant is not just the least-preferred option between two factions of the church; its priorities and methodology are *never* modeled by Jesus.

So, back to the questions that frame the beginning of this chapter: *How does Jesus respond to power, and how does He wield power?* Here’s a thumbnail guide, drawn from just three encounters Jesus has with religious and secular power in Matthew 17, John 8, and John 18.

Jesus Engaging Power	Jesus Responding to Power	Jesus Exercising Power
<p>In John 18:28-40, soldiers take Jesus to the Roman governor, Pilate, to be “tried” and judged for execution. Pilate asks if He is “king of the Jews,” but Jesus turns the tables and asks if this is his own question, or if others have “planted” it. He confirms to Pilate that He is a king, but His kingdom “is not an earthly kingdom.” And He testifies to Pilate that He “came into the world to testify to the truth,” but Pilate responds, “What is truth?”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus respects established authorities and power structures but reminds those who entrust themselves to secular power that there is a superseding authority that transcends them all. • Jesus is not impressed with power or leveraged by the threat of power. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus invites all to participate in His mission, emphasizing that His “currency” is tied to the level of trust we exercise, not the thickness of our power-wallet. • Jesus is secure in His power, and therefore free to expose the insecurities that are the true source of most secular/human expressions of power: “Is this your own question, or did others tell you about me?”

Jesus Engaging Power	Jesus Responding to Power	Jesus Exercising Power
<p>In John 8:1–11, a woman is set up by a group of conspiring religious leaders so that she is caught in the act of adultery. They bring her to Jesus to test whether He will give His stamp of approval to her execution, as Jewish law requires. Instead, Jesus subverts their plan with: “Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus discerns between expressions of power that uphold the values of the kingdom of God and those that are corrupt—He embraces the first and calls out the second. • Jesus is an expert at removing the fuel rod from the power-reactors of culture. When secular power is building toward coerced religious goals, He siphons away the energy that is animating those sources of power. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus reorders the established authority structures by targeting the heart instead, elevating the power of the heart above the power of the fist. • Jesus surfaces and celebrates the intrinsic dignity of all, stripping Himself of the trappings of power to remove any impediments to relationship.
<p>In Matthew 17:24–27, the Temple tax collectors show up where Jesus and Peter are staying in Capernaum, asking if they have paid the tax they owe for the Temple’s upkeep. Jesus instructs Peter to go to the shore and catch a fish—in the fish’s mouth will be a coin that pays what they both owe.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus upends surface expressions of power, intentionally modeling what’s <i>actually</i> powerful. • Jesus responds to coercive, denigrating expressions of power in the “opposite spirit” of those He’s engaging, undermining the foundations of that power. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus undermines the exclusivity of privilege, deconstructing hierarchies of power and flattening assumptions about roles and responsibilities. • Jesus does not usurp secular power; He outwits it, redirecting it for His own purposes.

To reiterate, the way of Jesus doesn’t preclude working through political conduits to advocate for justice, peace, moral standards, and human rights. But it never attempts to take over the levers of political control to establish by force or decree a Christian culture. It never elevates political power above the power of God. In fact, we have many examples of the Trinity thwarting and intentionally undermining human foundations of strength in those who intend to advance His mission by force.

In the Old Testament story of Gideon (Judg. 7), God taps a most unlikely leader to lead a ragtag, underwhelming army against an alliance of enemies led by the ruthless Midianites. The Israelites manage to gather thirty thousand “warriors,” but God pinpoints a problem: “You have too many warriors with you. If I let all of you fight the Midianites, the Israelites

will boast to me that they saved themselves by their own strength” (v. 2). So He releases all those who are “timid or afraid,” and two-thirds of the army abandons the fight. But ten thousand is still too many, so God reduces the force to a ridiculous three hundred men, who promptly rout and destroy the vast armies camped in the valley below.

