



How Retrieving Our Sacred Roots Can Renew and Refocus the Global Evangelical Movement

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A History of Serving Broken Communities In Christ

Since 1975, I have been involved in urban missions primarily targeting communities of poverty both here in the States and around the world. I have diligently sought to see how I could make the Gospel of Jesus Christ intelligible and convincing in a culturally-conducive way to those who are essentially unreached and untouched by our standard evangelical streams of thought and effort. Perhaps the most significant thing in this entire effort has been my concern that we make our central invitation to the living Christ and not simply provide empty platitudes or some bastardized version of an enculturated Christian schema to them. Frankly, many people we dealt with over the years had dramatic skepticism about Christianity and whether or not it was only for white, Western people, essentially a white man's religion, at best, or a historical hoax, at worst. Perhaps the Christian experience was merely a cleverly-designed tool to oppress those with no power, voice, or say in the main corridors of power in society. How would it ever be liberating for vulnerable, under-resourced urbanites living in communities of poverty? Many said it simply was not and could never be.

From the very start, it was clear to me that for the masses, especially in communities of poverty in America and around the world, there would be no way to smartly or adroitly help them understand who Jesus is if we did not go back to the basics come to create a baseline of thought and practice that would be authentic to Christianity and adaptable within their own culture. This adaptability's focus differed from accommodation to their cultural practice and understanding. Far from it, the heart of this was to help them understand that we are free, and that God's love was manifest in this way: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."¹ He manifested his love through the person of his Son as a gift for the world's

¹ 1 John 4.9-10, English Standard Version.

salvation. The initiative was from the Father's heart, not our love; rather, he loved us and gave his Son as a gift as an atoning sacrifice for our sin.

Searching and pondering the possibilities of where to begin, it became clear that we needed to rediscover Christianity's core teachings and practices without frankly being nostalgic about a pristine ancient church or cynical about a contemporary church that is syncretistic and anachronistic with its cultural milieu. In founding *The Urban Ministry Institute* in 1995, I determined to follow my conviction set by the example of my former professor and friend, the late Robert Webber², seeking to explore the common roots of our faith and discover ways I could work with my missionary colleagues in contextualizing the Great Tradition for leaders serving underserved neighborhoods. We began our work striving toward the possibility of an authentic spirituality for the urban poor that would survive and thrive in communities ravaged by social isolation, violence, economic deprivation, and psychological oppression.

Discovering Our Sacred Roots: the Origins of the Great Tradition

For more than 27 years, I have pursued developing a theological and spiritual schema written specifically to contextualize for communities of poverty the historic orthodox theology, worship, spiritual formation, and witness inspired by our common ancient consensus, called Sacred Roots. Sacred Roots seeks to retrieve and relate in broad outline the Christian faith and practice proclaimed by the apostolic Church and developed from the Scriptures from the time of the Lord Jesus Christ to the middle of the fifth century.³ We seek to understand this Apostolic Tradition as the Sacred Roots of our Christian identity.

² Robert Webber was my professor in historical theology at Wheaton Graduate school, and became a dear and trusted mentor as the years went by, and I have taught at the Robert Webber Institute of Worship in Florida. Some of his books were influential on my own thinking, including *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative*. Baker Academic, 2008.; *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life*. Baker Books, 2006; *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church*. Morehouse Publishing, 1989. *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*. Baker Books, 2002. *Worship is a Verb: Celebrating God's Mighty Deeds of Salvation*. Hendrickson Publishers, 1996. *The Secular Saint: A Case for Evangelical Social Responsibility*. Word Publishing, 1992. *Who Gets to Narrate the World?: Contending for the Christian Story in an Age of Rivals*. IVP Books, 2008. *Common Roots: The Original Call to an Ancient-Future Faith*. Zondervan, 2009. *Journey to Jesus: The Worship, Evangelism, and Nurture Mission of the Church*. Baker Books, 1999. *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*. Baker Books, 1999.

