

INTRODUCTION

When I wrote the first edition of *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*, I did not know that it was about a new monastic movement. I did not even mention new monasticism or MacIntyre's anticipation of "another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict" in the *CRUX* article that generated the invitation to write the book. But as I wrote the first edition of this book and came to the end of *After Virtue*, I realized that MacIntyre's cryptic remark in the closing sentence of his book provided a fifth lesson for the church. My last chapter on "New Monasticism," then, became something of an appendix to the earlier, more developed exposition of MacIntyre's contribution to the church's living faithfully in a fragmented world.

Until 2003. That year my son-in-law, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, browsed through *Living Faithfully* as he thought about his final project for a course in Christian Hospitality taught by Margaret Kim Peterson. He connected the chapter on new monasticism and the practice of Christian hospitality with the vision and calling that had been guiding my daughter for five years. All of that came together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as Leah and Jonathan committed themselves to establishing a new monastic community of hospitality in Durham, North Carolina, where Jonathan would be attending Duke Divinity School. It was then that Leah and Jonathan moved to the Walltown Neighborhood of Durham and helped establish the Rutba House.

In 2004, Jonathan used a grant from the Fund for Theological Education to gather people together to consider the call to a new monasticism. After that gathering, a lively network of new monastic communities developed through connections to long-established communities (including the Benedictines) and through the establishment of new communities.

The vision and energy of these communities and their embrace of the vision for a new monasticism calls for continuing discernment of God's guidance for new monastic communities, threats and pitfalls that we face, and those things necessary for sustaining faithfulness in our life together and before the watching world.

This new edition of *Living Faithfully* seeks to provide those resources for new monastic communities. Now that I know that the book is about new monasticism from beginning to end, it seemed good to rewrite it extensively in order to direct the exposition and argument of every chapter toward the call for a new monasticism.

This new edition is also an opportunity to develop the vision for a new monasticism, respond to criticisms, and correct misunderstandings. Since the publication of *Living Faithfully* and the increasing visibility of new monastics, the media have given some attention to the movement—newspapers, radio programs, television, and magazines have been intrigued. This coverage presents a problem of discernment for new monastics.

Since new monasticism is rooted in a stringent critique of modernity and postmodernity, it must be very wary of its relationship to institutions that are so deeply shaped by those cultures. In addition, since new monasticism is committed in its essence to building local community and serving locally, it has to resist becoming dissipated by wider exposure. Its ministry and witness are local.

At the same time, part of the argument of this book is that the church needs the life and witness of new monastic communities to learn to live with its history, expose the failure of the Enlightenment project, explain the contingency of its collapse into postmodernity so that postmodernity loses its veneer of inevitability and inescapability, recover a more coherent life of discipleship, and learn the gospel more fully. So doesn't all of that call for a larger witness than the local? Isn't access to the media part of fulfilling the mission of the new monastics?

The way through this tension is a process of discernment—of practical moral reasoning engaged in by communities that are seeking to be well formed. In the early years of community formation, most energy should be directed locally. Communities will take some time to mature and to live into their rule and their life together. The practices of discernment need to be developed in relation to local relationships and tasks—local meaning not only the new monastic community but also its neighbors,

friends, and church. So part of the discernment process in relation to media interest will be to discern whether a new monastic community is mature enough to even consider a media inquiry. Here the network of new monastic communities should be a resource as a new monastic community consults with another community to discern its calling in a particular instance.

In addition to the tension that exists between the mission of new monastics and the interests of the media, the actual content of media coverage presents a challenge for new monastics. One of the biggest challenges, especially within the evangelical community, is to differentiate the new monastics from the Christian communes of the 1960s and 1970s. Most of those communities were short-lived. Many may suspect that new monastic communities will be short-lived too. That is certainly possible, and even if it is the case this movement may still be of God and may have a long-lasting impact should the new monastic communities disappear.

