



Mark R. Teasdale

Author of *Evangelism for Non-Evangelists*

Participating in
Abundant Life

*Holistic Salvation
for a Secular Age*



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Participating in Abundant Life* by Mark R. Teasdale.
Copyright © 2022 by Mark R. Teasdale. Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

A Mission for the Common Good

SINCE I BEGAN TEACHING EVANGELISM over a decade ago, I have pushed my students to explain their “starting point.”¹ Their starting point is the good thing God has done in their lives through Jesus Christ that they want others to experience. This is an alternative to popular conceptions of evangelism, which are grounded in preparing for judgment (rather than being invited into God’s goodness) and are rehearsed as a pat set of propositional statements Christians have memorized about God’s love (rather than being shared out of the Christian’s personal experience of God’s grace).

Once my students can articulate their respective starting points, they need to expand on them. Instead of just seeing their experiences as one-off moments or feelings, they need to use them as the basis for explaining the nature of God and how God interacts with the world. Who is the God that brings about the kind of goodness they experienced? What activities does this God engage in? How does this God want us to respond to this goodness? The starting point becomes the foundation for making sense of their individual life stories and, more broadly, for developing a metanarrative that makes sense of how God operates in the universe.²

¹This is the first component of my “evangelism equation”: starting point + theological reflection + contextual awareness = creative practices. My book *Evangelism for Non-Evangelists* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016) walks through the equation in detail.

²Essential to this process is theological reflection, which requires people to develop their metanarrative in a way that is accountable to the teachings of Scripture and the tradition of the church. This is not just a process of creating personalized versions of the gospel and passing them off as the Christian faith!

This metanarrative stretches across time. It tells the story of how God has worked to bring goodness in the past, how God is sustaining goodness in the present, and how the student anticipates with hope the goodness God will bring in the future, even into eternity. This story provides the motivation for the students' life choices and ministries. It also is something they want others to know and claim so they can enjoy the goodness God offers.

It is at the point of shifting from their personal experiences to a metanarrative that my students often stumble. They understand the need to articulate their authentic experience of God's goodness through Jesus, but they have trouble seeing how this launches them to a grander view of the goodness that God wants all people to experience. They struggle to articulate how God's actions in the past and present lead to a vision for God's purposes in the future.

My students are not alone. Many Christians have trouble explaining this. As an evangelism professor, I often run across this. A recent email from a pastor asking me to develop a training program stated this explicitly. When I asked him whether he wanted me to focus more on evangelistic theology or evangelistic practices, he replied,

I'm asking for even one step further back. As the pastor here, I am very concerned that even our leaders and staff can't articulate faith succinctly or confidently. We have some of the best people in the world here at [First Church], but we aren't at all confident at faith sharing. We can run meetings, we can set agendas, we can be good citizens, we are great at serving in various ways, but if someone asks even our leaders and staff to share about their faith, there is fear and trepidation showing in our eyes.

This pastor's plea catches the Zeitgeist of many congregations in the West today. We know how to do good things. We know we should do them in Jesus' name. We know we have hope for eternity. We don't know how to fit all these pieces together; much less do we have a coherent

explanation for why they ought to fit together. As Alan Hirsch and Mark Nelson astutely observed in their book *Reframation*: “We have lost a sense of the big story that makes sense of all our little stories.”³

REINTRODUCING SALVATION

The Christian concept that expresses how God works to overcome all harm and bring goodness to creation is salvation. This makes the concept of salvation indispensable to sharing our faith since it explains both the dangers God desires to save us from and the goodness God desires to grant us. It plants a flag in the ground that declares unequivocally that Christians believe God is good and that God works to share that goodness with all people. As clear as this seems to be, I am convinced that it is a lack of clarity about what we believe salvation is that has brought Christians to this discomfort in sharing their faith.

Even though the word *salvation* is ubiquitous in Christian teaching, it is often left undefined. The result is for Christians to have this centerpiece of their faith shrink in importance and scope. It becomes reduced to an agenda that is more defined by cultural or countercultural logic than by the gospel, often made synonymous with concepts such as justice, equality, or soul-saving. Outside of this, it is a vague hope that may provide solace at a funeral but has little impact on daily life.