In the New Testament we see the same pattern. Three times the apostle Paul begs Jesus to remove a threat to his strength (metaphorically, a “thorn in his side”), and three times Jesus refuses with this terse-but-loving response: “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). In both examples, the Trinity is sending a clear message to those of us who can’t resist the temptation to exercise our own strength when God’s inside-out strategy for transformation seems weak in comparison: *It’s best for everyone to rely on My power, not yours.*

Why is this true? Human beings worship power. When we are enamored of our own strength, we are functionally worshiping ourselves, feeding the fundamental temptation already exposed in the garden: “You will be like God.” Adam and Eve are banished from the garden not as punishment, but as rescue. The path they have started down will lead to their destruction. We cannot worship God and also worship ourselves—it’s one or the other. And when we choose to worship our own power and agency above God, installing ourselves as gods, we cut ourselves off from our only source of life. Jesus reminds us of the mission behind His counterinsurgency in our lives: “The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life” (John 10:10).

Walking the Way of (the Unedited) Jesus

What will it look like if we walk in the way of the unedited Jesus, refusing to comingle the kingdom of God with the kingdom of secular power? Here are a few possibilities:

1. Emphasize what we're for, and look for ways to plant God's goodness in the world.

Several years ago I was speaking at a conference for denominational ministry leaders—they came from more than twenty countries around the world. I divided the room in half and had ministry leaders on each side find a partner. Then I challenged pairs on one side to list things the church is *against*, and pairs on the other side to list things the church is *for*. After two minutes, I had the pair with the longest list on both sides read them aloud. Then I asked the whole group: “Which list would people who are outside the church be more familiar with?” They had no doubt: “Against!” they screamed. Here’s the sad fact: *About the only thing most people know about Christians today is what we’re against.* Salt adds to the flavor of the meal (or culture); and when it’s added in the right amount it brings out the goodness of the food—it doesn’t *replace* the food.

Likewise, David French says: “Early church fathers were far, far more concerned with the faith and virtue of the church than the maladies of the Romans. Indeed, we forget a fundamental truth—our own maladies often make us unable to see the world clearly. Or, as Jesus said, ‘You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.’”²⁹ Put another way, we pay attention to the salt we’re adding to the meal—our “seasoning”—more than we complain about how bad the food is, or how incompetent the “chefs” who made the food are. We pay attention to our own brokenness and pursue healing through our dependent relationship with Jesus. And as we experience healthy growth in ourselves, we offer our salt as seasoning in our culture and context.

Rather than obsessing about fixing our broken world by investing our faith in political power to get things set right, we nurture what we are for—our own “faith and virtue”—rather than what we’re against—“the maladies of the Romans [pursuing salvation strategies that depend upon political power].”

Christians have been working to abolish slavery for centuries—an “against” that seems self-evident. At the turn of the nineteenth century, many around the world began to see the economic downside of the slave

trade and how it undermined free-market economic ideals and tamped down economic growth in the world. At the same time, Christians and “enlightened” intellectuals began railing against slavery as a moral evil. These forces combined and, eventually, led to a political “win”—laws were passed in Europe and America making the slave trade illegal. But more than two centuries later, we still have more than fifty million people living in slavery³⁰—more than at any other time in history. It’s evident that political solutions can lead to changes in the law, but they don’t necessarily leverage changes in the heart.

Philosopher John Stuart Mill, a member of the British Parliament at the height of its abolitionist momentum, observed that abolition was a result not of “any change in the distribution of material interests,” but rather “by the spread of moral convictions.” Mill wrote: “It is what men think that determines how they act.”³¹ What we think, and therefore what we do, is primarily influenced by a change of heart, not political or governmental mandates. This is why Jesus focuses on heart-change, leading to a change in the way we think, rather than focusing on political solutions to the world’s ills.