But there are some important differences between those Christian communes and the new monastics. First, most of the communes of the 60s and 70s retreated from the culture into geographically isolated, inward-turning life. It is instructive that two of those early communities that have thrived—Jesus People USA (J-PUSA) and Reba Place Fellowship—thrust themselves into the midst of the culture and engaged in holistic mission. These are both marks of new monasticism. So it is a profound misunderstanding of the new monastics to identify them with the separatist mentality of communes of the 60s and 70s. New monastics are living intentional, disciplined lives in response to a critique of the culture, but the nature of that critique, and more importantly their understanding of the gospel, lead them more deeply into the culture and into mission in the midst of the world, not into a geographical isolation and purist withdrawal from the world.

A second difference between the communes and the new monastics is their relation to the church. For the communes, their way of life was rooted in a rejection of “the establishment,” including the church. For the new monastics, their movement is marked by “humble submission to Christ’s body, the church.” This submission may take many different forms and because of the looseness of the movement may not consistently be practiced everywhere and always. But the commitment is there and the various communities do seek to hold one another accountable to this commitment.

A third difference between these two movements is their motivation. This is admittedly difficult to discern with certainty. However, it seems relatively clear to me that the communes were often rooted in an idealistic, thinly Christianized Age-of-Aquarius mentality. By contrast, the new monastics are grounded in a realism about their own sinfulness that comes from the ancient practices of the church.¹ They are also schooled by John Perkins and others in realism about the kind of life and the time that are required to be faithful to God's calling to a particular place. This schooling connects directly with a new monastic vow of stability.

In addition to differentiating the new monastics from Christian communes of the 60s and 70s, it is also important to continually address the accusation that the call to new monastic communities is a withdrawal from the church's call to mission in the world. I anticipated this accusation in the first edition of *Living Faithfully* when I wrote, "this call to a new monasticism may sound irresponsible. Some will label such a vision 'sectarian.'"² I then sought to disarm this accusation—or at least provide a context for a good argument about the allegation of irresponsible withdrawal. Nevertheless, the accusation is made—and made without due attention to my argument.

In a long footnote, D. A. Carson makes the following claim:

Even though Wilson revises MacIntyre's appeal to a "new monasticism," the resulting picture is of a separatist community, a sort of updated Anabaptist community. Speaking of tradition, that is one of only several possible models that appeal to Scripture to justify a set of relations between church and the broader culture. Doubtless the best-known typology is the five-fold scheme of H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956). Wilson's adoption of one of those patterns without wrestling with whether or not any of the other four might have equal or better claim to biblical warrant is doubtless prompted by the fact that, as he himself attests, he first learned to read MacIntyre under the tutelage of Stanley Hauerwas. For myself, I am inclined to think that all five patterns are found in Scripture but that each is tied to peculiar historical circumstances. I defend this view in a forthcoming publication.³

1. Several of the new monastics learned this discipline from Chris Hall, professor of Theology at Eastern University.

2. Wilson, *Living Faithfully* (1997), 71.

3. Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 146.

Before addressing the specific critique of new monasticism in this quote, two preliminary concerns must be cleared away. First, the appeal to Niebuhr is problematic in light of the criticisms that have been rightly directed toward his work. The helpfulness of Niebuhr's typology and of his descriptions of the types is highly contested today.⁴ For Carson to simply assign "new monasticism" to Niebuhr's "Christ against culture" type neglects the nuance I offer in my exposition. Secondly, it is wrong for Carson to be "doubtless" about why I do not consider the other four options that Niebuhr offers. Indeed, at one level it is offensive to suggest that I come to the conclusions that I do because I am "under the tutelage of Stanley Hauerwas." I am honored to be associated with Hauerwas and join with him in our concern for the church's life and witness to the gospel, but for Carson to suggest that I have not thought about these matters or to hint that I have no reasons for my argument or position other than Stanley Hauerwas's influence is a clever and vicious put-down that is unworthy of a trained exegete who should know "the personalist heresy" and recognize it in his own writing.

Now to the matter that is most directly relevant to "new monasticism"—the observation that it leads to "a separatist community." Although I made a number of comments about the strategic, tactical, and contingent elements of the need for a new monasticism in *Living Faithfully* (70–72), I think I think I left open—slightly—the possibility that new monastic communities could develop into isolated, quietistic communities that seek to establish and maintain their purity, to maintain some sort of barrier between themselves and the wider culture in a quest to establish and maintain their purity. But such a quest is unfaithful to the vision that the entire book lays out. It is for the sake of the mission of the church, and thus for the sake of the world, that God is calling new monastic communities into being. So if their life is not completed in mission, then they are not faithful to God's. It is also the case that only a very narrow and tendentious understanding of "Anabaptist community" could be useful to Carson in this context.