Compounding this lack of clarity is that Christians in the West live in a secular culture. Per Charles Taylor’s work, this is a culture that sets up an “immanent frame”⁴ which disallows any consideration of the supernatural, much less of the full Christian gospel. Being motivated

³Alan Hirsch and Mark Nelson, *Reframation: Seeing God, People, and Mission Through Reenchanted Frames* (Los Angeles: 100 Movements Publishing, 2019), 48.

⁴Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 542. Taylor goes on to argue that this “immanent frame” pushes us toward a “closed world view” that rejects epistemological claims outside of nature (555). Having made this point, he insists that it is not inevitable. He declares, “While the norms and practices of the immanent frame may incline toward closure, this neither decides the effect that living within the frame will have on us, nor even less does it justify the closed take” (556). I pick up on this argument by suggesting a more fully biblical view that allows us to be more effective witnesses for Christ in a secular context.

by profit, power, or other earthly desires may be crass, but at least it makes sense since these are goals that the secular culture recognizes. Being motivated by the desire for people to enter the goodness of an invisible deity is not. So, we either make our belief in God vague and private to avoid having it interfere with our daily interactions with others, or we adopt a logic for salvation that fits within preexisting agendas for improving the world, convincing ourselves the parts of the gospel that are outside those agendas are anachronistic, unnecessary, or simply wrong.

There is another way, a way that provides a more holistic vision of the goodness God desires to provide through salvation and that moves Christians away from their reduced understandings of it. It is an understanding that presents salvation as something to be experienced in an ongoing way. We are not saved just once, but we enter a continuous process of receiving and sharing God's goodness, even working alongside other people of goodwill as witnesses for Christ. This is participating in abundant life.

SALVATION AS PARTICIPATING IN ABUNDANT LIFE

The term *abundant life* comes from John 10:10, when Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees about the way that the Good Shepherd approaches his sheep. The Good Shepherd enters the sheep pen through the door, demonstrating that he is the natural and rightful caretaker of the sheep. This contrasts to those who break into the pen. These people are thieves who only harm the sheep. Applying the metaphor of the Good Shepherd to himself and the metaphor of the thief to false teachers, Jesus states, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (NRSV).

According to Jesus, the Good Shepherd comes to bring abundant life to the sheep. Following this metaphor, participating in abundant life involves two things for the sheep: being cared for by the Good Shepherd and joining the Good Shepherd in caring for others.

The Good Shepherd cares for the needs of the sheep. This includes attending to the physical and social needs of the sheep. The shepherd provides them a safe place to stay, sufficient pasture and water, and even the company of each other. The shepherd himself keeps the sheep company as seen later in the passage, when Jesus says that the sheep know his voice, suggesting that the shepherd is present with the sheep and talks with them (John 10:27).

This is not all. After introducing the term *abundant life*, Jesus refers to his coming death (John 10:11-15). He explains that, as the Good Shepherd, he must protect his sheep from the wolf that desires to destroy them. He will do this by allowing the wolf to kill him in place of the sheep. In saying this, Jesus avers that the abundant life he offers is not restricted to caring for physical needs but involves providing something that only his death could make possible. According to traditional Christian teaching, it is through his death that God provides forgiveness for sin and entrance into eternal glory. Jesus makes this eternal aspect of abundant life plain in the same passage when he states, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28 NRSV).

Jesus is pleased to provide this abundant life to all people, just as the Good Shepherd provides it to all the sheep. Jesus is so desirous to share this abundant life with everyone that, if we borrow a passage from the Gospel of Luke, he even seeks the lost to share it with them (Luke 15:3-7). However, Jesus does not just call people to receive life. They are to join him in sharing this life with others.

