Cultural Engagement with JR Vassar

Part 1 of 1: Spiritual Renewal in a Post-Christian Society
with JR Vassar and Darrell L. Bock
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Thank you, JR, for joining us. Welcome to the Table, where we discuss issues that connect God and culture and that’s what we’re going to do today. My role in this is to kind of pull everything together and summarize and have us have a conversation. There’ll be another time for questions at the end, so you can be thinking about that. So I’m just going to dive right in.

This is fun to do and hard to do at the same time. As JR has said, when I go to New York I show up at his church at the evening service, I can tell you there are tons of people under the age of 40 there, so I walk in as one of the oldest people walking through the door, and it is a great and terrifically effective ministry, and so it’s really been a pleasure to have you with us and to have you come down and help us down here in Texas. So we really appreciate that.

I’m going to start off by going to the issue of identity, and you used one image which 1 Peter zeroes in on, that’s the image of the alien in the strange land, the picture being in exile, and I just started listing off different aspects of our identity in different descriptions that believers have. It’s not an attempt to be a comprehensive list at all. I’m going to zero in on one of them, but among the things that come up, of course, saint, the person who’s set apart, salt and light and different pictures that we get out of Jesus’ ministry that talk about the visibility and impact that we have. Slave, which is one that certainly would be popular in our culture. Brother, to emphasize the element of community.

But the one I want to zero in on and I’d like to get you to elaborate on is the picture of the ambassador in Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, where it says that we are ambassadors. And I’ll tell you a little bit about how I think about this and then get your reaction. When I think about an ambassador, I think about someone who represents a country in a foreign land, so it fits your picture of the alien or the exile. And the other thing that I think about is the ambassador doesn’t just live in the embassy, he doesn’t stay parked in the embassy. He doesn’t ask the people of the country to come to the embassy, okay, but he’s out and about in the country. His job to a certain degree, is to represent the country there and so he gets to know the country, he gets to know the people, he goes out to where they are. How much of that image is helpful in thinking about the picture of aliens and exiles and the metaphors that you were working with?
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**JR Vassar:** Yeah, I think it’s extremely important, I think especially when it comes to effectively communicating to the culture. The danger of the picture of exile is one of withdrawal. There could be a chance where you do – you know, part of the diaspora communities, the isolation factor, the sense of being a separatist can somehow be frontloaded into that picture, but the ambassador is saying that, yeah, I have a sense of identity, I know to whom I belong, but I also know who – from whom I’ve been sent and the purpose for which I’ve been sent. And so being able to interact with the culture, engage with the culture, understand its hopes, its aspirations, understanding its language, and then being able to communicate the gospel in a way that connects right with where they live I think is an extremely important thing. Being well-versed in the poets of the day, whether that’s media, whether that’s music, whether that’s popular bloggers, but being able to listen to those cultural voices so that as an ambassador you’re able to speak intelligently to it.

**Darrell Bock:** So how often when you preach do you end up using contemporary examples and evaluating them, either for the kind of hope that they’re searching for in what’s being expressed or the frustration that they sense with life, as opposed to say, what often happens I think with preaching that I hear, which is the culture gets cited but it always gets cited as critique.

**JR Vassar:** Right. Yeah, I probably don’t do it enough, but whether it’s a novel or whether it’s an article in a magazine, or whether it’s a movie, I’m more inclined to talk about the aspirations that are revealed in those moments, the ache of the human heart that’s revealed, the universal longing that is seen here, or universal fear that gets seen here, that only the gospel can address or only the gospel can assuage. And you know, some contexts that’s a little easier to do. I know there’s been times where I’ve come back to visit and I may have quoted a movie and I’ve gotten like accosted by people – “How could you promote a movie like that here in church?” And so I guess you have to be culturally sensitive about some of those things. But yeah, I find in those, again, cultural poets, if you will, a real revelation of the human heart and I think we need to capitalize on those things.
Darrell Bock: I’m splitting time between two churches, Trinity Fellowship in Richardson and Bent Tree Fellowship in Carrollton, and Bent Tree has just done an interesting thing. They’re talking about mission, and two weeks ago they advertised on Craigslist for three unbelievers to come and talk about how they read believers when they talk to them. So it’s a pretty interesting little exercise. They interviewed them for a week, got them all prepped, brought them into church. One of the guys said, “I brought my mom so I could say I’ve been to church,” and the response was, “Yeah, you get two services this week.”

And they interacted, and what struck me about the interview that I think is important in light of so much of what you’ve said today, is the culture is hostile but there are a lot of people who are out there looking and searching and curious. They know that what the life is that they have in the world doesn’t offer all that they sense as a human being. And so I think sometimes it’s important to distinguish between the direction that the culture is moving or tends to be reacting to and where individual people are.

And so I like to think about mission being one soul at a time to form a community for life to a culture that oftentimes is searching for life and is not finding it. We tend to go global and think impact the culture and, you know, impact millions, okay, but really isn’t the church’s job one person at a time?

