

## ***The Gospel and Our Four Ministry Commitments: An Exposition***

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### **The Gospel**

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The Gospel is the good news that God has raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and made him Lord over all creation! The strange events concerning Jesus "are not simply odd Jewish occurrences, but the fulfilment of the creator's plan for the whole cosmos... [T]alk of Jesus and his resurrection is talk about the creator of the world—more specifically, talk about how the creator is, through Jesus, becoming the true king of all the world." [N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, (Eerdmans, 1997), 90] This Gospel both unites and shapes us irrespective of the wide diversity of our backgrounds. [From the UIUC GCF Vision Statement]

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In beginning a discussion of the Four Ministry Commitments of Graduate InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, it should be clear that at their heart must be the Gospel. To highlight its crucial centrality, from now on I shall spell it with an uppercase 'G' (except of course where spelled otherwise in a quotation). I want to begin by looking afresh at the Gospel not only for the reason just mentioned, but also because I've come to agree with those—most notably theologians N.T. (Tom) Wright and Lesslie Newbigin—who think that we must not confuse 'Gospel' with some "plan of salvation". This distinction and how we've come to confuse the two is put nicely by Dr. Wright:

The word 'gospel' and the phrase 'the gospel' have come to denote, especially in certain circles within the church, something that in older theology would be called an *ordo salutis*, an order of salvation. 'The gospel' is supposed to be a description of how people get saved; of the theological mechanism whereby, in some people's language, Christ takes our sin and we his righteousness; in other people's language, Jesus becomes my personal saviour; in other language again, I admit my sin, believe that he died for me, and commit my life to him. In many church circles, if you hear something like that, people will say that 'the gospel' has been preached. Conversely, if you hear a sermon in which the claims of Jesus Christ are related to the political or ecological questions of the day, some people will say that, well, perhaps the subject was interesting, but 'the gospel' wasn't preached. (Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, [Eerdmans, 1997], 40-41)

I hope we can all see at least some of the implications of such confusion in our own lives at the university. Some of these are spelled out in more detail throughout this paper.

But lest you think Dr. Wright has gone off the theological deep end, he says he's "perfectly comfortable with what people normally mean when they say 'the gospel'" but goes on to argue that it's just not what Paul meant by 'the Gospel'. (*WSPRS*, 41) I find Wright's perspective to be not merely the better way of understanding what St. Paul really said about the Gospel, but also very helpful for what it means for us to be Christians living in the world today, not least as Christian graduate and professional students at the University of Illinois.

What then is the Gospel according to Scripture? Wright says that God's Gospel concerns his Son:

A message about God—the one true God, the God who inspired the prophets—consisting in a message about Jesus. A story—a true story—about a human life, death and resurrection through which the living God becomes king of the world. A message which had grasped Paul and, through his work, would mushroom out to all the nations. That [Rom. 1:1-5] is Paul's shorthand summary of what 'the gospel' actually is.

It is not, then, a system of how people get saved. The announcement of the gospel results in people being saved—Paul says as much a few verses later. But 'the gospel' itself, strictly speaking, is the narrative proclamation of King Jesus. He can speak equally of 'announcing the gospel' and of 'announcing Jesus', using the term *kerussein*, 'to act as a herald' in each case (e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:23; 15:12; 2 Corinthians 1:19; 4:5; 11:4; Galatians 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:9). When the herald makes a royal proclamation, he says 'Nero (or whoever) has become emperor.' He does not say 'If you would like to have an experience of living under an emperor, you might care to try Nero.' The proclamation is an authoritative summons to

obedience—in Paul's case, to what he calls 'the obedience of faith'. (*WSPRS*, 45)

The strange events concerning Jesus then "are not simply odd Jewish occurrences, but the fulfilment of the creator's plan for the whole cosmos... [T]alk of Jesus and his resurrection is talk about the creator of the world—more specifically, talk about how the creator is, through Jesus, becoming the true king of all the world." (*WSPRS*, 90; see also Phil. 2.6-11)

Neither is the Gospel an invitation to a religious experience per se. To be sure, there will be new experiences of God by his Spirit, but seeking these experiences is not meant to be the goal of our response to the Gospel. The goal is life with God in his kingdom. In Mark 1.15 we hear Jesus proclaim: "The time has been fulfilled. The kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent and believe in the good news." When Jesus arrived on the scene, he was announcing that in himself the long-awaited exile was now over—for those who repented and believed in his message. Although the Jews had physically returned to their ancestral lands, they were still under the rule of Rome, a pagan nation, and so in a very real sense they were still in exile. And so they yearned for God to come and rescue them, ending their "real" exile. Why had God not acted to liberate them from Roman rule? Why had their "exodus" not yet been realized? The answer: Because the time had not yet been fulfilled. Tom Wright comments that "at the height of persecution by the Syrians Daniel 9.2, 24 spoke of the 'real' exile lasting not 70 years but for 70 weeks of years, i.e. 490 years." (*Mark for Everyone*, [SPCK, 2001] 229). With Jesus, however, the time is now fulfilled! But his hearers must repent and believe that in him there is now forgiveness of sins. Remember that God's people Israel—and all those in Adam—were sent into exile for their sin (Gen. 3, Deut. 29-30). Now, says Jesus, the time for return from exile has drawn near. To come home to God, to enter the kingdom of God, everyone must now repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

According to this Gospel, "the one true God has dealt in Jesus Christ with sin, death, guilt and shame, and now summons men and women everywhere to abandon the idols which hold them captive to these things and to discover a new life, and a new way of life, in him." (*WSPRS*, 157) Thus repentance means (1) turning from the idols that grip our lives, turning from the way we live apart from God's loving rule, and (2) turning to true allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ whom God has sent into the world to redeem it. "The call to repent is part of the announcement that this is the time for the great moment of freedom, of God's rescue." (*Mark for Everyone*, 9) Believing in the good news then is putting your faith in Jesus as God's provision of rescue. You abandon all else that you have put your faith in and you now give your loyalty to Jesus. By so doing, you enter into his wonderful kingdom, you cross over the line from death to life (John 5.24ff).

To summarize then the Gospel into one sentence: The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the royal announcement that God has raised the crucified Messiah from the dead and made him Lord over all creation—including (but certainly not limited to) men and women who've been made in the image and likeness of God. Thus, the Gospel is a kingdom announcement. Jesus—both before and after his resurrection—connected the Gospel with the kingdom (kingship or rule or reign) of God (see e.g. Mark 1.15, Acts 1.3). And Paul did the same (see e.g., 14.22, 28.31). And so must we! Therefore we preach this Gospel, summoning men and women at the U of I to repent and believe the good news of Jesus Christ so that they might be initiated into the kingdom of God with all its attendant privileges and responsibilities.