A shepherd does not care for sheep just because he enjoys doing it. The shepherd cares for sheep with the expectation that the sheep will share their gifts. They will be sheared, providing wool for clothing, blankets, and other necessities. They will give milk that can nourish others. Some may even give their lives to provide meat for hungry people to eat. Notably, the sheep do nothing to earn these gifts. They simply receive them as the shepherd makes life possible for them. They then give the gifts at the time the shepherd decides.

Likewise, Jesus expects that people will share the gifts they have received from God with others, especially those who are in need. The difference is that people have far more gifts they can share than sheep have. They might provide financial assistance for the poor, food for the hungry, community for the lonely, encouragement for the brokenhearted, and the gospel message for sinners ready to repent and find eternal life. In doing this, people become more than just recipients of abundant life whom Jesus saves from harm in this world and the next; they become participants in abundant life. They allow the life they receive from Jesus to shine through them as they reach out with their gifts so that others might live more fully.

Participating in abundant life allows us to live into the entire narrative of God's salvific work in our lives. We celebrate that God did save us through Christ in the past. We look forward expectantly to the glory God will welcome us into in the future. We participate in receiving God's provision and sharing it with others in the present. We also recognize that the salvation God provides us includes caring for people in both this world and the next through the life and death of Jesus Christ. All of this has direct implications for our evangelistic witness because it calls on those of us who enjoy God's life-giving provisions to make this fullness of life available to others. The abundant life we experience through Jesus is both holistic and missional.

ABUNDANT LIFE AND THE COMMON GOOD

The idea of participating in abundant life does more than offer an expanded understanding of salvation. It also provides Christians an attractive way to express their faith within a secular context. In *For the Life of the World*, Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun give two reasons for this. First, our notion of human flourishing identifies what kind of life we believe is worth living.⁵ In this case, we are claiming our lives flourish best

⁵Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019), 22.

when we participate in abundant life by receiving and sharing God's goodness with others. Second, every culture recognizes the need to have a vision of the good to order people's lives.⁶ Whether our culture is secular or not, all people are seeking for a meaningful way to live. Apart from our ability to articulate our understanding of the abundant life God offers us now and into the future, along with its call to care for others, we fail to have a message that meets this existential need.

But we do have such a message, and it is compelling. While Jesus is clear that only those who follow him will inherit eternal life, he is equally clear that God sustains the lives of all people regardless of their belief or even morality. In the Sermon on the Mount he explains that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45 NRSV). This is not the fullness of abundant life, but it still is an act of common grace and is exceptionally generous. God provides vast resources to sustain the physical lives of everyone on earth.

Despite this generosity, through sin, injustice, and tragedy, many people find themselves in need. Jesus makes it clear that those who follow him are to care for these people. As we explore later, he even shares that the eternal salvation of those who have much is dependent on whether they share with those who have little.

Part of what makes this message compelling is that the idea of caring for the needs of others entails working for the common good. This is not uniquely Christian. Those who argue that all religions seem like they are the same often point to the common ethic of caring for others that most religions, as well as people who are secular, teach. We can all agree that we should feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, visit the lonely, and work for justice. And, in fact, people of goodwill who have sufficient resources do commit to these activities regardless of their faith tradition or lack thereof.

⁶Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, 19.

Rather than be concerned that acknowledging this broad human commitment to care for others dilutes the Christian message, Christians should welcome it. It demonstrates that the Spirit of God is alive and well, prompting all people at least partially to participate in abundant life. They are receiving some of God's abundant life through the provisions that sustain them in this world, and they are inspired to share these gifts with others.

This common commitment to care for others gives Christians a platform from which to share the gospel message more fully. Christians, no less than anyone else, seek to work for the common good. We agree with all those who commit themselves to saving people from hunger, destitution, pain, disease, and the other maladies that afflict creation, and we can work beside them toward this noble end. As we do this, we will gain credibility to share with them that we believe what we are doing is part of how we experience salvation: participating in the abundant life of God by receiving God's provisions and sharing them with others. We can go on to explain that we believe the abundant life God offers not only encompasses God's provisions for the common good but extends to saving people from sin and death, offering them the glory of eternity through Christ. Those we work alongside will know we are Christians not just by our words but by our loving actions toward them and toward the needy. Moreover, they will know that we believe they are not far from the kingdom of God because they have responded to the prompting of the Spirit to love their neighbors.