JR Vassar: Yeah, and it’s quite a process too. I think that where the church gets sometimes sidetracked with that is not being willing to enter into that process. You’re talking about one soul at a time, that’s an investment of your heart, your time, being willing to be asked incredibly difficult questions that you have to respond to sometimes, I don’t know, or I don’t have a good answer for that, and there’s something very exposing about entering into those kinds of relationships.

So I think just blanket preaching is just easier for a lot of people, but you’re absolutely right, this is not just about this cloud called culture, it’s about individual people with individual needs and individual stories and people who are really indeed searching for life.
**Darrell Bock:** Now, I see two prongs coming out of this idea, and let’s talk first about language. You talked about not using church language when you interact and I think you used the example of, what was it, “I’m really grateful about how the blood of Jesus has changed my life” or whatever. And I do sometimes wonder when we use that phrase in church what a nonbeliever, when he hears that, is picturing in his or her mind when they hear that, if they don’t have a church background, what that might mean.

So my question is, probably one of the great bugaboos words that the church has to deal with in one way or another obviously is the word sin, and in fact, even though it’s got three letters it’s a four-letter word in our culture in many cases. And so the question becomes, how do you talk about sin, do you talk about it directly, are there synonyms that you use, what do you do to talk about sin?

**JR Vassar:** Well, I think that there’s – one is avoiding language, the other is just making sure you define it well. And so we’ll talk about sin but we also want to expand the definition of sin and understand that sin is not only a failure to love what’s most lovely. So as we’ve talked through, we’ve used a lot of the language that sin is a failure to love most what’s most lovely. It’s a failure to really honor most what’s most honorable, and it’s a failure to value supremely what’s supremely valuable.

And when you start talking about valuing things and loving things and honoring, I think people can understand that to say, no, I – there’s things that are beautiful, good and true that I have not really honored, loved or esteemed, most of all being God. And then also a failure to love the Lord God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and a failure to love your neighbor as yourself. So instead of picking off examples of sin, we keep it at 50,000 feet and say, hey, you’ve not loved most what’s most lovely and you’ve not loved God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. You’ve failed to be a human being at the very basic level of what it means to be a human being, to live in full dependence upon God, loving him, knowing him, being known and loved by him. So I think we’re, especially a post-Christian context, when you start – I think the specifics of sin is where people start checking out on you, but that 50,000 – if you can get it at 50,000 feet and they say, okay, I’ll own that, I’ll own that I’ve not loved most what’s most lovely, and then they start to go a little deeper with that and what that means for them practically.
Darrell Bock: That’s similar – there is a word that I like and it’s the word dysfunction. Most people recognize the world as dysfunctional, that their relationships are – they’ll own up to dysfunction, they won’t own up to sin, I guess because it’s a longer word.

JR Vassar: It sounds clinical.

Darrell Bock: And so that’s a way to begin to get at what the church is talking about, and I think you’re suggestion about our thinking about the language that we use from the pulpit, whether we use language that the person coming from the outside can connect to or not is important. There’s another concept that you talked about that I also think is important that I’d like to get you to elaborate on and that’s the idea of even though you’re preaching – you were preaching to people on the inside of your church, you were always addressing questions that had an eye to the outside of the church which are going to be the people they’re going to interact with.

And this has to do with something that I think is very subtle in the church so I want to probe this a little bit, and that is, the church, to be missional, really has to train Christians, if I can say it that way, to think and converse differently than they tend to think and converse when they’re in church, which may seem like a strange idea but if you think about it enough it’s true. I like to say it this way about the Bible: in the church the Bible is the answer to questions, but in the public square the Bible is the question. You can’t say the Bible says in the public square and know immediately, oh yeah, the Bible says it so I’m ready to buy it.

So my question is, how do you help people get there, how do you help them flip that switch, where you talk on the inside about how people think on the outside? I know you gave one example where you say you consciously develop objections that our culture has to Christianity and try to develop them as powerfully as possible. I take it there’s a little joy in you sometimes when you can get someone to squirm when they think about thinking Christianly during the service, in a way, and that then opens up the need, I’ve got to really be able to address this and help people address this. Is that the major way you think you go about doing this?
**JR Vassar:** Yeah, I think I understand what you’re asking. As we preach to those who aren’t there, so to speak, our people learn how to do that. They’re hearing and they’re going, oh, I never thought about that objection but they’re going to hear it, you know. So I think that’s one way. And then I do think as I eavesdrop, in a good way, on conversations happening all around Apostles Church, I don’t hear language that I would feel uncomfortable with a nonbeliever hearing and I think that’s because we’ve been vigilant about eradicating that kind of language just from our public gatherings. Like, we are really disciplined, our whole team, about making sure that when we are speaking, whether you’re making an announcement, whether you’re doing communion or baptism, whatever it is, that you are clear and you’re avoiding certain jargon or language that would just, one, be not understood at all, or two, be unnecessarily offensive. But yeah, as the people hear us, they start to adopt that same language, and so you start to eradicate some of those things from the actual vocabulary of the community.