³ From my own primer on Sacred Roots (by the same name), I define this phenomenon this way: "Sacred Roots is our shorthand term for the Great Tradition of the Church, that deposit of faith, practice, and hope which has served as the backbone (to mix a metaphor) of the Church from the beginning, and what I'll be arguing is likewise the key for the renewal of the contemporary church. Objectively, it includes our rediscovery of the Story of God in Scripture which details the saving work of the triune God on our behalf, culminating in Christ's work of atonement for the world. Subjectively, it includes the Church's corresponding act of faith, worship, discipleship, and witness that has been expressed by his people throughout church history, because of that very work" cf. Don L. Davis.

We are committed to exploring ways this Tradition may renew evangelical faith and mission in the cities among the poor.⁴

The Great Tradition, sometimes called the Apostolic or the Patristic Tradition, provides the Church-at-large with the foundational teachings, beliefs, and writings that the early Christian Church Fathers and Mothers crafted on our essential confession, life, and faith. While many views exist regarding the actual content of this Tradition, generally, it includes the works of those thinkers and practitioners whose reflections and formulations crafted the rules of our nascent faith and helped clarify our most fundamental confessions. The list of saints who contributed to the formulation of our faith is broad and impressive whose lives and thoughts help fashion our faith from the beginning and include figures such as Irenaeus, Cyprian, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory the Great, John Chrysostom, and Basil the Great. Since the Great Tradition (which I call our Sacred Roots)⁵ helped form the foundation for our orthodox Christian theology and spirituality, this same Tradition must be rediscovered and reappropriated in church movements serving the poor around the poor world.

A host of problems confront those who seek to make the Christian faith plain today among those who live and work in communities of poverty. The need to contextualize the faith presses upon believers in every age and time to declare and contextualize God's revelation in Jesus Christ among people, that same revelation proclaimed by the Apostles and their churches, authoritatively recorded in Scripture, and announced and defended by the Church through its history.

At a time of genuine syncretism and the emergence of many substitute centers to faith, Christianity in the West appears to be halting, if not in stark decline. Its accommodation to political causes and

Sacred Roots: A Primer on Retrieving the Great Tradition. Wichita: TUMI/World Impact. 2010. Kindle edition, loc. 153.

⁴ The number of poor people is increasing exponentially in the world, with our testimony among them lagging behind as well. For instance, more than half of the world's population, or 4.2 billion people, now live in cities and over 1 billion people in the world live in informal settlements or slums, lacking access to basic services and infrastructure. In sub-Saharan Africa, more than 60% of the urban population lives in slums, and the number of people living in slums is expected to reach 3 billion by 2050 (cf. United Nations. *The World's Cities in 2018 - Data Booklet*). The emergence of COVID-19 exacerbated poverty conditions worldwide, with an estimated 71 million people projected to be pushed into extreme poverty in 2021 alone, cf. World Bank. *COVID-19 and Global Poverty: A Predictive Analysis.* (2021).

⁵ The early Church theologians referred to a developing apostolic tradition which was becoming standard for the faith and practice of the nascent Christian movement. "When, however, the Gnostics are confused from the Scriptures, they turn round and accuse the same Scriptures as if they were not correct, nor of authority. They say that they are ambiguous, and that the truth cannot be extracted from them by those who are ignorant of tradition. . . . But, again, when we refer them to that tradition which originates from the apostles, . . . they object to tradition. —Irenaeus, c. 180 (cf. David W. Bercot, ed. *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs.* Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, p. 599).

ideologies with its uneasy alliances of faith and political opportunism has blunted its message and testimony among many. Add to this its jettisoning of fundamental theological positions for easy-believism strategies of personal blessing and pragmatic success, the prophetic voice of the Church has been muted or silenced. Even among those traditions (little “t”) which cling steadfastly to a trinitarian/canonical/credal identity can wrestle with ideas and practices shaped more by civil religion, neo-paganism, run-amok focus on self-interest, or desires to be embraced as rationalistic by the larger culture. To be relevant or reasonable, one can quickly abandon the faith once delivered for all times to the saints by the apostles (“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” Jude 1:3, ESV).