An objection can be raised here: Won't our understanding of salvation be diluted and commandeered by secular forces if we connect abundant life with working toward the common good? Or won't we become sell-outs that just want public acclamation and forget that we are supposed to be participants in God's mission to redeem creation through Christ? This would put us back in the position of reducing salvation to human agendas.

No. Participating in abundant life means that we believe and practice the entire gospel. The gospel proclaims that God provides abundant life to all creation through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁷ This abundant life overflows into this world and the next. That means we should care for all that happens in this world, including working for the common good. It also means we do not lose sight of sin, repentance, and eternity. As we will see, the temporal and eternal forms of abundant life complement each other, creating a reinforcing logic that demands we attend to both in our Christian mission.

The Holy Spirit further vouchsafes our fidelity to the gospel. The Spirit is at work in more people than just Christians. This is why there are people of goodwill who are already being prompted to care for others even though they do not follow Christ. The Spirit both prompts the act of love for neighbor and prepares the heart of the person who is loving their neighbor to receive the gospel. The Christian who comes alongside these people of goodwill is not losing the distinctiveness of the gospel by claiming that these people are participating in abundant life through their service to neighbor. Rather, the Christian is working with the Spirit to complete what the Spirit has already begun by demonstrating belief and commitment to sharing both the physical and eternal aspects of abundant life through Christ.

To better equip Christians to share their faith by word and deed as they participate in abundant life within a secular culture, we need language to interpret our beliefs to others who are either unfamiliar with or have distorted ideas about the Christian faith. To address this, it is wise to use language that is already accepted and understood in the secular world. I suggest using the terms *standard of living*, *quality of life*, and *eternal life* to explain the various ways God provides abundant life.

⁷For my defense of this articulation of the gospel, see Mark R. Teasdale, "A Bias for the Gospel," *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, forthcoming.

STANDARD OF LIVING, QUALITY OF LIFE, AND ETERNAL LIFE

All three of these aspects of abundant life will be covered in detail in later chapters. However, a brief introduction to them along with how they connect to Christian ministry is helpful here.

Standard of living. Standard of living refers to the ability to consume what we need and want. It is usually measured both by a person's access to things they can consume and their ability to afford those things. Put simply, those with a high standard of living are rich in income and have easy access to goods and services they can purchase with that income. Those with a low standard of living are poor in income and/or do not have access to goods and services.

Jesus explicitly taught in the Sermon on the Mount that God recognizes our physical needs and cares for them: "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (Matthew 6:31-32 NRSV). This makes it clear that the abundant life God offers includes providing for people to have a good standard of living. In addition, God does not want people to keep their provisions only for themselves. They are to share whatever physical gifts they have with those who are in need. John the Baptist explained this succinctly when the crowds asked him how to live: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (Luke 3:11 NRSV).

By giving of their physical means, Christians demonstrate they both have received the portion of abundant life that relates to standard of living and that they participate in abundant life by willingly sharing. Christians can do this individually, collectively, or even by working with organizations that are not expressly Christian, partnering with anyone else sharing their physical resources with those in need. This establishes an empirically verifiable and quantifiable platform from which Christians share the good news in word and deed.

The United Nations' Human Development Index is one of the most widely accepted measurements of standard of living. It measures the amount of money a person has and the capacity that person will have for self-improvement based on education and lifespan.⁸

Quality of life. Quality of life refers to how much we enjoy our lives. While having a high standard of living correlates in part to a higher quality of life, the two are not identical. Someone who is quite wealthy may nonetheless not enjoy life as much as a person whose income is below the poverty threshold.