**Darrell Bock:** Okay, that’s one prong, the prong of language. Let me do another one that I think comes out of what you’re talking about to some degree, and that’s the issue of confrontation. If you’re coming against society, if you’re challenging society, if you’re being subversive, I heard a lot of words to talk about this, you’re obviously going in a different direction than the person you’re engaging with.

But what I heard you do in the illustration, this was particularly with the gal who was in your church who had moved to New Jersey, what I heard you do was to not have a confrontation or a debate, what I heard you do was engage in a conversation in which you were asking the person to think through what it was that they were doing. Is that a good read of how you confront?
JR Vassar: Yeah, yeah. And that – I mean that obviously truncated that conversation as I shared it. That was a pretty long conversation about let’s talk about what this is meaning for your professed life of faith, what’s this going to mean for your future, what is this going to mean for your children. So let’s talk about some of the ramifications of that, and then also, what would Jesus say – what would his word teach us about that. Because this is a covenant member who’s signed off, who was like, yeah, I’m in, I believe the word, I hold the Bible as authoritative. And so it is an inviting people into dialogue about the ramifications of the chosen lifestyle that they have. But then also bringing the scripture into it and saying okay, let’s talk about also how the scriptures address this, you know.

Darrell Bock: Now, all of this that we’re talking about assumes, particularly this last area of confrontation, assumes the ability to build a community where what the community thinks about how someone is living makes a difference to that person.

JR Vassar: Yes.

Darrell Bock: I tell my classes, church discipline assumes that the discipline matters to the person being disciplined.

JR Vassar: Yeah. That’s like telling my kids they can’t eat broccoli anymore.

Darrell Bock: Exactly. I mean if they don’t care that the consequences are because of how the people around them, who they’ve been fellowshipping with will react, then you’re behind the eight ball. You’re slapping someone’s wrist without a chance of it going anywhere.

But if they care you’ve got a shot at it meaning something. So my question is, how do you work to build that community; what things do you do that help build community at Apostles?

JR Vassar: Well, we don’t have a lot of programs or anything like that, so we showcase community as much as we can. In the service we’ll talk about it, we’ll use illustrations from community groups, we’ll have community group leaders baptize people in their communities who have come to faith. So we try to put pockets of people up before our people to show them this is a little bit more of life in the church.
And then those community groups that are just constantly meeting on a weekly basis, we are just pointing people consistently to that, and once they – if they’ll go one time or two times, there is such a culture of celebration at those things, that they’re usually pretty hooked after that, they usually get plugged in.

**Darrell Bock:** How large is a community group in your church?

**JR Vassar:** They can be anywhere from 15 to 25, 10 to 25, some have gotten all the way up to almost 30 and then we had to birth a new group. Because remember, this is not – we’re not in the suburbs, so we don’t have like a big living room. Like I just saw an Instagram picture: Melissa, one of our girls, she had a birthday party and there were 27 people in a 400-square foot apartment, and they were – and I was just – like there was tons of them, and at that party there were a lot of nonbelievers who don’t go to Apostles. But we throw parties all the time. We have rooftop parties after the service pretty regularly at a couple of girls’ who live in apartments right by the church.

**Darrell Bock:** We can’t do that here in Texas, rooftop parties, what are those?

**JR Vassar:** That’s true, that’s true. And we’ll have sparkling grape juice and cheese –

**Darrell Bock:** That’s John 2 isn’t it?

**JR Vassar:** Yes. But we’ll have – after church they’ll have rooftop parties and they’ll have tons of people show up at this and they’ll have people who have never been to our church before at all. We’ve had people who have thrown spaghetti dinners for their neighborhood and people have ended up coming into their community group through it, absolutely. So our people are throwing parties all the time, they’re constantly doing stuff together. So that’s one way. And about once a month, community groups from the same particular neighborhood will all come together for a big event and they’ll usually invite tons of folks to come into that.

**Darrell Bock:** Now, if we’ve got 400 square feet where do they do that, do they pick a neutral venue?
JR Vassar: Yeah, or they’ll go to Central Park or we got a couple in Brooklyn that has a pretty big outdoor patio area and they’ll just pack the patio out. And they’ve also got access to a rooftop. So you’ll have rooftop people, you’ll have people jumping off the rooftop into – no, they don’t do that. So they’re just – it’s just a – they’re constantly throwing parties, all the time. And then, you know, going to events together, whether that’s shows or movies or Central Park. Central Park is a great way that our people have connected to nonbelievers.

Darrell Bock: So part of what you’re communicating, obviously, is that the church is not just a one hour on Sunday community.

JR Vassar: Yeah. I mean when we talk about syncing up the rhythms of your life, they really do. I mean for me, I can walk through the upper east side and I’ll walk into a diner and there’s four of our guys having breakfast together, you know, and they’re praying with each other or whatever. And I think New York can kind of lend itself to that when it’s neighborhood focused because you’re walking everywhere or taking a bus. We’ve experienced more community there than we have, as far as like the opportunity to connect with people on a regular rhythm than we’ve had anywhere else.