But if the Gospel Paul preached was not a 'plan of salvation', but rather the announcement or proclamation that Jesus is the Lord of all creation that summoned all people every where to repent and believe this good news, then how does a person become a Christian? According to Tom Wright and his understanding of Paul's Gospel,

The message about Jesus and his cross and resurrection—'the gospel' ...—is announced to them; through this means, God works by his Spirit upon their hearts; as a result, they come to believe the message; they join the Christian community through baptism, and begin to share in its common life and its common way of life. That is how people come into relationship with the living God. (*WSPRS*, 116-17)

This also invites the necessary corrective of trusting the power of the Gospel as we announce it, and of expecting the Spirit of God to be at work in bringing men and women to faith in Christ and ushering them into his kingdom. This should give renewed urgency for prayer for non-Christians to whom the gospel is being announced!

Now a word on idolatry. How's that for a transition! Actually, the topic of idolatry has been not far in the background of our discussion of the Gospel. Human sin and rejection of God did not leave a theological

vacuum. Instead of worshipping the one true God, we didn't worship nothing; rather we began worshipping many things. Since we are beings created for worship, and since humanity has rejected the one true and living God, we end up worshipping God's good creation, or we worship the product of our own hands and minds. In speaking of humans who have rejected God, Paul writes: "They exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen." (Rom. 1.25; this is also what Adam and Eve did when they believed the serpent's lie.) We might say of very many at the U of I that they "exchanged the truth of God for the lie and worshipped and served the product of their own ingenuity and creativity and cleverness—including their academic degrees, research programs, published papers and books; and bowed down to grantors of research monies and to the gatekeepers of their professions." Paul cashes out how such worship includes God giving people over to the consequences of their false worship. Unrepentant idolatry leads to God's rightful judgment of idolaters as well as to the negative and harmful ways of being human—harmful to ourselves, to others, and to the good creation itself.

In *Bringing the Church to the World* (Bethany, 1992), Tom Wright very insightfully unpacks the theology and psychology of idolatry:

Idolatry begins when human beings treat something which is good as if it were God. Idolatry is not merely silly. The Old Testament prophets sometimes mock it as if it were, but they are looking with the clear eyes of people used to standing in the presence of the living God. From where most of us sit idolatry makes a certain amount of sense. The world we live in is good, lovely, beautiful; so beautiful, in fact, that it is quite "natural" to linger and adore it.... When we look at it we are meant to find it wonderful, awesome, precious. Not do so would be to deny the goodness of the Creator himself.

It is vital to remember this as we study idolatry. The things to which human beings give mistaken allegiance are not, in and of themselves, bad. The evil consists in human misuse of creation, not in creation itself. When ancient pagans worshipped the sun, they were not making an altogether stupid mistake. The sun is indeed the source of the heat and light that sustains the world. The sun gives great beauty and blessing to the world. But it is not God.... Thus it is with all idolatry. It is not that the idol is itself bad, only that it is not divine. (45)

Much of the U of I is in the business of studying and manipulating God's good creation. As Christians, we must view such study and manipulation in light of the good news that the Jesus Christ is Lord of all creation. To think of creation as divine (as, say, the goddess Gaia)—which I think most at the U of I don't do—is idolatry; but so is thinking that humans are autonomous from God and can do anything with creation that suits our fancies. Such thinking is to make ourselves gods; or, science and technology become our gods-and gods which hold sway over us.

Other ways in which humans engage in idolatry in the West include the false gods of money (Mammon, materialism), sex (the obsession with and misuse of the goodness of human sexuality), and power (trust in military might and violence to solve our problems). As with all idols, they not only dehumanize those who worship them, but—we must say it again—they also have disastrous effects on our relationship with the true and living God, with others, and with the rest of creation.

One final thought here about idolatry and that taken from Wright's, *For All God's Worth* (Eerdmans, 1997). This thought gets at a core issue that's pervasive in the university among educated people:

All idols started out life as the god somebody wanted. At the more sophisticated level, the god I want will be a god who lives up to my intellectual expectations: a god of whom I can approve rationally, judiciously, after due consideration and weighing up of theological probabilities. I want this god because he, or it, will underwrite my intellectual arrogance. He will boost my sense of being a refined modern thinker. The net result is that I become god; and this god I've made becomes my puppet. Nobody trembles at the word of a home-made god. Nobody goes out with fire in their belly to heal the sick, to clothe the naked, to teach the arrogant, to feed the hungry, because of the god they wanted. They are more likely to stay at home with their feet up. (23-24)

We all see that university folk are very good at creating gods that in some way inflate themselves and give them a sense of importance.

God's answer to paganism and false worship was Abraham!—and his promise to bless him and through

him and his offspring to be a blessing to all the nations of the world (Gen. 12.1ff). The good news of the lordship of Jesus Christ is the continuation of God's plan to rescue creation, confronting head on paganism with its idols and gods. All who have put their faith in Jesus Christ are of the faith of Abraham, the justified people of God (Gal. 3.13-14). As Wright puts it, "The God of Israel is the one true God, and the pagan deities are mere idols.... The God of Israel is now made known in and through Jesus himself." (*WSPRS*, 60) To summarize at this point, Wright says the Gospel is the fourfold announcement about Jesus as follows:

1. In Jesus of Nazareth, specifically in his cross, the decisive victory has been won over all the powers of evil, including sin and death themselves.
2. In Jesus' resurrection the New Age has dawned, inaugurating the long-awaited time when the prophecies would be fulfilled, when Israel's exile would be over, and the whole world would be addressed by the one creator God.
3. The crucified and risen Jesus was, all along, Israel's Messiah, her representative king.
4. Jesus was therefore also the Lord, the true King of the world, the one at whose name every knee would bow. (*WSPRS*, 60)

This is the Gospel, as Paul said in Romans 1.16, that is the power of God for the salvation (in the full, rich, biblical sense) for everyone (Jews and non-Jews) who believes! We in GCF must believe in God to continue to use this Gospel to bring men and women out of the strongholds of sin and death, and to faith and freedom and life in Jesus Christ (see e.g. Col. 1.13). We must believe in the power of the Gospel to transform his children into the image of his beloved Son (Rom 8.29). And we must believe that the Gospel is relevant to all activities of our lives—and not least to our academic disciplines. The Gospel must not only usher an individual person into the kingdom of God, and thus into a new relationship with God, but the Gospel must be allowed also to continue to work itself out in the life of the believer and the believing communities in which he or she becomes a full member.