In Matthew 13, He tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds—the meaning, He explains to His disciples, is multilayered. The “good seeds” He’s planted in the world represent the values and priorities and culture of His kingdom—the “people of the Kingdom.” The “bad seeds” planted among the wheat represent the values and priorities and culture of the “evil one”—the forming influence of the world’s denigrating lies. Jesus warns against the “farmer’s workers” [His followers] pulling the weeds when they see them. Instead, He says, let the weeds grow for now, because He will take care of them later. Meanwhile, focus on growing and nurturing the good stuff—what we’re “for” in people and culture (the wheat). Gardeners know, by the way, that fertilizing and nurturing healthy plants is a “natural weed management”—thriving plants choke out the sources of life weeds depend upon.

So, to guide our everyday interactions and missional intentions in the culture, we consider WWJF—“What Was Jesus For”? Of course, every “for” has a corresponding “against,” but we have way overinvested in our

againsts and way underinvested in our fors. Jesus wants us to be wheat farmers by trade, not weed pullers. His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 is a “shock and awe” unveiling of what people who live out the values of the kingdom of God promote and practice: love your enemies, treat others with dignity, live out your relationship with God with humility and integrity, forgive others while recognizing your own brokenness, work for justice, give the good things you have to give, invest in others’ well-being more than you invest in your own wealth, and walk the narrow road in life that honors the kingdom above all else.

To follow Jesus means we abide in His presence so regularly, so deeply, that His values infect and overtake our values—we naturally nurture the wheat in ourselves, in our communities, and in our world. The values Jesus spotlighted in His Sermon on the Mount are the fruit of our abiding dependence on Him. We cannot “work up” this kind of transformational goodness—we can only attach ourselves to its source and make ourselves a conduit for it to flow into the world.

2. Participate politically, and in secular conduits of power, but do so with a determination to “love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us.”

Timothy Keller observes: “In the Good Samaritan parable told in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus points us to a man risking his life to give material help to someone of a different race and religion. Jesus forbids us to withhold help from our neighbors, and this will inevitably require that we participate in political processes. If we experience exclusion and even persecution for doing so, we are assured that God is with us (Matthew 5:10–11) and that some will still see our ‘good deeds and glorify God’ (1 Peter 2:11–12). If we are only offensive or only attractive to the world and not both, we can be sure we are failing to live as we ought.”³²

To be both offensive and attractive to the world because of our political participation means we are beholden to neither side of the spectrum, but to the way of Jesus alone. And to do that, we worship Jesus above all else, including our chosen party platform. And it means we continually seek Him for the courage to listen to our “enemies” on the other side of

the political divide, and risk to love them and even learn from them.

In His hometown synagogue, Jesus stands to read from “the scroll of Isaiah” on Sabbath day. The focal point of this section of Scripture is the mission of the Messiah: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD’s favor has come” (Luke 4:18–19).

Jesus rolls up the scroll, hands it to the synagogue attendant, and sits (rather melodramatically) in “the seat of Moses.” Then He proclaims, “The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!” (v. 21). This is shocking to the Sabbath crowd because no one but the coming Messiah is allowed to sit in the seat of Moses—it has been empty for centuries. Jesus intends this to be a defining moment, highlighted by what he *doesn’t* read in the scroll. He plants a period where Isaiah had a (functional) comma, excising this: “and with it, the day of God’s anger against their enemies.”

Jesus is clearly spotlighting a tectonic shift in our focus—He wants us to target “the enemy within us,” not the enemy outside us. When we’re following the unedited Jesus, we respond to those who see us as enemies (however unfair that seems) with humility, remorse, curiosity, and counter-cultural kindness. We give people a taste of the enemy-loving kingdom of God in the way we interact with them.

3. Upend the embedded power narratives in the culture by serving, not flexing.

Dr. Paul Farmer, the legendary infectious disease expert and public health pioneer, lived by a guiding passion he called “The H of G”—it’s short for “hermeneutic of generosity.”³³ It means he operated from a foundation that assumes the best in others and is determined to help others as a default setting in life. Researchers have explored strategies for undergirding self-worth and identity, comparing two approaches—one inward-looking and one outward-looking. The first approach focuses on promoting our positive qualities and hiding our weaknesses. The second approach focuses on “striving to help others” and “making a positive difference in someone else’s life.” The H of G was, by far, the more powerful foundation for identity.³⁴

People who live out of a secure identity, striving to help others, are conduits for transformation in the world.