Darrell Bock: Now, one other thing that you said to me in this segment caught my attention, that’s what you said about your 13-year-old daughter, and I think the phrase you used was the moral degradation she had been exposed to. Now, I can think of lots of parents who would say that they don’t have a class on moral degradation 101 for their kids. And so explain the mentality you bring, not only as a pastor but as a parent, that says rather than turning my back and running away from what I see around me, I’m going to help my youth, if I can generalize it, I’m going to help my youth see what’s going on and come to be discerning about it.
**JR Vassar:** Yeah. Well that’s certainly a challenge. It’s not just the moral thing she’s up against, there’s also like wonderful opportunities for her. She developed – early on developed a real heart for homeless people and so even a few – before we left for sabbatical a few months ago we went to breakfast and there was a man she’d seen a couple times and she said, “Dad, I really want us to get him some breakfast.” So we went and bought him breakfast. His name is Vincent. We see him on the way to church every Sunday. My wife made homemade muffins the other day and my daughter said, “Hey, can we take some to Vincent and drop him off some on the way to church?” So she has developed a care and concern for people like that.

And then as she’s exposed to things that I would rather her not be exposed to at an early age, which she was way early age, it’s just made for conversations, you know, “What do you think about that?”

**Darrell Bock:** Isn’t there a sense in New York there’s almost no choice?

**JR Vassar:** No, you don’t – I mean – well, we did blindfold her for her entire – when she was 8, the entire year, she went around blindfolded.

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah, I bet that was really effective, generated a lot of conversation about what she was seeing, right.

**JR Vassar:** Sure, yeah, people would say why is she blindfolded and I said I don’t want her to see what you’re doing, that’s why she’s blindfolded.

**Darrell Bock:** Another topic that I think is important is this idea of Jesus being the polarizing reality. We just did a chapel here a week ago Friday on Matthew 10, the mission passage where Jesus tells the disciples that he’s going – you know, he’s sending them out like sheep in the midst of wolves, they’re going to have to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. And the point of that chapter is to make the point that you’re going to go out into a world that is going to push back, so it’s the point you certainly have made very, very effectively today.
Here’s the question that I have, and that is, how do you challenge and how do you engage in a way that keeps the hope of the offer of the gospel in the offer of the challenge? In other words, you’ve got a positive thing that you’re doing even in the midst of what, at least to the person who’s hearing it and who’s outside the church, is a negative thing. How do you balance those out?

**JR Vassar:** Well, spin. No, I’m kidding. I do think it’s – I think we try to lead with beauty. In other words, painting a picture of the life that Jesus offers them. And then showing them what a positive response to that looks like, and a positive response involves repentance of fully reorienting your life to the lordship of Jesus and his kingdom, and how that requires something from all of us that, regardless of where you’re at in life there is a denial of self, basically saying no to myself, it’s a painful no, and saying yes to him.

So the challenge is there. And we also give people time to process it. So we use the language a lot at Apostles Church, if you’re here and you’re exploring Christianity, or if you’re window shopping this thing, or you’re kicking the tires around on it –

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah, I’ve heard those phrases.

**JR Vassar:** What we want to say to you is that there comes a time where you have to cross the line of faith or choose no. Jesus is going for a decisive answer from you and we want you to be here, ask questions, raise your objections, but we also want you to know that there’s going to have to come a time where you either fish or cut bait. They don’t understand that phrase, but where you have to say either absolutely yes to Jesus and cross the line of faith or no, or I’m open but I still have some questions.

And we have to ask, are your questions an attempt to hold on to autonomy or are your questions legitimate questions that you’re looking for more certainty, which you’re never going to have full certainty but you’re looking for more certainty or is it a fear to give up autonomy. So we’re constantly challenging people on crossing the line of faith and why will you not cross the line of faith, is it because you don’t believe he’s who he says he is and he’s done what he said he’s done or is it because you want to continue to be the ruler and lord of your own life and your kingdom will crumble. His kingdom is the only one that lasts.
**Darrell Bock:** You’ve talked also about how the culture tends to impact us. Let me give you two words that I think are what our culture teaches us that the church struggles to get over. One of them is the word—well, what the culture teaches is independence, so the idea of being dependent on someone, in fact, it gets translated when people talk about “Oh, they’re weak, they’re dependent on God” or whatever, as if dependence is a negative category and independence is great, you know, it’s almost idolatrous if you think about it theologically, the idea of being disconnected and being in charge and captain of your own ship disconnects you from the creator. So I see you doing a lot to challenge that aspect of the culture, am I right?

**JR Vassar:** Yeah, we confront the whole radical individualism, the autonomy of self, those kinds of things, and what that means for the destruction of human community but also what it means for disconnection and alienation from God, the one for whom you are made. So yeah, this idea of radical individualism permeates every part of our culture and it’s something that—I mean consumerism is the outworking of it. And so we are constantly confronting consumerism. That’s another way we speak of sin, is consumerism for self-pleasure without regard for the good of the other, or the glory of God.

And so yeah, we’re constantly pressing that in. And that’s why community is such an important piece because community is the crucible where you die to radical individualism and you learn to live life in relationship with other people, mutually submitted to them under the leadership of gifted, qualified people that God’s entrusted.