As one called on making the faith plain in communities of poverty around the world, I have sought to address these problems over the years in a straightforward manner, both missiologically and theologically. I have sought to exegete both the culture and the faith to provide a clear and compelling witness of our Faith. In my judgment, a return to and a recovery of our Sacred Roots, wisely and sensitively interpreted, can strengthen those who embrace the historic faith to offer a renewed witness of our shared consensus, articulated by the ancient Church and guarded and defended by its allies in Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and our Protestant churches. The nascent Church lived in an environment plagued by idolatry, heresy, and political oppression and still thrived and grew. Like them, we can overcome our dragons if we rediscover and reassert our allegiance to the biblical/kingdom storyline of Scripture outlined in Israel's history, and brought to completion in the incarnation of Jesus, the arrival of God's Kingdom in him, and his subsequent death, resurrection, and the ascension.

A retrieval of our Sacred Roots can revitalize and refocus the global Christian movement, especially in communities of poverty, in four ways. Retrieving those Roots provides us with a confessional stance, an incarnational presence, a formational journey, and a missional expression, inspired and shaped by the Church's allegiance to the trinitarian, canonical story. Each of these realities is a direct response to God's working in history through Israel, Christ, and his Church.

A Confessional Stance

A recovery of our Sacred Roots can help the global Christian movement to solidify its confessional stance and its unapologetic commitment to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. At the center of the Christian faith lies our conviction that the triune God has revealed himself in history in the story of Israel, in the

person and work of Jesus Christ, and through the actions of the apostles and formulation of the Church, God's kingdom community in the world today.

This narrative telling of the revelation lies at the heart of our faith and has historically been confessed as the essence of our divinely-authorized canonical narrative. As articulated from the beginning, we see the works of Jesus Christ as a summing up and fulfillment, as a recapitulation of human history. In him all the revelation of God is summarized, fulfilled, and consummated, and even human history itself outlined and explained. The Church, from the start, has been a confessing community; it bore witness to the apostolic message and evaluated all things in conjunction with the fidelity of its message. They sought to clarify the essence of the apostolic message about Jesus Christ, identifying the components of their testimony into discreet rules, which later became the very articles of our shared faith. These rules were the precursors to the baseline statements of belief that would summarize the essential tenets of a biblical faith,⁶ made explicit in such creeds as the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds.

This primacy of our commitment to the Christian telling of the story is precisely why each generation must rediscover the Sacred Roots of the Church. If the Church is primarily a confessing community, its articulation and stance upon that confession must always be of primary importance. While many things can be said of the global Christian movement, it is essentially, and finally, a movement of affirmation, witness, and belief. We are believers, and we owe it to every generation and age to rearticulate what we believe, why, and what the implications of that belief are. Retrieving the primary canonical narrative will guide emerging Christian movements to understand and articulate their core beliefs persuasively to their neighbors, families, and societies.

Rather than jettisoning all references to faith and theology, the Church must strongly rediscover and reaffirm its tenets, crafting afresh a credible confessional stance that will enable us to share and even

⁶ Webber in his corpus reiterates the biblical nature of the ancient Church, along with its leaders, shapers, and theologians. "H. E. W. Turner, in *The Pattern of Christian Truth*, has successfully demonstrated the reverence of the Fathers toward Holy Scripture. They were not, as Harnack once suggested, metaphysical theologians, but biblical theologians. Any reading of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, Origen, Athanasius, Basil, Jerome, or Augustine shows that they were steeped in the Scriptures, and that they would agree with the judgment of St. John Chrysostom: 'Tarry not, I entreat, for another to teach thee; thou hast the oracles of God. No man teacheth thee as they; for he indeed oft grudgeth much for vainglory's sake and envy. Hearken, I entreaten you, all ye that are careful for this life, and procure books that will be medicines for the soul. If ye will not any other, yet get you at least the New Testament, the Apostolic Epistles (emphasis added), the Acts, the Gospels, for your constant teachers. If grief befall thee, dive into them as into a chest of medicines; take thence comfort of thy trouble, be it loss, or death, or bereavement of relations; or rather dive not into them merely but take them wholly to thee; keep them in thy mind.'" Webber, Robert E. *Common Roots: The Original Call to an Ancient-Future Faith* (Kindle Locations 2582-2587). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

convince our contemporaries of the legitimacy of our faith. We must do all we can to ensure that the direct testimony regarding Jesus of Nazareth and his Kingdom is accurately communicated, critically understood, and carefully communicated to the people in our culture and world. As confessors, we must provide both the vocabulary and constructs to help our congregations and the world know what God did in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Establishing afresh our confessional clarity based on our once-for-all shared understandings and commitments can empower us, on the one hand, to avoid heresy or false teachings that contradict the basic principles of the faith and, on the other, provide us with statements of our common ground that can serve as new starting points for theological discussion and debate, and missional cooperation. Only a retrieval of our Sacred Roots, which emphasized fidelity to the canonical narrative of the triune God's salvation through the Son, can ensure that the fundamental beliefs of Christianity are not lost over time or distorted by misunderstandings.