To follow the unedited Jesus means we are vulnerable about our weaknesses and take on a posture of serving others rather than muscling our way to the top of the ladder—personally, corporately, or politically. We raise the waterline for life-changing generosity in all our relational environments. Jesus, excoriating the Pharisees for their lifestyle of power-mongering, says: “Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra-long tassels. And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called ‘Rabbi’” (Matt. 23:5–7).

And later, invited to the home of an important Pharisee for dinner, He witnesses a pathetic competition to land the seats of honor at the head of the table. He urges the power-desperate guests to lower themselves instead, to “take the lowest place at the foot of the table” because “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:10–11).

Practically, this means we’re proactively enthusiastic about others’ good news and compassionate toward their bad news. We focus on constructive rather than destructive responses to others—look for the lurking beauty in them, even when the ugly seems dominant. We honor others above ourselves. A heart captured by the way of the unedited Jesus wants to give, and in giving it finds wholeness. When psychiatric pioneer Dr. Karl Menninger was asked, “What would you advise a person to do, if that person felt a nervous breakdown coming on?” he said, “Leave your house, find someone in need, and do something to help that person.”³⁵ Serving others not only invests life in them, but also gives us access to the source of that life in ourselves in order to give it. That means the “living water” Jesus has promised us flows through our own soul on its way to splashing onto others.

**A church that
comingles political
power narratives
with the gospel of
Jesus is driving
people away, for
good reason.**



Secular kingdoms advance their mission by decree; Jesus advances the kingdom of God in an upside-down way. A church that comingles political power narratives with the gospel of Jesus is driving people away, for good reason. Though we are tantalized by the political promise of real change, we've seen enough to know those promises are hollow. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Derek Thompson says, "Religion has lost its halo effect in the past three decades, not because science drove God from the public square, but rather because politics did."³⁶ Celebrated jazz artist Gregory Porter captures the upside-down and inside-out mission of the unedited Jesus in his song "Take Me to the Alley." Here is a Jesus who simply doesn't care about human standards of strength, notoriety, and influence—a Jesus who honors the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of political gain:

*Well, they guild their houses in preparation for the King
And they line the sidewalks
With every sort of shiny thing
They will be surprised
When they hear him say*

*Take me to the alley
Take me to the afflicted ones
Take me to the lonely ones
That somehow lost their way*

*Let them hear me say
I am your friend
Come to my table
Rest here in my garden
You will have a pardon³⁷*

Reflection/Discussion Questions for Individuals or Small Groups

The Comingling of Kingdoms

- Many have long believed that America is a “Christian nation”—what do you believe, and why?
- What do we lose, and what do we gain, when we tie our national identity to our Christian identity?
- What are examples of the government embracing “the ways of Jesus,” and examples of government departing from “the ways of Jesus”?
- If you had to choose, has your worldview more closely aligned with the Church Regnant (the kingdom of God expressed through political power) or the Church Remnant (the kingdom of God expressed through the “divestment of power”)? Explain.
- In your life, how have you struggled to trust Jesus with the things that matter most to you? What has helped you to trust Jesus more deeply, and why?

EDITING JESUS

- Jesus refused, over and over, to let others co-opt Him into leading a political revolution—why was He adamant about this? What might have happened had He caved to this pressure?
- What does it mean for you to live as “salt and yeast” in the world, in your everyday life?
- What’s something about the way Jesus responds to power, or exercises power, that challenges you? Inspires worship in you?
- In what ways have you struggled to “love your enemies” in this season of your life? In what ways have you reached out to love your enemies?

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