**Darrell Bock:** Now, the second word that I have in mind is one that I think we struggle with too, it’s the word entitlement. It’s the fact that we grow up in a culture which tells us we’re entitled to certain things. I mean—I remember the commercial, you know, the old McDonalds commercial, “You deserve a break today.” And so we have this sense about we are entitled to certain things, and because of the consumerism and entitlement that we create for ourselves, we tend to think that we’re entitled to certain things from God, that he owes us in one sense or another. Now, I can’t think of anything that runs more counter to the idea of grace than entitlement. So is this another thing that you challenge in one way or another?
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**JR Vassar:** Yeah. Jean Twenge, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen her book, *The Narcissism Epidemic,* but she hits on this very thing about a narcissistic culture and it’s sense of entitlement. And so yeah, we confront narcissism and entitlement regularly, again with the gospel and show Jesus as the anti-narcissist, basically. I mean here is the one who does have the right to live a narcissistic life but he’s the one in the garden saying, “Not my will but yours be done.” He’s the one who is laying aside glory for the sake of us being raised in glory.

But you know, it’s one thing to denounce something in a culture, it’s another way to show a more beautiful way in Jesus. And so if you can present this – if you can show Jesus for who he is then all the sudden narcissism and entitlement begins to look repulsive to you because it’s been put up against the beauty of the life of Christ.

**Darrell Bock:** Now, I want to come to another topic that’s tricky in our culture and that is, we talk about family. Normally when we talk about family we’re talking about obviously a husband and a spouse and kids. Unfortunately that’s actually a minority in our culture today. So a lot of families exist but they’re broken or they’re reshuffled or one parent is missing in certain contexts. So how do you help families – if I can – how can you help families that are not ideal families in the context of your community?

**JR Vassar:** Yeah. Well, one of the challenges for us is our upper east side community has a lot of families in it. Our Union Square community, we probably have three families, two families. I mean you’ve been there, you’ve seen – I mean some of the people don’t even shave. So it’s pretty young.

**Darrell Bock:** Fair enough.

**JR Vassar:** So we’re still learning how do we do family ministry. I think we have a couple – I don’t even know how many blended families we have. We’ve had some single moms and we’ve really done our best to try to serve them and bless them and challenge our community. For instance, if you’re a single man or you’re a married couple without children, how can you be an aunt or uncle, spiritually speaking, to these other children who may not have a dad at home. And so just trying to include them. So we won’t have a community for single moms, we’ll have a single mom in a community group of people and those people embrace her and love her kids.
**Darrell Bock:** That actually was my next question, which is you have a lot of single people, a lot of young people who are there, how do you help them get located, do they hang out together or is there some cross-generational stuff going on?

**JR Vassar:** You mean as far as like older people in the community connecting with younger people in the community?

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah, yeah.

**JR Vassar:** Yeah. Because our community groups are very proximity based, it’s not affinity based, we do have a wide swath. So I’m thinking of one community group in our upper east side. We’ve got a couple in their late 30s, maybe – yeah, early 40s who are – they got two kids and then you’ve also got a 23-year-old in their community group, single guy. And he’s getting to watch Craig lead his family, love his wife, parent his children, and then he’s being asked to – like, one of the things I love to do is when a young guy is over at our home, have him tuck my kids in and pray for them. And it’s a little awkward with a 13-year-old, but – I’m kidding. But like my 9-year-old son. I remember one guy named Tom over at my house. “Hey, Tom, will you go pray with my son, it’s his bedtime, just go in there and kneel down with him at bed and just pray with him?” And Tom’s like, “Well, what do I pray?” “Well, just go and pray with my son.” And so that kind of interaction is great because this guy is learning something – that the church is not me and a bunch of friends like me, you know, it’s bigger than that, it’s a family community.

**Darrell Bock:** I’m going to open this up for questions from the mike, so if you have questions you can start moving up to the microphones in the remaining time that we have. But here is another thing that I’m observing. We titled this session, the entire session of the day Mission To The City and I think that gives a picture of – well, if you use a military metaphor, it gives a picture of a regiment moving out and taking ground. But what I’m hearing is actually something pretty different than that kind of an image. What I’m hearing is a call to the church to be the church, to be the church that it’s designed to be, to be – I’m going to use your phrase that I hear you use a lot which I like – the image bearers of God. I tend to talk about how God has made us, it’s the same kind of idea. The image bearers of God who shine what the kingdom is. In other words, rather than trying to make the culture, on a cultural mandate model, become more Christian because that’s going to be hard to do without Christians being there.
The model that I’m hearing you present is, if you want to see community you can see it at Apostles Church. If you want to search for life and ask life’s hardest questions, you can get those asked and thought through at Apostles Church, and we’re telling you up front this is not going to be what you’re hearing out there, we’re having you come to us not to continue to live the way you have lived more efficiently, we’re actually asking you to come to us to think about the way you live and to change the way you live.

*JR Vassar:* Mm-hmm, yeah, enter into a different experience of life.