In a day of mind-numbing divisions and alienation among Christian movements and traditions, only a repositioning of faith around the critical articles of faith established on our common foundation can provide ground for a union and collaboration among believers across denominations and cultures. Despite our well-debated differences in particular theologies, spiritual practices, worship styles, and ecclesial policies and procedures, Christians from different backgrounds can quickly reaffirm their allegiance to our foundational rules of faith and our shared credal convictions. A shared confessional stance built on our consensus of allegiance to the Great Tradition can facilitate a larger sense of community and collaboration among us, despite our differences and help us both emphasize and experience our unity as the body of Christ.

Finally, this confessional stance from our Sacred Roots can be a vital source of comfort and inspiration for believers today. Our faith is grounded in the historical truth and apostolic testimony of the incarnation of Christ into the world. We anchor our confession in the canonical Scriptures, in close association with the theological interpretations and spiritual practices passed down from the apostles, the early Fathers and Mothers of the Church, and its guardians through church history. We confess one Lord and one faith and place no credence in contemporary approaches that ignore our Gospel rules, articles of faith, or our ecumenical creeds. As the Vincentian canon suggests, retrieving our Sacred Roots can provide a renewed confessional stance, "the tradition that has been believed everywhere, always and by all."

Jesus spoke clearly that the world would see our unity, through which it would come to know that the Father sent him into the world (John 17:20-23). By rediscovering our common roots through the resources of the Great Tradition, emerging Christian movements can find fresh assurance in the legitimacy of their faith, and draw strength from the transparent truth that the just ones live by their faith. What could be more inspiring, clarifying, and moving for old and new traditions to rediscover the common roots of our faith, the shared source of our hope and life together, and the compelling blessed hope of the return of Christ? What could provide a better testimony than our unbelieving neighbors, than a rediscovery of our foundational faith, believed, affirmed, and shared by all since the beginning,⁷ the same faith that has endured such opposition and continues to stand the test of time? Who knows what renewal and refreshing of the pastoral ministry of our churches could occur if we embraced the time-tested and gospel-centered content of the ancient Rule of faith, leading to new engagement of Scripture, theological assessment of contemporary culture, and new vistas in Gospel mission.

An Incarnational Presence

Next, a recovery of our Sacred Roots can vivify and rejuvenate our notion of the importance of the visible Church in the world. At a time when it is fashionable for preachers to say to their congregants, “We don’t go to Church; we are the Church,” our time witnessed a precipitous drop in church attendance among many denominations. Our theologies of the dichotomy between the visible and invisible Church have undermined the concept of the presence of Jesus amid his people. We have failed to either believe or to take the visible nature of the Church seriously. The articles of faith and practices of the spirituality of the Great Tradition affirmed the essential nature of believers gathered in the community.⁸ Rather than offering clichés about the meaning of Christians in their meetings, the ancient

⁷ Vincent of Lerins (d. 450) in his *Commonitory* lays out the argument for the rule of faith being built on what believers have believed everywhere, always, since the beginning: “Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense “Catholic,” which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally. This rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent. We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith to be true which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is manifest were notoriously held by our holy ancestors and fathers; consent, in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at least of almost all priests and doctors” cf. Webber, Robert E.. *Common Roots: The Original Call to an Ancient-Future Faith* (Kindle Location 2789). Zondervan.

⁸ The intimate relationship between the ancient Rule of faith, the Scriptures, and our lives is evident in the commentary of the Fathers regarding faith and life, e.g., “Wherever it will be manifest that the true Christian rule and faith are, there likewise will be the true Scriptures and the correct expositions thereof—and all the Christian traditions.” – Tertullian, c. 197 (cf. David W. Bercot, ed. *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, p. 147).