The subjective nature of quality of life makes it difficult to measure, though there are some tools that attempt to do this. One is the World Happiness Report, compiled annually since 2012 by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network. This study asks respondents around the world to imagine a ladder with ten rungs, with the top (tenth) rung symbolizing their perfect life. They are then asked which rung they are on currently. To see the effect that standard of living has on quality of life, the report correlates the rung number to a variety of UN statistics that measure standard of living for the respondent's country (e.g., national GDP, healthy life expectancy).⁹

The *Global Happiness and Well-Being Policy Report* is an offshoot of the World Happiness Report. Published for the first time in February 2018, it offers specific policy recommendations to governments for improving people's happiness (quality of life) based on governmental approaches to standard of living items.¹⁰

Another attempt at measuring quality of life is by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a forum supported by thirty-seven countries (as of 2021) that recommends "policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the

⁸"Human Development Report 2016: Human Development for Everyone" (New York: United Nations Development Program, 2016), 198-201.

⁹"FAQ," World Happiness Report, <http://worldhappiness.report/faq/>.

¹⁰*Global Happiness and Well-Being Policy Report*, Global Happiness Council, 2019, <https://www.happinesscouncil.org/report/2019/global-happiness-and-well-being-policy-report>.

world.”¹¹ The OECD has developed its Better Life Index, which includes eleven data points ranging from standard of living items such as income, health, and education to quality of life items such as happiness, work-life balance, and civic engagement.¹² Recognizing that people value these items differently, the index allows for each item to be weighted to determine how well specific nations would provide a high quality of life for each person. Someone who believes they will have the highest quality of life if they have a greater opportunity to pursue wealth will find a different country more appealing than someone who is primarily concerned with excellent healthcare, for example.

God’s promise of abundant life is that people do not need to choose only certain items that will make life more enjoyable. Christ can fulfill us in every way. At the same time, Christians can use tools like the Better Life Index to learn more about the people with whom they seek to share their faith. By knowing what people value in a specific context, Christians are better prepared to work for the common good in a way that is recognized and appreciated as improving quality of life. They also can express their appreciation for people and organizations who are already engaged in this work.

A common way to improve people’s happiness is by forging relationships. This commonality sustains across cultures. Christians are especially well-suited to meet this need by providing communities that will give people a sense of value and purpose. We will explore this in detail in the chapter about quality of life.

Eternal life. Eternal life is not something that fits with the secular culture since it is beyond the capacity of humans to verify empirically. Belief in eternal life falls within the pale of religion and requires faith to sustain.

Notwithstanding, the concept of eternal life is essential to how we understand abundant life for several reasons. First, as mentioned above,

¹¹For more about the OECD, see www.oecd.org/about/.

¹²OECD Better Life Index, www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/#/111111111111.

without eternal life we miss the full gift of salvation that God offers us. As N. T. Wright explains,

The work of salvation, in its full sense, is (1) about whole human beings, not merely souls; (2) about the present, not simply the future; and (3) about what God does through us, not merely what God does in and for us. If we can get this straight, we will rediscover the historic basis for the full-orbed mission of the church.¹³

If we let go of the eternal, we relegate the church to being one more humanitarian agency with Christian symbols attached to it. Participating in abundant life means receiving the fullness of life that God offers us, including eternal life, and sharing that with others.

Second, it reminds Christians that we do not believe in an afterlife, but in abundant life. According to Wright, for most people, including Christians, the word *salvation* evokes mental images of an eternal paradise populated by fluffy clouds, winged angels, and golden streets. It refers to what happens to us after we die, saving us from either ceasing to exist or being condemned for our misdeeds.¹⁴

Jesus teaches that the abundant life he offers is not bifurcated by mortality. We do not experience some of it now and some later, with death standing as a fixed chasm between the two lives. He explained this to Martha when he arrived at Lazarus's tomb.

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:23-26 NRSV)

Martha believed that death was an unavoidable reality. Jesus, as the Messiah, had the power to offer life in the physical world (by healing

¹³N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 201.

¹⁴Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 17-19.