Let's now turn to an exposition of our Four Ministry Commitments and how the Gospel comes to bear on each of the commitments.

## Evangelism

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Evangelism is "that set of all intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time." [William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Eerdmans, 1989), 95] In GCF we want to do our part in helping others at the U of I repent and believe the Gospel, and so be ushered into the reign and rule of God that they too are sent back into the world as agents of Christ's kingship. [Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Eerdmans, 1986), 124] [From the UIUC GCF Vision Statement]

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In light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that is, the announcement that Jesus Christ is the Lord over all creation, the most useful definition of evangelism around was that put forth by Dr. William Abraham in his *The Logic of Evangelism*, (Eerdmans, 1989). He very helpfully re-connects evangelism to the kingdom of God. Both Jesus and Paul declared and preached the kingdom of God with the view that men and women would repent and believe the Gospel, and so be ushered into the reign and rule of God that had begun with the coming of Jesus Christ and which continues by his Spirit until one day God is all in all.

With this in mind, Dr. Abraham defines 'evangelism' as "**that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time.**" (*Logic*, 95, emphasis added) Evangelism thus cannot be reduced, for example, to merely preaching the Gospel, though preaching the Gospel is absolutely central! Rather, evangelism includes a wide variety of activities on the part of the church—GCF included—to help initiate others into the kingdom of God.

The title of Abraham's book speaks of the 'logic of evangelism'. What he means is that the Gospel of the kingdom brings with it its own unique criteria for initiation. For example, take initiation into the legal profession. When I became an attorney, I became part of a new community (a member of the state bar association), there was an initiation ritual (being sworn in by the supreme court chief justice), there was a body of information to learn (the law), a new set of ethical behavior and practices (legal canon of ethics), etc. These particular dimensions of initiation are unique to the legal profession.

Similarly, Dr. Abraham identifies at least these different, yet related, dimensions of evangelism in light of the good news of the kingdom of God (*Logic*):

1. "The kingdom brings with it the Israel of God, that community in which God rules. So to be initiated properly requires that one be joined to that community. Initiation has, therefore, a communal dimension that cannot be set aside as an option to be taken up at will." (102)
2. "Initiation is unthinkable without those evangelized coming to believe certain propositions about themselves, about Christ, about God and his kingdom, and so on ... The church, acting through its evangelists, shares with them in handing over an intellectual and theological vision that those initiated into Christianity come to appropriate and believe." (102)
3. "Initiation also requires the appropriation of a very particular moral vision that serves as the bedrock of moral action in the Christian community and in the world. At the heart of this are the two great commandments to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself." (102)
4. "Initiation is marked by the reception and development of particular gifts and capacities that equip one to serve as an agent of God. Initiation is not just a matter of receiving, it is also a matter of learning to give of oneself in the work of the kingdom. To that end, God has given gifts to his church to carry out his work in the world?and initiation is seriously defective if this is overlooked and ignored." (103)
5. "Finally, initiation is constituted by the appropriation of certain basic spiritual disciplines that are absolutely essential for the exercise and sustenance of responsible obedience to the joys of the kingdom. At minimum it involves learning to fast, pray, read the Scriptures, and participate in the eucharist." (103)

What else has to be said is that initiation into the kingdom of God is never merely a mechanical affair, but requires the Spirit of God. As Abraham puts it, "To be initiated into the rule of God is to encounter a transcendent reality that has entered history and to find oneself drawn up into the ultimate purposes of God for history and creation." (*Logic*, 101) And so we strive to steer away from any individualistic and merely sociological approaches to the Gospel, and away from any evangelism that leaves out the kingdom of God or his initiative in the person's life.

Numerous implications flow from these dimensions of initiation for Graduate InterVarsity, but we highlight here the following for special consideration, some of which are fleshed out more in the rest of this paper:

1. GCF is not a substitute for a good local church. In grad chapters we don't baptize or serve the Lord's supper. But neither can the local church easily reach men and women on campus without the help of a solid Christian community of university students and faculty. Thus these dimensions of initiation suggest a genuine partnership among the various local churches and GCF as each community does its part in the initiation of people into the kingdom of God.
2. We must find effective ways of communicating clearly the Gospel to those not yet in the kingdom of God, as well as to those who have recently responded to the summons of Christ who must now work out the implications of Christ's lordship in their lives. Furthermore, we must do this in ways relevant to them and their various cultures.
3. The moral vision of a Christian, and the spiritual gifts and disciplines fall under what we've been calling 'spiritual formation'. This term is intentionally broad to cover all those aspects and activities of growing into Christlikeness—in his sufferings as well as in his glory. But we want to bring intentionality to our spiritual formation, including appropriate follow-up of new believers, helping them find a good local church, etc. And we must help our members confront the anti-Gospel cultural shaping forces in their lives, and help them grow as full members of genuine Christian community as part of the people of God.
4. We need to make explicit that all Christians—new or not—are the missionary church and that we must each do our part in God's global mission. As the Father has sent Christ into the world, so Christ has sent all who believe in him into the world (John 20.21-23, cf. John 17.18-19). This includes all of us in GCF at the U of I. Responding to the Gospel in evangelism must lead to a life of serving God and others as his people in the world which he is redeeming.

5. Lastly, we must add that we are sent as God's renewed humanity into all the world. And this includes being sent into the sciences and the visual and performing arts, into the marketplace and applied sciences, into the humanities and social sciences, etc. Besides being sent for evangelism and service, here we must include the integration of faith, learning, and practice. This integration is best done in the community of fellow believers together seeking to bring the mind of Christ to bear on their disciplines and professions for the glory of God. We are sent back into God's world as those who have been redeemed and who are in the process of becoming like the Lord Jesus Christ—and this requires the integration of faith, learning, and practice.

The idea with outreach in the Grad chapter is that we want to foster worshipping, multi-ethnic, loving, and witnessing communities. This priority-worship ahead of evangelism-is crucial. When the Lord Jesus returns and brings the kingdom of God on earth in all its fullness, evangelism will cease, but worship shall endure! Dr. Abraham explains further why the priority of worship over evangelism and he bears quoting at length:

Evangelism cannot be the primary activity and preoccupation of the church as if everything revolved around it like the earth revolves around the sun. This coveted position belongs to the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God must be the primary, unconditional priority of the church, which exists in and for the coming of the rule of God in history. Only as she exists in and for that kingdom is she authentic and valid. Evangelism is important only because the kingdom is important; it is subordinate to the kingdom. Only because evangelism involves initiating people into the kingdom of God does it deserve our attention, our allegiance, and our very best endeavors. And only as we keep evangelism utterly subordinate to the dynamic rule of God are we liberated to participate in it with appropriate joy and confidence. To make evangelism the primary concern of the church is to give it a misplaced and exaggerated position in our lives. The first task of the church is to worship: to bow down before the Lord of glory, to celebrate God's love and majesty, and to invite God to rule over the length and breadth of all creation. (*Logic*, 182)

We want to be a witnessing community wherein the Gospel is seen and heard and touched and felt, a place where initiation into the kingdom of God is our goal and something for which we actively do our part in GCF. We do this because we believe there is power in the Gospel for the salvation of all who believe (Rom.1.16-17). Let us now turn to a more—detailed discussion of the kind of Christian community that we have in view.