Church affirmed the centrality of the Church in God's contemporary Kingdom enterprise, God's embassy in a fallen world, however small or unimpressive. Our Lord even said that where two or three are gathered in his name, there he would be, in their very midst (Matt 18). Today's Church must recommit to participating in the mission of God (*Missio Dei*) and do so in a manner that displays our unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity.

The theological notion of incarnation is a cornerstone of our Christian confession and worship. As we confess, the Word (the divine Logos who was one with the Father, co-equal, and of the same essence as him) became flesh and dwelt among (tabernacled alongside) us. His presence among his people is the distinctive reality of their authentic faith. The Church's long-considered discussions on the nature of the transformations of the elements in the Eucharist reflect on what it means that Jesus dwells among his people. The Church is the body of Christ in the world, with him as its head. The gathering of believers in Word and Table becomes a dwelling place of God through the Spirit through faith in Christ. The people of faith are the temple of God (1 Cor. 3, 6), and when they gather, God gathers with them as they sing, proclaim, and reenact the story of God's love in Christ through the Eucharist. The Great Tradition affirms the centrality of the people of God in the gathered community, asserting God's presence in and among his people in the indwelling Holy Spirit, in both Baptism and the Eucharist, and the many expressions of the Spirit in the lives and journeys of God's people. Christ's incarnational presence is not music and song alone, exegetical teaching, or Hollywood-influenced production-level events. God is in our midst. His presence enlivens and refreshes us and provides us with hope and strength.

Our Sacred Roots challenge us to experience the incarnational presence of God in an authentic Christian community, as God's people worship in their celebration of his redemption through the Word and Table, as we mark time together following God's actions through Christ's incarnation through Church Calendar. As priests and priestesses of God, we gather to experience God's presence in community, fellowshiping, worshiping, praying, learning from, and supporting one another. We are one Church—one, holy, catholic (universal), and apostolic. In our gathering together, we experience the presence of Christ as community and belonging. We know and believe that our faith cannot be lived out in isolation; only in the regular gathering can we build relationships and find support, sharing mutual struggles and triumphs, praying for and encouraging each other.

The affirmation of the centrality of the Church in the Great Tradition is essential to faith and discipleship. From the beginning of our shared faith, believers have sung, preached, reflected upon, interpreted, prayed, and enacted the canonical Story of God through its liturgy in Word and sacrament.

In our regular, dynamic gatherings of Christian assembly, we have offered our God spiritual sacrifices acceptable to him and provided tangible, visible evidence of God's presence in the world in the body of Christ. Global awakenings among emerging church movements require refreshing worship where the actual presence of God is encountered among the people of God, however modest, poor, or ordinary that assembly might be. Today's focus on lecture-oriented, performance-centered, professionally-produced worship has drifted from Word and Table's historic, elegant gatherings, where believers come to worship the triune God. When believers gather to sing and celebrate God's acts in history, to hear his Word taught, and to reenact Christ's passion through the Lord's Supper, they transcend the hyped, overstimulated habits of worship cultivated in many of our worship experiences today.

Without question, God's presence among his people represents the signature reality of what is defined as acceptable spiritual worship in the Scripture. The call to holiness and purity, separation from unbelievers, the standards of sacrifice, feast and festival, and consecration from idols and false prophets are all related to the awesome responsibility of living as a community in God's presence. Because the LORD God dwelt among his people, they had to cleanse themselves and be holy. Acceptable worship and praise are the natural corollaries to God's presence among his own, providing space and opportunity for every priest and priestess of God to sing, pray, share, and lift their voices to God in praise and thanksgiving. Only in the gathering can we experience the incarnational presence of Christ, the power of collective prayer and petition, and the strengthening of our faith-deepened relationship with God.