Lazarus before Lazarus died) or life to Lazarus through the resurrection (after Lazarus died), but he could not bridge these two experiences of life. She did not understand that Jesus offered abundant life that overturned death itself. This is what he meant when he responded that whoever lives and believes in him will “never die.” Jesus is life, and so long as a person remains in relationship with him, that person’s life remains secure. The mortal body may fall away, but the person is neither harmed nor diminished, persisting in God’s care. Even the body’s physical failing is not final. Jesus proved this by raising Lazarus from the dead. Abundant life overturns death itself so that the mortality of the body is only a temporary state that God easily undoes.

This is the same hope Paul shared when he mused in his letter to the Philippians as to whether he would soon die or remain alive:

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith. (Philippians 1:21-25 NRSV)

Paul described the hope of participating in abundant life. For him, whether his mortal body was alive or dead, he remained alive in Christ. Physical death is not a factor that can separate him from the abundant life of Christ. Moreover, so long as he was alive in the body, he did not just receive abundant life but participated in it by engaging in the missional work of sharing that life with others. It is this remarkable hope that overflowed from Paul in Romans 8:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.

Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Romans 8:31-39 NRSV)

Third, while the ironclad hope in eternal life through Jesus Christ may not be something that the secular culture accepts, the problems of fear, death, and meaninglessness are common to all people.¹⁵ There is desperation to find a firm assurance that these problems will not swallow us in the end. Put another way, there is a fervent desire for salvation and the life it brings.

The culture does not shy away from voicing this need for salvation, even if it is eclectic in its articulation and uncertain of what it is seeks. For example, as of August 2021, the website Goodreads listed 8,250 quotations related to salvation from a wide variety of writers, including atheists, new age thinkers, authors of vampire novels, and Christians from across the theological spectrum. In each case, salvation describes something akin to the greatest good that humans can experience, usually in a way that allows us to escape a painful and wearying world.

This escape need not take us out of the world. The *Wall Street Journal* carried an article titled “Technology = Salvation,” in which Peter Thiel, the cofounder of PayPal, argued that technological development was the

¹⁵“Death Anxiety,” American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology, <https://dictionary.apa.org/death-anxiety>.

key to extricating people from all their problems. “All sorts of things are possible in a world where you have massive progress in technology and related gains in productivity,” he said. When technology is developing quickly enough, it can alleviate every potential difficulty. Debt, unemployment, and governmental incompetence are all overcome. This belief in technology rises to the level of a faith for Thiel, such that the only thing he fears is technology not progressing quickly enough to continue lifting society out of the problems that occur. Convinced that this faith is not something he holds alone, he stated, “people don’t want to believe that technology is broken.”¹⁶

This muddled desire for salvation is similar to the subjectivity of quality of life. Not all people agree with what they need to be happy, but they all desire to be happy. Likewise, not all agree on what they need to save them from the pressing problems of the world, but they agree that a solution needs to be found that sets things right in perpetuity.

Darrin McMahon demonstrates in *Happiness: A History* that quality of life and eternal life have been linked historically in how Western civilizations sought the purpose of life. From Socrates forward, Western philosophers have determined this purpose is found in attaining some version of salvation, being lifted from the difficulties of life into a greater goodness. If humans could enter this goodness, they would find their chief reason for existence. With the rise of the Enlightenment and modernity, this search began to look more to this world than beyond it for the purpose of life. Spiritual ideas were privatized and minimized as salvation was couched in terms of finding happiness in the here and now. As McMahon put it, the Enlightenment “translated the ultimate question ‘How can I be saved’ into the pragmatic, ‘How can I be happy.’”¹⁷

Benjamin Franklin stands as an exemplar of this. A precursor to Thiel, he believed that by unraveling the mysteries of how nature operated, people would determine how to decrease the difficulties they faced in

¹⁶Holman W. Jenkins, “Technology = Salvation,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 2010.

¹⁷Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 209.

daily life, increase their prosperity, and even attain immortality.¹⁸ He bemoaned that he would not live long enough to see this day, less because it would keep him from having to die and more because he would miss the happy state that humans would enter.