### **Christian Community**

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This Gospel creates, not just a bunch of individual Christians, but rather a Christian community in which Christ dwells by his Spirit. In community we are to grow intellectually and spiritually as Christian graduate and professional students, serving others and the university. Our love for one another is a crucial way that they will know that God sent his Son into his world to redeem it. [From the UIUC GCF Vision Statement]

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William Abraham rightly states that "The kingdom brings with it the Israel of God, that community in which God rules. So to be initiated properly requires that one be joined to that community. Initiation has, therefore, a communal dimension that cannot be set aside as an option to be taken up at will." (*Logic*, 102) According to Scripture, we are "being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph. 2.22).

However one of the defining characteristics of American society is atomized individualism, where self is the individual's ultimate priority, and where participation in community is seen not only as optional, but needed only for the sake of the individual's personal self-realization or self-fulfillment. Individualism says that the individual is all-important. Dordt College theology professor David Williams offers the following very helpful comments:

According to Scripture people are always in relationship to one another, come to full expression, fulfill their God-given tasks, and even experience self-fulfillment and redemption, only in the context of the social relationship known in Scripture as Israel, the body of Christ, the people of God, or the church. The relationship represented by that body is intrinsic to the redeemed life and the very being of creatures made after the image of God. Relatedness is intrinsic to humanness. A human being is by definition a

contextual being, a social being. Individualism, however, atomizes people, disrupts community, and fragments society. ("Individualism and Biblical Personhood", *Pro Rege*, March 1993, 7).

Dr. Wright puts it correctly and bluntly as follows: "The gospel creates, not a bunch of individual Christians, but a community." (*WSPRS*, 157)

Individualism—a characteristic that persists from modernity through to postmodernity—is accentuated in the university world. Think of students coming to class only for what they can get of it and not also for what they can contribute to the class. We all know faculty members who do their research on their own, resenting participation in any community of scholars as a threat to their ideas or a hindrance to "getting their own work done". Or, perhaps it is seen only as a place where they can shine with their own bright ideas (make a name for themselves) or scavenge ideas for their own personal work! I may be too pessimistic here, but I want to make the point that we currently live in a time of atomized individualism and that definitely includes very many students, faculty and staff at the University of Illinois.

It's too easy and all too pervasive to orient all of one's own life by "What's in it for me?" This individualistic mindset can easily and unconsciously get extended to one's Christian life. The kind of evangelism that is typical today too often appeals to the non-believer's individualistic bent by presenting a "gospel" where God exists to help them accomplish what they want out of life. Faith in God then becomes a means to the person's own desired end (e.g., "You want to be a successful graduate student, try Jesus!", or "You want to be a happy, fulfilled, etc. [on your own terms!] person, try Jesus!") Perhaps I exaggerate the extent to which popular brands of evangelism do this; however the problem is not one of degree, but of kind. Any attempt to evangelize by pandering to the individualistic nature of the non-believer in a misguided attempt to "be relevant", misunderstands the gospel, the nature of the kingdom of God, and proper evangelism. We end up with what Darrell Guder has called "culture plus Christ." (*The Continuing Conversion of the Church*[Eerdmans, 2000]) The idea there is that the individual is a product of his or her culture, which is basically good, but that the person now "just needs Jesus". The person remains basically the same, but now has a 'spiritual side' to her life. And that's how evangelism too often comes across. But this still leaves the person in control of her life, with the Gospel now becoming merely subservient to the individual's wants, wishes, and desires. (Think here of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8.9-23!) Such a person has yet to be confronted by the lordship of Jesus Christ; such a person has yet to enter the kingdom of God (think again of Simon the Sorcerer!).

In speaking of faulty understandings of the gospel, evangelism, and justification, Dr. Wright says this:

[B]oth in Enlightenment modernism and in contemporary post-modernism, individualism has been all the rage, with its current symbols of the personal stereo and the privatization of everything. Tragically, some would-be presentations of 'the gospel' have actually bought into this, by implying that one is justified or saved first and foremost as an individual. Paul's gospel could never do that; nor could its corollary, the doctrine of justification. Of course every single human being is summoned, in his or her uniqueness, to respond personally to the gospel. Nobody in their right mind would deny that. But there is no such thing as an 'individual' Christian. Paul's gospel created a community; his doctrine of justification sustained it. Ours must do no less. (*WSPRS*, 158)

It's hard to give up control of our lives to anyone, but such submission to the rule of God in Christ is necessary for entrance to the kingdom of God and to becoming truly human. Think for example of Jesus's own life of complete obedience to the Father; Jesus modeled what it means to be truly human. We cannot serve, and we are not created to serve, two masters. We cannot serve God and anything else that would demand our ultimate allegiance, be it money or family (being just but two things Jesus mentioned) or academic and professional success (a commonly-worshipped god that has powerful sway at the university). Allegiance to Jesus Christ is essential to the formation of genuine Christian community. What we don't want is a group of individualistic Christians, each "in it" for themselves, participating as it suits them and only for what they can get out of it. What the University of Illinois needs is a community of graduate and professional students who are marked by at least these further characteristics: worship, multi-ethnicity, love, and witness or mission. As we shall see momentarily, these characteristics are inextricably connected.

***A worshipping community.*** At the University of Illinois, we want to see established and advanced a community of graduate and professional students wherein Christ is worshipped as Lord and King. Not only

so in the large group meetings, but also whenever we gather in the name of Christ as Christian graduate students at the U of I. We desire to meet God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each time we gather as his people—and be changed by his Presence for service in his world. God continues to seek out worshippers who worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4.23). And it's precisely within Christian community where God's people must worship Jesus as Lord and King. I once heard Dr. Abraham ask "Where else on earth can non-believers look to see what it means for Jesus to be Lord other than to the church?". Our chapter must be characterized by allegiance to Jesus Christ and his kingdom. And this allegiance includes working itself out in obedience to Jesus's lordship as worship (cf. Rom 12.1-2).