A Formational Journey

The Christian life is often compared to being a sojourner on a journey. This analogy emphasizes that Christians are temporary residents here, and their ultimate destination is the Kingdom of God. We are not permanent earthly residents here on earth in this life; our citizenship is in heaven, though we are in the world. Therefore, spiritual formation must enable disciples to order their priorities, focusing on eternal things rather than temporary pleasures. Believers must focus their lives and hope on Christ as those called to movement and growth. This journey requires effort and perseverance, clarity and endurance. In this life, we face persecution, trials, hard times, challenges, and problems along the way. Nevertheless, our shared discipleship has a distinct destination. At the journey's end, we will be reunited

with the Savior and dwell in his Kingdom forever. Our journey of discipleship helps us deal with the problems of this life and keep our faith strong so that we are ready for the next.⁹

To be a believer is to be a follower of Christ, one of the talmidim of Messiah Yeshua. The nascent Church sought to structure faithfully what the faith journey represented. The first formative journey, that of a catechumen, was meant to go from a seeker, attached to a guiding and vouching sponsor, to a baptized believer, an official community member in good standing. Now, as an accepted member, the baptized believer was to follow the path of Messiah alongside the members of the community, to become a faithful ambassador of Christ. This new path was intended to become a lifelong spiritual formation and discipleship process. These concentric and interrelated journeys signified to the community the process of authentic faith, detailing what authentic followership meant.

Said in another way, the Christian life of spirituality and spiritual formation grows out of our understanding of the Christian story, and what it means in the Church. Colwell captures the union of the story of God with the life and disciples of the Church:

Beginning with the affirmation of God as the one who comes (and who will come), the Church moves through the narrative of Christ's birth, of his baptism and revelation to the world, of his temptation and his journey to suffering and the Cross, of his resurrection and ascension, of his sending of the Spirit, and of his kingly reign with those made holy in him. Through prayers, canticles, readings, and responses the Church not only contemplates these stages of the story, it re-lives them, it enters into them, it is shaped by them. The Church journeys through the Christian Year with the Christ whose story is here narrated; the Church joins him in his journey and reaffirms his journey as its own journey, the journey by which it is defined and in which it participates. This is no detached propositional dogmatics, this is a repetition and an indwelling of the story that is deeply engaging and inherently transformative. . . . To celebrate the Christian Year is to engage in theological reflection that is narrational, doxological, and truly systematic.¹⁰

⁹ The true nature of discipleship is not merely form, structure, or process but the power of God demonstrated through his presence revealed in the daily life journeys of believers, filled with the Holy Spirit. This pattern is consistent with the apostles themselves, who, by human standards were not particularly gifted or well-known figures but were led by the power of God. "From Jerusalem, twelve men went out into the world. There were uneducated and of no ability in speaking. But by the power of God, they proclaimed to every race of men [sic] that they were sent by Christ to teach the word of God to everyone. – Justin Martyr, c. 160 (cf. David W. Bercot, ed. *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, p. 260).

¹⁰ John E. Colwell. *The Rhythm of Doctrine*. Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2007, p. 7.

The heart of discipleship among God's people in the ancient Church involved a spiritual formation anchored on the biblical narrative that gave voice to God's divine acts of salvation. Spirituality flowed from the confession of faith, attached to the story of God, resulting in faith and public baptism into the life of Christ and his Body. Through baptism, we are made one with Christ in his death, burial, resurrection, ascension, session, and return. Spirituality is unknowable from a union with Christ inaugurated by the process of the catechumenate and the baptism of a new believer. When spirituality is disconnected from life in Christ and the people of God, it can easily become legalistic, syncretistic, and disembodied and focused overmuch on narcissistic, self-centered themes, including personal therapy, professional success, or ideological allegiances. The global Christian movement cries out for spiritual practices and themes influenced by authors, artists, and spiritual directors who are deeply influenced by an apostolic vision rooted in the narrative of the triune God who saved through his Son.

The shapers of the Christian vision measured false spirituality by its distance from and ignorance of the revelation of God in Christ. From birth till death, a believer's life was translated as a journey to Jesus, which would flower into a path to maturity becoming an ambassador of Christ.

Pastoral oversight, which involves the spiritual guidance and care of individuals and communities, could be revolutionized by the ancient faith to ensure that our contemporary discipleship remains grounded in our timeless truths. The beliefs, practices, and teachings of the early Christian Church were uniquely grounded upon the person of Jesus Christ and the apostles' writings. Stitching spirituality to the person of Jesus of Nazareth and the beliefs and practices passed down through the centuries can enable pastors to laser focus their equipping ministries with the laity on what it means to walk every day informed by the pattern of Christ, where they live.