Even with the diminishment of the spiritual, the ongoing need to claim some sort of transcendent happiness shows that the notion of finding a way to live the fullest life possible, freed from danger, is universal to humanity. Regardless of what we believe about ultimate reality, we all recognize that there are great problems facing us and that we need help (whether that help is divine or technological) to overcome these. To reach a place in which we have surmounted these problems will allow us to live in a state of perpetual happiness. This is the greatest good we can achieve, and it will give us hope even when facing death. It would be abundant life.

Regardless of what we believe about how the universe operates, we recognize that we need salvation from the dangers around us, especially from death. The assurance of eternal life provides us with the ultimate hope that we will not succumb to these dangers, because even death cannot hold us. Coupled with the concepts of standard of living and quality of life that are familiar to the secular culture, this hope in eternal life is complemented with concrete and measurable ways of demonstrating how people can experience God's salvation by participating in the abundant life offered through Jesus Christ.

SECULAR CULTURE AS AN OPPORTUNITY

The increasing secularization of the West, as well as other parts of the world, provides an ideal setting for Christians to express their experience of salvation as participating in abundant life. This is because the concept of secularism that has been broadly accepted for centuries is out-of-date and ready to be supplanted.

¹⁸Benjamin Franklin, "Letter to Joseph Priestly," in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 74.

Much of the antireligion bias of secularism is derived from the destruction caused by the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). A primary motivation for fighting this war was intra-Christian competition. Which form of Christianity (Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed) would the different regions of Europe officially sanction? The various clergy and lords believed this was a serious enough issue to spill the blood of their subjects for a generation.

The Peace of Westphalia (1648) brought this war to an end in part by privatizing people's religious observance. This allowed everyone to worship according to their conscience without those beliefs interfering with the operations of the state. While this sort of toleration would take centuries to be put into practice, the foundation for it was set here.

According to historian Erin Wilson, defenders of the more hostile forms of secularism have overplayed this moment in history by claiming that religion is always dangerous in the public sphere. Left unchecked, it is wont to promote violence and intolerance. The only safe way to sustain a developed civilization is to privatize religion and let the secular state operate unhindered.¹⁹

While Wilson legitimately critiques this view of religion, we should not be too quick to dismiss it. It is true that some people used (and continue to use) their religion as justification for engaging in violence. The desire to shape a peace that denied the capacity for this to happen is understandable. Both people of faith and people of no faith can agree on that. Moreover, most of the people who participated in writing and ratifying the Peace of Westphalia were at least professedly Christian, so the agreement was not forced on Christians from the outside.

The ratifiers recognized the death and damage wrought by the misuse of religion and made room through the document for an expanded secular state to avoid that sort of destruction from happening again. This was not kowtowing to secularism but making use of the opportunity

¹⁹Erin K. Wilson, *After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 47-49.

secularism offered to help curtail the abuse of power by religion. It was preferable to a solution that restricted religious practice or banned the church from operating. Freedom of conscience and the practice of religion were upheld while the political order focused on serving the tangible common good.

Once again, we live in a time when many people believe that religion is dangerous, especially conservative religion. The onus is on those of us who are people of faith, like the framers of the Peace of Westphalia, to demonstrate that we understand how religion can be misused. However, instead of doing this by dialing back the engagement of the church in the public square, the desperation of the present day calls for us to demonstrate how the church should be more engaged for the common good.

If we can show that we are concerned for the well-being of other people not because we are seeking cultural or institutional dominance but because working for the common good is a facet of participating in the abundant life offered through Christ, we can open a new door of engagement with the culture. By celebrating and working alongside people of goodwill who are already committed to the common good of improving the standard of living and quality of life of those in need, we can find ways of building credibility even in a secular context.²⁰ This will allow us to share about eternal life as welcome participants in promoting