In Carson's footnote he wonders why I do not consider the alternatives in Niebuhr's typology. I do not directly consider those other types partly because I think that Niebuhr's entire project is misleading; to take

4. Stassen et al., *Authentic Transformation*; Gustafson, "Preface"; Carter, *Rethinking*; Stackhouse, *Making*. D. A. Carson himself provides a more nuanced account of these matters in his later work (2008).

it as a point of departure misdirects the discussion from the beginning. In my text, I argue quite clearly that the call for a new monasticism is directly related to the entire forgoing analysis of our culture and my theological reframing of MacIntyre's argument. (I was thinking of 2 Cor 10: 1–6 while writing the book. My intent was to emulate Paul.) I do think that we may discern God working in many different ways in the world, but I also believe that given the argument of *After Virtue* and the lessons of *Living Faithfully*, we need new monastic communities to discern those ways because so much of the church's life is compromised and co-opted by a culture that is anti-Christ.⁵

This book is written under the conviction that the church in Western culture is in grave danger of compromising its faithfulness to the gospel. Of course, such conviction is almost always present somewhere in the church. Nevertheless, because of the enormous changes that are taking place in our culture, such conviction takes on greater significance. This book is also written under the conviction that the changes taking place in Western culture present a wonderful opportunity for faithful witness to the gospel, as the church in the West reexamines its own life and witness and discovers once again the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to redeem humanity.

Guided by these twin convictions, I describe in this book several aspects of contemporary culture that create both opportunities for, and threats to, Christian mission. On the basis of this description, I suggest some understandings and practices that the church must adopt today in order to live faithfully and witness effectively to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I have also had some opportunities to present this material to people who are engaged in ministry outside the domination of Western culture and have heard from them the relevance of these lessons even for their mission. In June 2006, I taught a cohort of DMin students—North American and South American—who are engaged in ministry in Bolivia. As something of a test case, I presented this material to them in a lecture. They found the material highly illuminating for their context. They especially saw the call to new monastic communities as one that fit

5. One of the oddest accusations directed toward *Living Faithfully* is Carson's conclusion that "In the hands of Wilson and McLaren . . . MacIntyre becomes a voice in defense of a post-modern agenda." Since this accusation is at most tangentially related to new monasticism, I have addressed it in an Appendix to this book.

their cultural context and the need of the church for more disciplined living. In several courses I have taught students whose ministries are primarily contextualized by immigrants from mainland China or who work primarily in mainland China. They too find the lessons here illuminating and fitting for their context. Such is the power of MacIntyre's analysis.⁶

Beyond the power of MacIntyre's analysis is the power of Jesus Christ. His call to faithful living and witness is given to the church in the "Great Commission":

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:18–20)

In this passage, Jesus Christ calls the church to particular practices: making disciples, baptizing and teaching them. In the midst of much discussion about the relationship between these various practices, one thing is clear: their point of reference is the good news of Jesus Christ. This good news is an ever-present, unchanging reality: Jesus himself promises to be with us always. So the gospel which the church is commissioned to proclaim is not something we merely conjure up from the past or hope for in the future, though it certainly has a past and a future. Rather, the redemption of Jesus Christ is a present reality that he is actively accomplishing in our world today. Therefore, the church's responsibility is to participate in that redemption and witness to it. We are witnesses to Jesus Christ, ambassadors of God's reconciliation which is being accomplished through Christ. This responsibility extends to all peoples, to bring the gospel to them and educate them in the practices of the gospel—baptizing and teaching—so that they may participate in this redemption and become its witnesses.