Drawing on the wisdom of the Great Tradition, pastoral leaders can learn by becoming friends with the ancients through their texts and writings. By befriending the ancients through their writing and examples, today's pastors can provide guidance and support to individuals and communities similar to the ancients. The early Church confronted and overcame many barriers and difficulties (e.g., paganism, Gnosticism, political oppression) through their shared allegiance to the teachings of Christ and the apostles and the Tradition that flowed from that teaching. The pastoral ministry would be well-served if it began rooted in the essential history and traditions of the Faith and adapted the resources culturally and situationally to suit the needs of the saints it encounters. By staying connected to the ancient faith, pastors can provide relevant and timeless guidance, helping individuals and communities navigate the challenges and complexities of the modern world with faith, hope, and resilience.

One option for a revitalized faith among the global Christian movement could easily include a catechumenate informed by a history of spirituality taught and lived in the ancient Church. That catechumenate was shaped by a public commitment to fleshing out corporately the Story of God, expressing faith and hope in personal and communal identification with the living Christ of God's Story through the Christian Calendar, celebrated and embodied in the community. Such a vision could invite followers of Jesus to sojourn together in vital spirituality rooted in the Christ event, mapping out credible processes whereby disciples live together in a common identity and shared spirituality, all informed by personal devotion to Christ and his Kingdom.

A Missional Engagement

Finally, retrieving our Sacred Roots could reboot the contemporary Church's expression of its engagement with those outside the faith. Because we are aliens and sojourners, ambassadors and witnesses, we must represent the age to come in this present world. We are the body of Christ, agents of the Kingdom of God, in the world and not of it. To be a disciple of Jesus is to represent the interests and life of the Kingdom to come where God has placed us today. We bring the life of the Cross, the humility of the Nazarene, and his lowliness and service, in a practical commitment to God's mission in the world in our unique life circles among our family, friends, and associates.

To understand what this means is to engage in God's mission (*Missio Dei*).¹¹ God has determined to save a remnant of humankind from Adam's lineage and has purposed to save them through the paschal work of his Son on the Cross. As disciples of Jesus, we follow the pattern of the Nazarene in our personal, vocational, professional, and spiritual lives, striving to embody his character and values in our relationships and actions. This participation in the *missio Dei* is not merely a congregational or tradition-wide effort, i.e., a global effort of the Christian Church alone. Instead, it touches upon and encompasses

¹¹ The ancient Church saw the story of Christian faith with God Godself at the heart of the drama, with his own working, movements, and actions dictating and finalizing the salvation we cherish. God is not some standby or bit-player in the story; salvation is at his initiative, with his mission at the center of the story's meaning and fulfillment. **"Error! Main Document Only.** But underlying all this great variety is the dynamic movement, similar to the plot of a drama, that binds the whole together. The biblical drama, however, is unique in that God appears in the cast. Not only is God the Author who stands behind the scenes prompting and directing the drama, but God also enters onto the stage of history as the Chief Actor—the protagonist. The biblical plot is the working out of God's purpose for the creation in spite of all efforts to oppose it. The denouement is reached, according to the conviction of the Christian community, when the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth are proclaimed as the sign of God's decisive victory. In the light of this climactic event, the earlier stages of the story are understood *with a deeper and larger meaning* [italics mine]." Bernhard W. Anderson, *The Unfolding Drama of the Bible*. 4th ed. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2006, pp. 12-13.

the task of representing the Kingdom of God in life situations, in the roles we live and play, and in our personal lives. This representation extends our roles as priests and priestesses of God and ambassadors of Christ. As followers of Jesus, each of us is called to live out the values of the Kingdom in the present, in our personal lives, where we live and work, bringing glimpses of its beauty and justice into our world. We may not be evangelists by gifting, but all disciples are evangelists by command; the Savior wants us to share the Good News, prioritize the interests of the Kingdom, and demonstrate our hospitality and generosity to those who need to experience his mercy and grace.

Returning to our Sacred Roots calls each church to give every follower of Jesus the tools they need to be ambassadors of the Kingdom where God has put them. This representation includes their families, workplaces, friendship circles, associates, neighbors, and communities, even strangers and enemies. A lifestyle of the Kingdom makes every Christian a kingdom ambassador, suggesting in every endeavor, we deny ourselves, live lives of holiness and honor, and pursue excellence in all things.