*Darrell Bock:* Of life, yeah. And with God obviously at the center and thinking through what that means.

*JR Vassar:* Absolutely. We were talking, you mentioned the church being sort of the sneak preview –.

*Darrell Bock:* Sneak preview of the kingdom.

*JR Vassar:* Of the kingdom of God. Foretaste of it, a trailer. And we use that language a lot at Apostles, is that we want to say if you want to know what the kingdom of God – if you want a little bit of a taste of what the kingdom of God is going to be like when it comes in its fullness, people should be able to taste it among us, and if they don’t then we have some repentance to do. If they come and they don’t feel the suffering love of Jesus, if they don’t feel compassion, if they don’t feel sympathy, if they don’t feel understood, if they don’t feel accepted, not affirmed in every way but accepted, then something’s wrong in us, there’s self-righteousness, there’s pride, there’s ego, there’s, you know, entitlement.

So yeah, we want to say to people, we want you to come and be a part of this but know that our hope – we’re not saying our friendship with you is contingent upon you believing what we believe and doing what we do. You’re not a project, you’re a person, you’re made in the image of God, you have dignity, value, worth, honor, we love you even if you disagree with us until the day you die, and we won’t take delight in your death at all. But we do want to be honest with you and say we want you to come to know and love Jesus.
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Darrell Bock: So there’s invitation, there’s conversation, there might be engagement, but there’s not – I can say, there may even be debate but it’s debate in the pursuit of a conversation about what life ought to be like as opposed to taking sides in a war or something like that.

JR Vassar: Yeah. There’s confrontation without conditions for friendship. And I think that’s important for people that, you know – we’ve had people in our community who, they’re still not believers but – and they’ll tell you that, “No, I’m not a Christian,” but they’re coming and they’re involved in community and they’re asking questions and they’re disagreeing about things and they’re bringing some really interesting perspectives to stuff, but it’s also helping us understand our context better.

So yeah, but they’re not going to stay at Apostles and not be confronted with the realities of Jesus, the polarizing identity of Christ, they’re going to hear, you need to repent, believe in him, trust in him, cross the line of faith, become part of the family of God and bring yourself under the glad submission to the lordship of Jesus.

Darrell Bock: Okay. I’m going to move out to the floor here, I’m going to start over here with questions, so go ahead.

Audience: Yeah, thank you, JR, for the very challenging message today, appreciate that. Just had a question in regards to this breaking down the barriers of church-y language in churches, which I agree there’s definitely some of that stuff that we need to be careful of, even with our own people, talking over their heads and things like that. But as you affirm propositions, as you talk about setting the bar high doctrinally, how does that relate or what’s the line we draw in regards to breaking down barriers or the language for that?

JR Vassar: Like how much language do we use that is actually biblical language, language from systematic theology? We’ll use them, we just make sure we define them. And then how much of those are – how much of that is language that’s been taken from southern hymnology or the Gaither Vocal Band or something like that, right? So we want to ask what is necessary language but what’s not necessary language? What’s unnecessary phraseology?

So you’re probably not going to hear we’ve been cleansed by the blood of the lamb too much at our church because whereas a first-century Jewish context would understand that, our context might not understand it as well. So we try to talk about having your guilt removed because of the work of Jesus on your behalf. So we would rather couch those things in phrases that they could understand.
We do talk about redemption, we just define it. We do talk about propitiation, we define it, justification. We just did a series on Galatians and man, we – there’s a lot of theological terms in Galatians – but we defined it, you know. There’s a lot of terms you’ve got to define in Galatians, like circumcision party. Our people had never heard of a circumcision party nor wanted to attend one. So we had to work with them through what was the circumcision party.

Darrell Bock: Bring your knife.

JR Vassar: Yeah. BYOK. So yeah, I need to be certain that it’s understood, I’m not saying I’m against using biblical language, I’m all for it. I’m for defining it, and I’m for making sure that those are indeed biblical and systematical theological handles without necessarily falling into traditional Christianity hymnity that we start jerking phrases out and canonizing them. Does that make sense what I’m saying?

Audience: Yeah, thank you.

Darrell Bock: Over here.

Audience: I’m Shawn O’Brien, Dr. Bock, JR, thanks for taking my question. JR, at Apostles Church how have you addressed the problem of evil in a place like New York City with the onslaught of the Twin Towers falling, Hurricane Sandy, the recent snowzilla storm? I mean how can a good, all-powerful, loving God let these atrocities happen?

JR Vassar: Yeah, we have to address the problem of evil. You know, I had to preach after Sandy, so I addressed it then, the tenth anniversary of 9-11, I happened to be in the book of 1 Peter talking about the problem of evil and suffering. The thing for us has been to take the approach of God being – actually being touched by suffering as well, that Jesus entering into our suffering, Jesus bearing suffering, Jesus experiencing it for us.