²⁰I emphasize the notion of “people of goodwill” because there will always be some people who remain resistant to any notion of salvation, secular or otherwise. Taylor expands on this point, suggesting that there are three parties in the current Western culture who debate the nature of humanity: secular humanists, neo-Nietzscheans, and those who acknowledge some good beyond life (with Christians falling into the last group). He contends that it is possible for each group to align with one of the others at some point. The neo-Nietzscheans and the religious both point to the failed efforts that secular humanism alone can bring about; the secular humanists and the religious deplore the violence and will-to-power espoused by the neo-Nietzscheans; and the neo-Nietzscheans and the secular humanists consider the transcendent claims of the religious to be out-of-step with human nature. I am not suggesting that this idea of abundant life can completely undercut the fundamental disagreements among these groups. I do contend, however, that it can provide a stronger bridge between Christians and those in the other two parties on the points where they already agree: the neo-Nietzscheans by engaging with the secular powers and authorities of the world in measurable ways, the secular humanists by demonstrating a clear and compelling case for working toward the common good. Insofar as it can accomplish this, it will establish a much stronger witness to all groups that otherwise are caught in the immanent frame that would close their worldview to faith. Of course, this witness will only be meaningful for those

the common good rather than as suspicious interlopers in the public square. Clarifying our experience of salvation as participating in abundant life provides us the intellectual framework and practical impetus for doing this.

THEOLOGICAL, BIBLICAL, AND PRACTICAL

The balance of the book will be spent building the case for articulating the Christian experience of salvation as participating in abundant life. The opening chapters will lay the internal Christian framework for this. Chapter two will reflect on how different theological traditions can not only maintain their integrity but be enriched by accepting this way of articulating the Christian experience of salvation. Chapter three will provide an overview of biblical teaching about salvation. It will demonstrate that when looking at the whole salvation narrative across the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, the concept of salvation is holistic, entailing God rescuing us from dangers in this world and the next.

The later chapters will look at how this framework intersects with secular ways of thinking about life and working to improve it. In chapters four and five we will treat the concepts of standard of living and quality of life, respectively. In these chapters we will draw heavily from secular organizations that deal with these ideas and look at how Christians can connect with them and critique them in light of the full offer of abundant life through Christ. We will especially consider how people of goodwill, regardless of their faith, can work together to improve people's standard of living and quality of life.

Chapter six will address eternal life. In it we will consider what it means for Christians to steward the gospel message, especially the call to invite people to receive forgiveness and eternal life so they can be saved from divine judgment, in an otherwise secular setting. To do this, we will draw from missionaries Lesslie Newbigin and E. Stanley Jones.

who have the goodwill both to desire good for their neighbor and to see that Christians are capable of likewise desiring this in measurable ways. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 636-37.

Finally, the conclusion will remind us that looking to God for abundant life in both this world and the next has deep roots in the church by reflecting on the Divine Liturgy. Although applying the terminology of standard of living and quality of life to Christian salvation is new, the notion of doing this alongside eternal life is ancient. Our move to express salvation in this way is less an innovation than a reclamation of the living Christian tradition.

The appendix provides a reflection on metrics Christians can use to determine how fully they are participating in abundant life along with individual and congregational scorecards for tracking this. The scorecards are not to determine whether someone is saved! Salvation comes through grace alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). Rather, they suggest ways Christians can hold themselves accountable for both receiving the gifts God has given them and deploying those gifts to make an impact in the world around them. And since many congregations and denominations prefer quantifiable data because it is easier to collect, interpret, and summarize, these scorecards rely heavily on numbers.

My prayer for this book is that it (1) helps Christians better articulate their beliefs, especially about ultimate things that motivate their ministries, and (2) equips Christians to live out their salvation in the world as it is, learning how they can maneuver in a secular culture without feeling embattled or as if they must trade off the fullness of their faith to be effective. In doing both these things, I believe that Christians will be more like Jesus.

I also pray that it will give us a way to talk about and enact salvation today that will be meaningful and attractive to those who live around us. It will be a way that commends rather than condemns the secular world's desire to bring a better life to all people and that serves as a signpost that shows both a better standard of living and a better quality of life flow out of the abundant life that is offered by God through Jesus Christ.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/participating-in-abundant-life