***A multi-ethnic community.*** Furthermore, the worshipping community that we see through the vision of the apostle John in Revelation 5 (for example), is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic community of worshippers. Paul tells us in Ephesians 2 that Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile (Gentile=the nations, the non-Jews (goyim)), so that peoples from all nations will be reconciled to God through the Cross of Christ. And remember what Paul says in Galatians 3.28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The worshipping community is open to all peoples who repent and believe the good news of the kingdom that there is a new King of the universe, the Lord Jesus Christ!

What's more, the apostle John tells us that when some Greeks asked to meet with Jesus, Jesus saw this as a signal that his 'hour' had come (John 12.20-27), that 'hour' when he would be lifted up (on the cross) drawing all people to himself (John 12.32). The ethnic diversity of the church at Pentecost (Acts 2, esp. 2.5-12) was a pattern that is to become the norm. After Jesus's ascension and sending of his Spirit, we see people from among the nations entering the kingdom of God and becoming his worshippers! The multi-ethnic nature of the worshipping church had begun with a bang! Again, the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles has been demolished by, in, and through Jesus Christ. But first Peter (Acts 10.1-18) and then Paul (Acts 13.46-48) would have to learn that the multi-ethnic nature of the church is where God has been moving his worshipping community all along. The amazing revelation of Jesus to John is a picture of people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" who have become "a kingdom and priests to serve our God" and "reign on earth" (Rev. 5.9-10)!

In the cross of Christ, the Gospel unites people—irrespective of race, class, gender, national origin, social status, etc.-to be his new community. Given that the U of I has, providentially, so many people from around the world, we can't but rejoice at being a slice of the multi-ethnic people of God, and we need to learn from one another what it means to follow Jesus in this diverse context. Amidst the power struggles that divide people amidst such diversity, GCF can be an example, a foretaste of the power of the Gospel in uniting a diverse people. We can thus be a tangible and visible sign of the kingdom of God.

***A loving community.*** Christ gave a new command in the upper room to his disciples on the night he was betrayed. This command was powerfully enacted by Jesus through the washing of his disciples's feet. All followers of Christ are likewise to love and serve one another. And in John 13, Jesus couples his command with him being our Teacher and Lord. Against our Western individualism we must hear this part of the call of the Gospel: "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Phil. 2.4). And Paul offers Jesus himself as our example! This is the kind of love that must mark GCF. We must grow in our love for one another (love as action if not as feeling), and grow in our love for those to whom we are sent with the Gospel of Love.

A loving community is also a welcoming community. It is difficult to read Luke's account in Acts (see e.g. chapter 2.42-47 and 21.17) and not be struck by the welcoming nature of the early community of disciples. Believers and non-believers alike should always feel that our chapter is a place where they can meet God and be loved. Genuine hospitality should continue mark us as a chapter but this will always take work on our part to make the welcome warm and enticing.

***A witnessing community.*** In GCF we are to (establish and) advance at the U of I, witnessing communities. This is at the heart of InterVarsity's Purpose statement. A witnessing community is one called together out of the world for the purpose of being sent back into the world. Before Jesus was arrested as well as on his resurrection day, Jesus said that as the Father had sent him into the world, so he has sent his disciples into the world, and not least to the U of I. And he was explicitly clear that by 'disciples' he meant all who would believe in him through the message of those first disciples (John 17.18-20). That wonderfully

includes us! We in GCF are included as God's 'sent ones'. Dr. Lesslie Newbigin put it powerfully as follows,

The church is the bearer to all the nations of a gospel that announces the kingdom, the reign, and the sovereignty of God. It calls men and women to repent of their false loyalty to other powers, to become believers in the one true sovereignty, and so to become corporately a sign, instrument, and foretaste of that sovereignty of the one true and living God over all nature, all nations, and all human lives. It is not meant to call men and women out of the world into a safe religious enclave but to call them out in order to send them back as agents of God's kingship. (*Foolishness to the Greeks*, [Eerdmans, 1986], 124).

We must help fellow Christian graduate and professional students understand their missionary calling as graduate and professional students whom God has sent to the U of I to bear his image together as his redeemed men and women, and to announce and live out the lordship of King Jesus.

That these characteristics are inextricably connected can be seen by what it means for each of them to be genuine. No Christian community can genuinely worship God if it fails to love others—irrespective of ethnicity or background, or to announce the good news of Jesus Christ. No Christian community can genuinely love one another or others if it fails to worship the God of Love, or to announce the Gospel to those whom they say they love. No Christian community can genuinely bear witness if it lacks love for God and for others. As I see it, genuine Christian community includes at least those constitutive characteristics just outlined.

I conclude (without comment) by merely listing some tantalizing subchapter headings that speak powerfully on their own about God's renewed humanity, his new community (from "God's Renewed Humanity", chapter 8 of *WSPRS*):

- The center of renewed humanity: Worship
- The goal of renewed humanity: Resurrection
- The transformation of renewed humanity: Holiness
- The coherence of renewed humanity: Love
- The zeal of renewed humanity: Mission

### **Integration of faith, learning and practice.**

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Because Jesus is Lord over all creation, this fact requires God's people—us!—to think about and live in the world in new ways. We must take all thoughts captive for Christ, and this includes integrating our faith, learning, and practice. Such integration is not (merely) a matter of Christian scholarship, but also a matter of Christian discipleship. As graduate and professional students, to follow Jesus in the world is to follow him into the various disciplines and professions, thinking them through in light of the lordship of Jesus Christ and then living accordingly. [From the UIUC GCF Vision Statement]

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We next consider the challenge of the Gospel to our academic disciplines and our professional lives. The key ideas are that Jesus Christ is Lord over all creation, and that in him and by his resurrection from the dead, the new world has already begun! But before teasing out these ideas a bit, let's first rehearse the culture in which we hear the Gospel of the kingdom of God. We've seen that Americans are deeply individualistic and how that is juxtaposed to the kingdom of God and what it means to be a genuinely Christian community. There are several other characteristics of our culture that we must briefly rehearse.

The privatization of our faith. The first to mention is that in the West, there has been a divide or cleavage made between public truths and facts, and private values and opinions. This often is simply referred to as the fact-value dichotomy. No one disputes that there are person-relative values and opinions. Some people prefer chocolate to vanilla, and oddly enough, some people actually prefer vanilla to chocolate. But it's merely a person's opinion whether chocolate or vanilla really tastes better. In the West however, the domain of what is a value or opinion extends to things such as morality and religious beliefs. What many Christians typically misunderstand in their contemporary discussions of relativism is that when a person declares truth to be relative, she typically means to say that all things on the value/opinion side of the dichotomy—that is, 'truth' with a lower-case 't'—are relative. And there's where she puts religion and morality... and the Gospel.