And so the two approaches is that, one, you doing away with God does not fix the problem of evil, it just removes your only hope for it being eradicated; and giving, again, a good eschatology about the renewal of all things in the end, that God will bring an end to all this, and it’s the hope of every human heart, and so if you have that ache in you then you’re touching a little bit about the realities of the kingdom of God.
But then the second thing is to show how God himself has been touched by suffering, and I think Keller does a great job with this, talking about basically that, you know, in all our understanding of religion God is the only – the Christian God is the only God that actually enters into the suffering of a people, takes it upon himself and defeats it. And so we try to take a – just a basic historic Christian approach to theodicy and the problem of evil. So you might have some thoughts.

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah, I do. This weekend I was at board meetings for Chosen People Ministries in San Francisco and the chairman of our board lived four miles within Newtown and so he was talking about the experience of going through that and he made a couple of observations that I thought were pretty fascinating.

First, he said after that event Christians were everywhere and atheists were nowhere to be found, in terms of helping people go through their pain, their suffering, et cetera, and identifying with it. I thought that was an interesting observation. The second observation he made is, once you ask that question, how can God do X, the next question is, where does that leave you? Where does that leave you? What kind of – as he said, what kind of hope can I offer to a parent if there is no God? What kind of explanation can I give for that death if there is no God? It makes no – there is nothing to be made of it, there’s no way to think about what goes on in our world, it just happens.

So I think sometimes when we get asked what I think are legitimately tough questions about Christian faith, that the next move to make is what’s the alternative? Is the alternative really any better? And I think sometimes that can give people pause.

**Audience:** JR, a question of clarity. You’ve used the term “kingdom” over and over repeatedly and I realize that has a lot to do with missional theology and the missional church movement, but sometimes you tend to talk about the kingdom coming and then the kingdom now, if I’ve understood, and maybe even tie that in with the millennial reign of Christ, and Darrell, if you want to comment, I know you’ve done a lot of work in that area.

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah, don’t ask me about the kingdom.

**Audience:** Help us out a little bit, JR. The kingdom – coming kingdom and kingdom now?
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**JR Vassar:** Yeah, I believe in both. I believe that the kingdom is here already but not yet in its fullness, and does what we’re wanting to see is more thorough expressions of the kingdom now that would look more and more like what the kingdom in its fullness is going to look like. So injustice, why are we dealing with sex trafficking, why are we trying to traffic-proof communities in Cambodia? So we’re partnered with Love146 and an organization called Kone Kmeng to basically traffic-proof these communities, educating children and villages.

Well, why do we want to do that? Well, it’s an atrocity, right, but we also say that that’s not what the coming kingdom is going to look like at all, that’s not in line with God’s great vision of the world to come and so we want to be about seeking that world to come even now. We know God’s going to bring it but we’re also going to seek it, and we don’t establish the kingdom but we certainly put it on display and we want to see greater expressions of it.

So if I’m going to brand myself kind of a historic pre-millennialist, close to progressive dispensationalist but not quite maybe. So yeah, we’re definitely –.

**Darrell Bock:** What other churches are there in that?

**JR Vassar:** I couldn’t have an intelligent conversation with Dr. Bock about it anyway. So yeah, the kingdom of God, we want to see Christ lordship expressed in people’s lives in such a way that brings about righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.

**Darrell Bock:** I’m going to piggyback on Aubrey’s question because I think there’s something going on here that’s important. Sometimes when you hear the word kingdom, particularly kingdom today, you think kingdom today equals church. It doesn’t. If you look at Matthew 13, the field where the kingdom is planted is the world. The kingdom makes a claim on every soul that walks this earth, that’s actually part of the basis for the accountability that will come at the end. The kingdom is bigger than the church.

Now, the kingdom is effective in the church where the spirit is active, and what – part of what I like about what Apostles Church does and what missional churches do is they’re trying to picture what the kingdom will be now with all the equipment that God has given us to make that happen. Ephesians says you’ve been given every spiritual blessing you need in Christ, so I think that’s very, very important, because I think sometimes we think kingdom, we think church and we don’t think about the kingdom’s presence in a mixed world; God says that’s going to be mixed until the end.
I had a phrase in here on one of the questions, we didn’t get to it, where it says it’s important to make people appreciate that they are accountable to God one day and that he will give an account, but we are not the accountants. Okay. We’re not the people who will do the accounting, they will do an accounting before God, God’s the one who will settle the accounts. And all that we’re doing is telling them, one day your debts are going to become due, what are you going to do with them?

**Audience:** Could you share a little bit about how you guys bring in new believers and maybe the membership classes you were talking about, like how long they are, what their content is? Some of that.

**JR Vassar:** Yes. We have an all-day-long membership class. We don’t do it over six weeks because you’ll never have a New Yorker in New York for six weeks in a row, so we just do it on a Saturday and we do it all day long, provide a free lunch. And we cover everything from our doctrine statement to our vision, values, what do we mean by gospel, what do we mean by community, what do we mean by mission. What does it look like for you to be a fully functioning member of Apostles Church, seeking a more intimate relationship with Jesus, being in community, using your gifts and talents and resources to further the mission of the church, willingly bringing yourself under the leadership of the church.