This gospel and the mission of the church never change, but the circumstances in which we witness to and live out the gospel do change. With changing circumstances comes the need to rethink how the church lives faithfully and witnesses to the gospel. Changing circumstances bring new opportunities for witness, but they also bring new threats to the integrity

6. A Chinese translation of *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World* was published in 2008. A Spanish translation of this book is planned.

of the church's witness. For example, Christians in some parts of Africa encounter the question of polygamy. Addressing this issue and shaping the life of the church to respond to this question provides an opportunity to live out the gospel in that situation, but it also threatens the possibility of unfaithfulness. We have recognized this same truth in situations closer to home. For example, how the church in the West handles the questions of divorce and remarriage is shaped by and shapes our understanding of the gospel. Sometimes the differences are more subtle, but still very significant: we know that a church in suburban Denver and one in downtown Denver face different challenges and look different. In other words, although the unchanging mission of the church is to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, that witness must always discern the present reality of that redemption and shape the church's mission accordingly.

As I have noted above, the church faces many threats to its unfaithfulness. Words are important here: the *gospel* is never threatened by changing circumstances—God's purposes in Jesus Christ is being accomplished and nothing can hinder that. All authority has been given to Jesus Christ. However, what may be compromised is *the church's faithfulness to the gospel*. Even here, the church may be made a witness to Jesus Christ by God's judgment. That is, even an unfaithful church may be used to witness to the gospel by God's judgment upon it. So what is at issue for us is not the gospel or our witness to the gospel, but the church's faithfulness to the commission given by Jesus Christ.

This understanding of the mission of the church must be disciplined by the gospel and firmly grounded in the conviction that "relevance" is an intrinsic characteristic of the gospel, not a demand of the culture. Otherwise, the quest for relevance becomes a quest for acceptance. As Julian Hartt reminds us, there is a great difference between the church asking the world, "Are you getting the message?" and asking the world, "Do you like the message?" or "Will you go on loving me even if you don't like my message?"⁷

Enormous changes are taking place in the culture within which we are called to witness. Although we have often been sensitive to changing circumstances due to changing places—from America to Africa, from suburban Denver to urban Denver—we have not always been aware of our own culture's historicity. Or, as I will later argue, when we have shown

7. Hartt, *Christian Critique*, 345.

some sensitivity to historical forces, we have often misread that history or indulged in a misplaced nostalgia. As a result of this neglect and misreading, the church is unprepared for the new challenges and opportunities that we face. We are in danger of failing to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ or of cloaking a nostalgia for the past in Christian language and mistaking its acceptance for acceptance of the gospel. The church is particularly vulnerable in times when a familiar and comfortable culture is changing. When a culture has been regnant for some time (even though there may be some minor changes along the way), it becomes familiar and the church develops strategies for faithful living and witness in that culture. But those established strategies may not be helpful in changing circumstances. Just as antibiotics aid the human body in resisting and conquering bacterial infections, but are ineffective against viral infections, so also strategies used by the church for living and witnessing faithfully in one culture may be ineffective in another culture.

At the present time, I believe that the church is in grave danger of compromising the gospel and the integrity of its witness by mistakenly relying on strategies that are not effective in our changing times. My concern is primarily with the church that is situated in Western culture—the culture of Europe and North America. As we move toward a global culture dominated by the technologies and economies of this culture, my concern becomes increasingly global. Nevertheless, as I will later argue, the church in “Western culture” faces particular challenges that arise from the history of its impact on this culture.

So, in order to be faithful to the unchanging, ever-present Jesus Christ and to the mission given it by Jesus Christ, the church must attend carefully and persistently to its circumstances. We live in a time of tremendous change and uncertainty. In such a time, the church has many opportunities for revitalized witness to the gospel. New ways of living out the gospel arise, and people who thought they had the church and the gospel figured out and written off may have to reconsider its relevance and truth. At the same time, the church’s faithfulness to the gospel must be vigorously guarded. As circumstances change, new threats to the truth of the gospel may arise. For example, with religious freedom in Russia and the republics of the former Soviet Union, the church has tremendous opportunities to present the gospel to spiritually hungry people. At the same time, however, the church in those states has had to contend with

the rise of religious cults—a problem that did not exist in the U.S.S.R. and one which the church is ill-prepared to meet.

Since changing circumstances bring new threats, the church must continually discern the characteristics of the particular culture within which it is called to faithfulness. This is true of the church in all times and places. The concern of this study will be the faithfulness of the church in Western culture.