How this plays out for us Christians in the university is that we too can easily live—even if we say or think we don't believe—as though the Christian faith is true for those who believe it but not for those who don't. Whether Jesus rose from the dead and was raised in power to be the Lord and King of all reality (i.e., the Gospel!) can neither in practice nor in principle (and maybe not even in logic) be confined to the value/opinion side of any fact-value dichotomy. To do so will be to privatize our faith, confining it to the value side of the dichotomy. Unless we believe the Gospel is true with a capital 'T' (as Francis Schaefer was fond of saying), we'll make little progress in bringing all of our thinking under Christ's kingship—and this includes our academic disciplines and professional lives. And if we're really deficient in our thinking on this, then we won't even try to integrate our faith, learning, and practice!

If you think about it or know anything about first-century life in the Greco-Roman world, you'll know that the early Christians always had the option of making Christianity a privatized religion. This certainly would have made life in pagan cultures much easier. There would have been no martyrs precisely because that "gospel" would have been no threat or challenge to the culture and "the powers that be"! But it also would have been a denial of Jesus Christ as Lord and King over all creation. It simply was not an option given their understanding and knowledge of Jesus Christ in whom they had put their faith. So too we must regain confidence in the Truth of the Gospel—and not be ashamed of it (cf. Paul in Romans 1.16f). We must repent and believe the good news of the kingdom of God, and then orient all aspects of our lives around this Gospel.

Creeping anticreational dualism. Besides individualism and privatization of the Christian faith, the last feature to think about in this context is dualism. Here the idea is that there is a dichotomy between "the spiritual" and "the physical" parts of life, and furthermore, that the former is more 'godly' than the latter. Here is where many graduate students really feel the pinch. We spend many, many, many hours week in and week out, working on our research in (say) chemistry, or mathematics, or physics, or computer science, or engineering of one of its many varieties, or renaissance literature, or....[fill in your own area of study] yet we feel the strain of wanting to "serve God" but just don't have the time or energy given the demand of our graduate studies. I think there is a tendency to think of prayer and Bible study and evangelism and "church work" (say) as somehow more spiritual than what we do in our studies or research. Here I think there is a common disconnect between what we want to believe (that what we do matters to God) and what we feel (that it's not as spiritual as being a pastor or missionary). Such dualism is anticreational—and we must resist it at every turn. This dualism is anticreational precisely because it denies the inherent goodness of creation that God affirmed both in the incarnation of his Son and in Jesus's resurrection from the dead. Creation is fallen, yes. But God is redeeming his creation for the sake of his glory and in faithfulness to his covenant promises. And he has called us, his renewed humanity, his renewed image-bearers, amazingly to join him in this redemptive activity!

The way forward. As we've seen, the Gospel is the royal announcement that God has raised the crucified Messiah from the dead and made him Lord over all creation. This "all creation" part is what's at issue here. I've been greatly helped in particular here by two works of Dr. Wright, "Good News for the Pagans", *WSPRS* (77-94), "The Light of the World" of Wright's *The Challenge of Jesus* (IVP, 1999), pp. 174-197. (This latter work was also his concluding talk at InterVarsity's Following Christ/Shaping our World conference in December of 1998.) That chapter is an invigorating call to be the people of God who are made in the image of God. Bearing the image of God, said Wright, is our vocation: "It means being called to reflect into the world the creative and redemptive love of God." (183). This gets further cashed out below, but for now we focus on integration of faith, learning, and practice.

I really appreciate the way Tom Wright lays out the bigger context that helps us connect the Gospel with our academic disciplines. (I don't apologize one whit for all the extended quotations here for I hope they serve also to entice you to read Wright's works for yourself; you'll be changed for the better through them!)

What has the pagan world to do with the strange events concerning Jesus of Nazareth? Answer: they are not simply odd Jewish occurrences, but are the fulfilment of the creator's plan for the whole cosmos.... The Jewish framework of interpretation within which Paul understands and expounds the death and resurrection of Jesus is, of course, news for the pagans; that the creator of the world will be all in all, by defeating evil and death and claiming the world as his own.... (*WSPRS*, 90)

...The whole world belongs to the one true God, who is now reclaiming it. God is not simply affirming the world as it stands: that would be to capitulate to paganism, with its worship of all sorts of elements

within the world as though they were themselves divine. It would be to ignore the fact of evil and corruption, decay, misery and death which now deface God's creation. Nor is Paul rejecting the world as it stands, as though the Christian Gospel were a form of dualism. He is saying, as he says extensively in Romans 8, that the whole creation is longing for its exodus, and that when God is all in all even the division between heaven and earth, God's space and human space, will be done away with (as we see also in Revelation 21). Paul's message to the pagan world is the fulfilled-Israel message: the one creator God is, through the fulfilment of his covenant with Israel, reconciling the world to himself. This involves, it seems, a triple exodus. Israel is redeemed, in the person of Jesus, for the sake of the world. Humankind is redeemed, through Jesus, so that the image of God may be restored. Thus creation itself is redeemed, and the creator God will be all in all. (*WSPRS*, 90-91)

This passage, along with how the apostle Paul has defined the Gospel, helps us think through how the Gospel relates even to our academic disciplines! If you think the Gospel is some "plan of salvation", then it's odd indeed to speak about the gospel-as-plan-of-salvation as relating to English literature, say, or to engineering, chemistry, or art. Plans of salvation are for people, not for academic disciplines. But once we get straight that 'Gospel' for Paul is the royal announcement that Jesus Christ is Lord over all creation, then relating the Gospel to our disciplines begins, I think, to make sense, though it doesn't necessarily make it easier. We're now asked to figure out how the fact that Christ is the Lord of our disciplines and professions changes how we must—as followers of Christ—begin to think anew about them and then to live accordingly.