Rediscovering our Sacred Roots can teach us how to live persuasive lives even while facing opposition, rejection, and persecution. Through the examples, testimonies, writings, and insights of the believers who have gone on before, we can equip contemporary saints to live out their faith prophetically, learning how to represent Christ and his Kingdom in all facets of our contemporary culture. Suppose we embrace our kingdom identity, our true selves in Christ. In that case, we can share the Good News through our testimonies, not only to our circle of friends, families, and associates but also to the lost, least, and unlovely. We can love and serve those who are immigrants, the homeless, the broken and the voiceless, the poor, the forgotten, and the oppressed.

As agents of Christ, our lives can now become how we reveal our union with Christ and connection to the people of God. Through a straightforward process of incorporating believers into faith, we can initiate seekers into faith through baptism and incorporate them into the people of God, making our confessional stance. In our gathering with the people of God, we share the incarnational presence through the Word and the Table and embody the story of Christ in spiritual formation through the Church Year. In counseling and soul care, we enable others to understand their life stories in juxtaposition to God's Story. In our present relationships, we embody the Story's meaning through acts of honor, excellence, hospitality, and generosity. Through sharing the Gospel, we announce the Good News of the Story to all who have never heard of God's great Drama.

Retrieving Our Sacred Roots

Our use of the phrase "Sacred Roots" refers to our efforts to retrieve in broad outline the Great Tradition, i.e., that distinct and determinative Christian faith and practice which developed from the Scriptures from the time of the Lord Jesus Christ to the middle of the fifth century. With hearts determined to be both historically credible and freshly contemporary, we strive to understand this rich body of Tradition, recognizing it as the "sacred roots" of our Christian identity. Together we explore ways that these Christ-centered, biblical roots can renew evangelical faith and mission in the cities among the poor.

I have dedicated my life to draw together urban churches, pastors and leaders, denominations, and associations to recover for their spirituality and mission the Bible's salvation history in Abraham and the people of Israel, and to do so informed by the Great Tradition of the Church. I have equally sought to regain in my theological vision a theology elucidating a prophetic and apostolic witness to Jesus Christ about which that biblical history articulates. The majesty of the prophetic and apostolic witness to Christ can recenter our worship and witness from idiosyncratic emphases on culture to the deep roots of Scripture informed by the Great Tradition.

We must reaffirm that the revelations of Scripture and the apostolic witness the Church has believed and defended are sacred, not in a hokey or oddball sense, but as testimonies of God's acts in Jesus Christ. These roots are sacred because Christianity is, at its core, a historical revelation: God has spoken to us in history, culminating in Jesus Christ. Only in the faithful acts of the covenant-making and keeping God of the Scriptures do we come to know God's story of love in Christ, and by faith in him, we make that story (his-story) our own. These acts and the testimony about them, these roots, when retrieved and embraced, can renew and refresh all branches of global spirituality and mission. Contemporary urban church theology, worship, discipleship, and mission can enrich itself as it reestablishes and reembodies the wisdom embodied in the ancient Church's theology, liturgy, and mission.

Those who share an affinity with this theological project of rediscovering our Sacred Roots can help to encourage urban poor Christian leaders and congregations to rediscover the power of the *Christus Victor* motif of the Great Tradition and to restore in its theology, worship, discipleship, and mission today the same Christ-centered passion displayed by the ancient, undivided Church. This rich legacy of faith, theology, and action is the spiritual heritage of all believers, predating the distinctions of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant thought.

Indeed, ours is a perilous time for faith and discipleship. Many traditions eclipse or jettison the content of the biblical narrative of the triune God's work in creation, Israel, and Christ. Where faith has been

shortchanged, worship has become performance, and gimmicks, series, gadgetry, and shock tactics have replaced a thoughtful focus on God's cosmic drama in Christ. We need renewal today. Only clear voices anchored in the canonical Scriptures and unashamed of the triune God's saving acts in Christ can regain the prophetic message necessary to reignite living faith in our global Christian movement. Our Sacred Roots represent a remarkable opportunity to rediscover a faith that is vital, that will enable us to rediscover the same Gospel that spread through the world centuries ago despite challenge and persecution. That faith touched the world. If we embrace the same, it will do so again.