And so people commit to financially supporting the church, they commit to being in a community group, they commit to being on mission and seeking to bring others into the knowledge of Christ. So it’s those big pictures. We try to frame everything under gospel enjoyment, intentional community and prayerful mission, those are our three key values and so we shape the whole class around those three key values.

**Audience:** As a church planter, what advice do you give? You know, you said you have groups and then they would eventually plant churches, what advice do you give to men coming up wanting to plant a church, as someone who has gone through some things, what things do you, you know, hey, you got to watch out for these things or you need to do these things, or your family needs to be prioritized in this way, what advice do you give?

**JR Vassar:** Yeah. Well, don’t do it. No, I’m kidding. I would say don’t do it without the support of a local church. So I gathered 12 churches together and they all supported us for four years, prayer, finances, sending teams up just to encourage us and serve alongside us. That would have been pretty difficult.
I would also say don’t do it alone. I wouldn’t get a big team but I was reading in 2 Corinthians 8, where Paul says there was a door in Troas open for me in the Spirit, so the Spirit opens the door for Paul to preach the gospel in Troas but he said, by my spirit was disturbed because Titus wasn’t with me so I left. And I was really struck by that the other day as I read that because here was an open door, the Lord opened it for Paul to preach the gospel and he said because Titus wasn’t with him he was so disturbed in spirit he decided not to do it.

And I would just – man, I would say have one or two brothers that agree to do this with you for a season. I don’t think you’d go on all saying we’re doing this till we die, I think you say can you give me the next two or three years of your life and can we do this together. And if, God willing, there might be something on the other end of that, what you’re going to discover a lot of times, especially if you’re going into a new area, is that you’ll contextualize faster than the guys you brought and it becomes really challenging because you end up pastoring them instead of planting with them. So you’ve got to be careful about those kinds of things and be careful who you take with you.

Thirdly, I’d say raise a lot of money, that’s just – depending on where you plant, like if you’re going to plant in panhandle Texas, you probably don’t need that much money but if you’re going to plant in Boston you’re probably going to need some cabbage. So I would say that. I would also say take a zero year if you can do it, where you move to the place and you don’t do anything for a year but pray, pray, meet people, listen, check out the conversations happening, get into the conversations, understand your context. We moved to New York City and nine months later had a church up and running with small groups in Mercy and Justice Ministries and I didn’t know my city very well at all. So I would say take some time to do that.

And then, you know, I don’t know if you’re married but your wife certainly needs to sense that calling with you as well and be a part of that. And then I wouldn’t have your 5-year-old keep the books, that was a disaster. I didn’t think Quickbooks was that hard, all right, let’s be honest. So I’m sure there’s a lot more things I could say but that’s just a few quick ones that come to mind.

_Darrell Bock:_ Okay, this is the last question, go ahead.
I’d love to hear a little bit about like children’s ministry and the youth ministry, when you’re going into a lot of young families, a lot of seekers, maybe not a lot of mature volunteers, just kind of what does that look like?

Yeah. Well, we don’t have a youth ministry, we have only – basically my daughter is the oldest kid in our church, she’s 13, so we’ve started a middle school ministry for the girls, it’s kind of like a community group for the girls. And we’re trying to partner with some other churches in the area to kind of do a joint venture for some students.

But we have a thriving children’s ministry. We have well-trained volunteers that are all screened. You know, the thing about New York is no one’s really from Manhattan. We’re in Manhattan – Center City Manhattan, so no one’s really from Manhattan, so we got people from all over the place and we have several people who come from really solid church backgrounds. So we’ve got a lot of great volunteers, we’ve also got a lot of new believers that are learning a lot teaching the children. So that’s been kind of a cool thing.

So we’ve got a pretty extensive process where they have to go through an interview, go through screening, go through training and then they’re part of the children’s workers. So trying to do more ministry to families, helping families embrace a sustainable life in New York City because it’s kind of challenging in that way. So yeah, but we’ve got a lot to learn in that area, a long way to go.

I’m going to close reading a passage from 1 Peter that I think summarizes much of what’s been said today. It comes from Chapter 3, and Peter is addressing how believers engage with the culture at large. So listen to this, this is going to be verses 8 through 17. “Finally all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, affectionate, compassionate, and humble. Do not return evil for evil or insult for insult but instead bless others because you are called to inherit a blessing. For the one who wants to love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from uttering deceit. He must turn away from evil and do good. He must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous and his ears are open to their prayer. But the Lord’s face is against those who do evil.”
“For who is going to harm you if you are devoted to what is good? But in fact, if you happen to suffer for doing right,” I think it’s amazing he says who is going to harm you if you do good, and then – but if you do suffer, if you do catch it in the chin, okay, if you do happen to suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. “But do not be terrified of them or be shaken but set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts and always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess, yet do it with courtesy and respect, keeping a good conscience, so that those who slander your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame when they accuse you. For it is better to suffer for doing good if God wills it than for doing evil.”

This is a pretty important passage, set a pretty important tone for what it is that we have been talking about today. JR, I want to thank you for being with us today.