Wright offers some hints as to how this might be worked out in our academic disciplines:

If you work in information technology, how is your discipline slanted? Is it slanted toward the will to power or the will to love? Does it exhibit the signs of technology for technology's sake, of information as a means of the oppression of those who do not have access to it by those who do? Is it developing in the service of true relationships, true stewardship and even true worship, or is it feeding and encouraging a society in which everybody creates their own private, narcissistic, enclosed world? Luther's definition of sin was *homo incurvatus in se*, 'humans turned in on themselves.' Does your discipline foster or challenge that? You may not be able to change the way the discipline currently works. You may be able to take some steps in that direction, given time and opportunity, but that isn't necessarily your vocation. Your task is to find the symbolic ways of doing things differently, planting flags in hostile soil, setting up signposts that say there is a different way to be human. And when people are puzzled at what you are doing, find ways—fresh ways—of telling the story of the return of the human race from its exile, and use those stories as your explanation. (*Challenge*, 185ff)

After elaborating how this might work in fine art, music or architecture, he then helpfully offers the following:

If you are to shape your world in following Christ, it is not enough to say that being a Christian and being a professional or an academic (to address these worlds particularly for the moment) is about high moral standards, using every opportunity to talk to people about Jesus, praying for or with your students, being fair in your grading and honest in your speaking. All that is vital and necessary, but you are called to something much, much more. You are called, prayerfully, to discern where in your discipline the human project is showing signs of exile and humbly and boldly to act symbolically in ways that declare that the powers have been defeated, that the kingdom has come in Jesus the Jewish Messiah, that the new way of being human has been unveiled, and to be prepared to tell the story that explains what these symbols are all about. And in all this you are to declare, in symbol and praxis, in story and articulate answers to questions, that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not; that Jesus is Lord and Marx, Freud and Nietzsche are not; that Jesus is Lord and neither modernity nor postmodernity is. When Paul spoke of the gospel, he was not talking primarily about a system of salvation but about the announcement, in symbol and word, that Jesus is the true Lord of the world, the true light of the world. (*Challenge*, 186ff)

One more very helpful thought from Dr. Wright. He reminds us that we live "between Easter and the consummation [of the kingdom of God], following Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and commissioned to be for the world what he was for Israel, bringing God's redemptive reshaping to our world." (*Challenge*, 179f) Where this comes to bear on the angst we often feel about whether our work matters, Wright very helpfully says the following:

Let us be clear, too, about the relation between our present work, our present reshaping of our world and the future world that God intends to make. Christians have always found it difficult to understand and articulate this and have regularly distorted the picture in one direction or the other. Some have so emphasized the discontinuity between the present world and our work in it on the one hand and the future world that God will make on the other that they suppose God will simply throw the present world in the trash can and leave us in a totally different sphere altogether. There is then really no point in attempting to reshape the present world by the light of Jesus Christ. Armageddon is coming, so who cares about acid rain or third-world debt? That is the way of dualism; it is a radically anticreation view point and hence is challenged head on by (among other things) John's emphasis on Easter as the first day of the new week, the start of God's new creation.

On the other hand, some have so emphasized the continuity between the present world and the coming new world that they have imagined we can actually build the kingdom of God by our own hard work.

Wright then points to the punch line of Paul's discourse on the resurrection of Jesus. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:58 (Wright's translation): "Therefore, my beloved family, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, inasmuch as you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain". The point is that the new world has already begun with Easter and Pentecost and what we do now is "already part of the kingdom-building that God is now setting forward in this new week of new creation." (*Challenge*, 180)

I close with this following thought. Integration of faith, learning, and practice requires strong and ongoing spiritual formation, in the community of fellow believers on campus and elsewhere within our disciplines (I call these 'integrating communities') who are working to help and encourage us to bring all things under the lordship of Christ. Such integration is perhaps more relevant to our non-believing friends in our departments than we might otherwise have imagined, and such integration may provide wonderful opportunities for evangelism. I still remember well presenting the vision of Graduate InterVarsity to a group of students at Daniel Hall. A non-Christian Chinese woman asked me afterward to say more about integration of faith and learning. She said she had not heard how relevant Christianity was to her life as a graduate student studying whatever it was she was studying. How relevant? Yes! And if we don't understand how the Gospel even could be relevant, then we don't yet understand the Gospel. More than one non-Christian philosophy professor has repented and believed the good news of Jesus in large part because of the work of Christian philosophers who took their faith seriously as they did philosophy. Thus integration of faith, learning, and practice also has a role in evangelism. So let us take seriously our calling to this kind of integration! Remember, our work in the Lord is not in vain!

### **Spiritual Formation.**

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Finally, God has pledged to conform his people to the image of his Son; God is re-making us into his own image and likeness! We currently live in that overlap between the present age, one that is filled with sin and its brokenness, where creation itself groans until the day of our redemption, and the age to come, an age that dawned in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ but which will be consummated at his return and our own resurrection. In anticipation of the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness, spiritual formation can be thought of as a process of being conformed to the image of Christ—in his sufferings as well as in his glory—for the sake of oneself, others, and the rest of creation to the glory of God. [Robert Mullhouland, *Invitation to a Journey* (IVP, 1993), 12, with R. Scott Rodin, *Stewards in the Kingdom: A Theology of Life in All Its Fullness* (IVP, 2000), 30, and with David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament theology of sanctification and holiness* (IVP, 1995)] The Gospel of Jesus Christ must shape us as God's renewed humanity as we live out its implications in a fallen world that seeks to shape us to itself. [From the UIUC GCF Vision Statement]

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There is salvation for all—irrespective of race, color, gender, language, national origin, social class, academic discipline, etc.—who repent and believe the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord! God came to each of us as individuals, and rescues "us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14). As we saw in our discussions of evangelism and Christian community, being ushered into the kingdom of God is to now be a part of the new community which is the people of God, with Jesus Christ as the head (see e.g. Col. 1:18). But God does not merely bring us into his kingdom and leave it at that; rather he spiritually forms us into the

people he wants us to be! I now briefly discuss what I think we should mean by 'spiritual formation' in GCF. These are offered as starting points to give at least some shape to what it is that we're after in the area of spiritual formation.

First, the beginning of a definition. Dr. Robert Mulholland spoke at one of our graduate student Winter Retreats a few years back and authored, *Invitation to Journey*, (IVP, 1993). He offers this as his definition, with successive chapters fleshing it out: "***Spiritual formation is a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.***" (12, emphasis his). This is the start of a good definition but I think it needs improvement in light of the discussion of the first three Ministry Commitments.

I deliberately put the discussion of spiritual formation at the end of this paper precisely to allow the discussions of the other Ministry Commitments to give much-needed shape and content to what I think spiritual formation should mean. It's too easy to fall into the cultural trap of expounding spiritual formation in an individualistic and privatistic way. That is, we want to avoid the trap of thinking of spiritual formation in any one-dimensional way of merely our "vertical relationship with God." Holiness is never merely a personal thing; it affects all our relationships as we shall see below.

I suggest now the following alteration to the definition Mulholland offered: "Spiritual formation is a process of being conformed to the image of Christ—in his sufferings as well as in his glory—for the sake of oneself, others, the rest of creation, and to the glory of God."