One of the most powerful and far-reaching analyses of Western culture is Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*.⁸ Although MacIntyre's later work grows beyond *After Virtue* in ways that we will consider below, *After Virtue* remains MacIntyre's seminal work and his most incisive analysis of Western culture. In this book, MacIntyre traces the history of Western moral traditions and argues that this history has brought us to a critical time in our culture. Although focused on ethical theory, MacIntyre's account incorporates a compact and incisive analysis of the whole of our society. We are faced, he says, with two paths, which we will explore in the following chapters. We may follow Nietzsche down the path that views morality as simply an expression of emotional preference and social relationships as an arena for the exercise of power. Or we may follow Aristotle down the path that leads to community rooted in the narrative of a tradition and embodied in certain virtues and practices.

MacIntyre's analysis provides some powerful lessons for the church's faithfulness. However, since MacIntyre's "tradition" in this analysis is more Aristotelian than Christian, we will have to make some adjustments as we follow his analysis. Following the writing of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre returned to the church, and his later works, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, show the dominance of the Augustinian-Thomistic tradition in his thought. However, these later works do not display the same incisive analysis of Western culture found in the earlier work and even the turn to Christianity in them is incomplete.⁹

8. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (1981; 2nd ed., 1984; 3rd ed., 2007). Refer-ences to this book will be made to the second edition. Since my concern here is to draw on MacIntyre's work for the sake of the church's faithfulness of the gospel, I will seldom engage the secondary arguments about MacIntyre's work. For that discussion and further references see the works by Horton and Mendus and Stout in the Bibliography.

9. See the criticisms in Milbank, *Theology*, 326–79; and Hauerwas and Pinches, *Christians*.

So even though we will have to make some adjustments along the way, *After Virtue* is the text from which we will draw several lessons for the church to live and witness faithfully. The first lesson is the need to attend to our history. Under the influence of modernity, the church has tended to be ahistorical. By telling the story of Western moral traditions, MacIntyre shows us that history constitutes an argument and determines the range of possibilities open to us. Therefore, in the first chapter I tell briefly the history of the church in relation to Western culture as that history determines how the church is to live and witness faithfully today. Given this history, we need new monastic communities that will live their lives before the watching world in such a way that our history as a church will be acknowledged in confession and repentance. Such confession and repentance requires an intentionally disciplined way of life that makes such practices integral expressions of life together with God and one another, not a marketing program or public relations ploy.

In the second chapter, I pursue MacIntyre's suggestion that we live in a fragmented world rather than a pluralistic world. I show the differences between fragmentation and pluralism and its significance for Christian mission. In the third chapter, I summarize MacIntyre's story of the mainstream of morality in Western culture and show how the church has compromised its faithfulness by accommodating to that mainstream and how many current conceptions of the mission of the church continue that mistake. In a new fourth chapter, I consider the Nietzschean reality and potentiality in our world as a powerful danger to living faithfully in a fragmented world. In the fifth chapter, I summarize MacIntyre's story of the minority, Aristotelian tradition in Western culture. I replace his account with one rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Christian community. In each of these chapters I show how MacIntyre's hope for a new monasticism responds to these analyses.

In the sixth chapter, I draw on the preceding chapters to develop MacIntyre's hope for a "new monasticism" in order to consider what forms the life of the church must take in order to sustain faithful witness in contemporary culture. In conclusion, I summarize my argument and identify some areas for further thought and action in response to all that has developed since the first edition of this book. I am especially concerned here to indicate briefly a theology for a new monasticism after modernity and post-Christendom.

The “Preface to the Series” in which the first edition of this book was published states that the series “(1) examines modern/postmodern culture from a missional point of view; (2) develops the theological agenda that the church in modern culture must address in order to recover its own integrity; and (3) tests fresh conceptualizations of the nature and mission of the church as it engages modern culture.” Those are precisely the aims that this book seeks to advance through a very specific analysis of the threats to and possibilities for living faithfully in a fragmented world. As the years have passed since the first edition of the book, it is also clear that we are living in an increasingly postmodern culture. Part of the work of this new edition is to address the shift from modernity to postmodernity and the cultural overlap of the two. The flourishing of a new monastic movement indicates something about the rightness of the cultural analysis offered here and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in new monastic communities as one place to live in faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

SAMPLE