This definition affirms most of Dr. Mulholland's very helpful insights and incorporates relevant insights from theologians David Peterson, *Possessed by God* (IVP, 1995), R. Scott Rodin, *Stewards in the Kingdom: A Theology of Life in All Its Fullness* (IVP, 2000), and as you might have guessed by now, N.T. Wright.

Dr. Rodin argues that the vocation of each and every human being is to be a steward in the kingdom of God. 'Steward' is a relational term and human beings are stewards of four relationships: to God, to others, to oneself, and to the rest of creation. The kingdom belongs to God and we are his stewards. We are stewards as we bear God's image in his world. Rodin indicates how these four relationships are to be thought of as follows:

Stewards are by definition not owners, but they have a relationship with the owner in order to be a faithful steward.... The biblical steward invested the resources in the lives of those to whom the owner was inclined. Therefore there is a necessary relationship between the steward and the recipients of the resources being stewarded.... [W]hile the resources are not owned by the steward, the steward is expected to live from the resources and in that way be a steward to himself or herself. There is self-stewardship implied in the term....[T]here is a relationship between the steward and the resources themselves. Here issues of control, power, materialism, exploitation, waste, harvest and dominion need to be discussed. Here the steward faces the temptation to act the part of the owner. Here is where the dark side of ownership is manifested, and stewardship is abandoned. The term steward carries the identification of one who draws clear lines between investing and exploitation, between management and control, between caretaking and domination, between use and waste. Here the term steward is most poignant and most challenging. (*Stewards*, 30)

We were created by God, sovereignly placed in his world, and then given the great privilege and responsibility to be his image-bearers, living as faithful stewards with God as our only King. Having forsaken our calling to be stewards, we have sought instead to take the earth for ourselves (think of the builders of the Tower of Babel in Gen. 11; don't be like them!). In loving faithfulness, the covenant God called Abraham (Gen. 12) and began (as he had promised in Gen. 3) a plan to redeem all of creation. Then, again in faithfulness to his covenant promises, he sent his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ to redeem the world. By repenting and believing the good news that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all creation, we enter the new community. And remember that it will be only God's kingdom people who will inherit the earth (Matt. 6) when God brings his kingdom in its fullness. God's redeemed people are his renewed humanity, and he is forming us into the image and likeness of God (Col. 3.10, Eph. 4.24), which is, equivalently, being conformed to the image of God's beloved Son (Rom. 8.29).

Wright, Newbegin, Rodin, and Peterson all agree that we live in the overlap of the present age and the age to come. We have entered the kingdom of God when we responded to the Gospel in repentance and faith in Christ. But we are sent back into the fallen world to live out the Gospel as his renewed humanity (Wright), as

faithful agents of the kingdom of God (Newbegin), as stewards of the kingdom of God (Rodin).

Peterson nicely unpacks what Paul means by being 'conformed to the image of God' by looking at Romans 8.29 in light of all of chapter 8. According to him, Paul draws our attention to being conformed to Christ in his sufferings in the present age when even creation itself groans as it awaits our redemption (Rom. 8.18ff). We must live in faith and obedience in this present age, sharing in his sufferings if we're to share in Christ's glory in the age to come (think of Paul's yearning in Phil. 3.10-11!). One day we will (God has predestined it, Rom. 8.29) be conformed to the image and likeness of God—as God had created us all along to be! We will not be disembodied souls in a non-physical realm called 'heaven'. Rather God is spiritually forming us now for a transformed-physical life in the very physical new earth (see e.g. Isaiah 60 and Rev. 21). Whatever 'spiritual formation' means, it must be shaped by God's creational intent for us as his faithful image-bearing stewards of his kingdom; it must be shaped by the vision of the new heavens and earth; it must be shaped by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We've seen that the Gospel is an announcement that Jesus is Lord, and that this is not merely some new bit of information. Rather it carries with it a summons to repentance and faith in Christ. Thus spiritual formation requires nothing less than that we actively bring all aspects of our lives under the lordship of Jesus Christ. This requires that we put off of the old self, which means that we are to think and live no longer as those who are dead in their transgressions and sins, as those still in spiritual exile (see Eph. 2.1ff, 4.17ff). And it requires us to put on the new self, which is being conformed to the image of Christ, living as faithful stewards, as children of light, as citizens of the kingdom of God, as children of our heavenly Father (the biblical metaphors pile up!)—living in the expectation and hope of the new heavens and new earth, and pointing the way forward (Eph. 4.24). This requires the obedience that comes from faith that Paul speaks of in Romans 1.5.

Spiritual formation is, again, a process of being conformed to the image of Christ—in his sufferings as well as in his glory—for the sake of oneself, others, the rest of creation, and to the glory of God.

God has gifted us by his Spirit for service as his stewards of his kingdom. There are "certain basic spiritual disciplines that are absolutely essential for the exercise and sustenance of responsible obedience to the joys of the kingdom." (*Logic*, 103) These include learning to read the Bible, pray, etc. These disciplines are helpful only to the extent that they move us in the direction of Christlikeness as we seek to live lives of obedience in the overlap between the present age and the age that is to come.

I conclude with this final thought on idolatry. Spiritual formation, finally, must include looking soberly at ourselves and whatever gods we might be tempted to serve and worship while living out the Christian life—and renouncing them. Again, vintage Wright:

Here's the rub: idols demand sacrifices. If I want seriously to worship that which is not God, I must expect that certain things will have to move over and make way for it. In order to continue getting from idols the inflation we crave, we must offer up to them things that we might otherwise wish to preserve: honesty, chastity, kindness, respect for the earth and for persons, and so on... Western society likes feeling ten feet tall. Science and technology have done so much for us: we are better fed, better informed, better equipped, better housed, better entertained than ever before. We are larger than life, and we like it that way. And who stands in the way of this dream continuing? Some of them live in our midst: the poor, the homeless, those who live in cardboard boxes.... There are other things that stand in our way: the rain forests that are turning ever-brown under the steady drip of the acid rain from those same industries. There is a price to be paid for our idolatry. If we treat the world as a diamond mine, we are almost bound to treat it at the same time as a rubbish heap. There are sacrifices that we regularly offer on the altar of our materialistic neopaganism. And some of those sacrifices are human. (*Bringing*, 49)

The Christian life (Christian praxis) is living a different way of life, a different way of being human, a life shaped by the Gospel of the kingdom of God. These are the kinds of lives the world desperately needs to see—lives that are being shaped by the God who is preparing us for a new earth in which to be his renewed humanity, stewards of his kingdom in perfect relationship with God, our neighbors, ourselves and his world.

It seems to me, then, that the goal of seeing each Christian graduate student share and live out these Four Ministry Commitments is worthy of our efforts in GCF!

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