Virtuous Citizenship and Economic Wisdom

Part 1 of 2: Transforming Culture through Virtuous Citizenship
with Darrell Bock, Greg Forster
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Welcome to The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture. I’m Darrell Bock, executive director at the Hendricks Center for Cultural Engagement, and my guest is actually a returning expert, Greg Forster, who is executive director for one of the programs associated with faith and work at the Kern Family Foundation, and the last time we had him he was with us here live, but this time we’ve got him by the miracle, or however you want to describe it, of Skype.

So he’s with us remotely, but is ready to discuss, really, part two of a document that the Kern Family Foundation produces called “Theology That Works,” and the goal of this document is to discuss the connection between, really, whole life discipleship and faith, and to connect the idea that a large portion of most people’s lives are spent in venues that we don’t talk enough about in the church.

So, Greg, welcome. We’re really pleased to have you again, and we’re glad that all the technology is working out very nicely.

Thanks very much. I’m really pleased to be with you whether live or vicariously.

Well, let me just dive right in. The very opening section of part two of this document reads as follows. I’m just going to have you comment on this: “The gap between discipleship and everyday life is not only a threat to the church. It also is a major cause of public crises that are now confronting human civilization. Economic systems are becoming dysfunctional because social structures have grown further out of alignment with God’s design for image-bearing humanity.”

Now that’s kind of an ominous beginning to a section. So can you elaborate on what you’re beginning to get at, and kind of orient us to kind of where we’re going in the second section of this document?

Yes. Thank you. You know, I think it’s a daunting challenge that we face in the culture that we live in today. So you’re right to sense a note of being sober about the size of the challenge. It doesn’t mean I’m not optimistic. It doesn’t mean I don’t see a lot of hope, but we don’t want to be Pollyanna-ish; we want to be very realistic about the magnitude of what’s before us.
You know, actually, after I wrote that document I heard Dallas Willard say something that says basically the same point I’m making there, but much better put. He said: “The cause of our economic crisis is that we cannot say no to our desires,” and I think that is deeply true, and that’s really what I was driving at when I wrote the passage that you just read; that in our culture increasingly we understand the purpose of our lives. We understand what is good for human beings in terms of satisfying our desires, in terms of just going after the things that our hearts tell us will make us happy in a spontaneous way without having the wisdom of the long-standing tradition that’s informed by Christianity or many other sources of wisdom either that teach us that your heart will deceive you, that your natural desires are not actually a guide to what will make you well off or happy. It’s not the good for human beings to satisfy your natural desires.

And the church is the repository of something that God has placed in human culture in the church that we can then bear out to our neighbors through the way we live our lives and the way we participate in culture, and the witness that we bring, the wisdom that we are able to share with our neighbors in a thousand different ways, and that this is part of every Christian’s task to figure out how do I, in the places where God has put me, embody and live out and bear witness to the wisdom that the Lord has cultivated in the church.

Darrell Bock

You know, as I listen to this and listen to the focus on desires and how desires can mislead, the passage that comes to mind is the parable of the rich fool, which actually in Luke is designed to surface what it is that misdirected passion engenders in someone, and what it engenders ultimately is a kind of – in fact, Ephesians says that greed is a form of idolatry, and so what it engenders is a kind of self-focus to the degree that we become little gods, little “g,” but little gods, and we disconnect ourselves from the people around us and we disconnect ourselves from God as a result, and we end up not being vessels of service that contribute to this society, but we end up being a force that in effect sucks life out of society by the selfishness that we have.
That passage, the first person pronoun appears multiple times in a handful of verses; I think it’s like 11 times in three verses or something like this. So that the cliché that you hear, “It’s all about me,” is very much true about that text, and that’s what I see you beginning to address and warning in this section, and the way you’re trying to do it is to kind of reconnect us, not just to who we are as individuals, but what our social membership is, how we connect to the rest of society.

In fact, at one point you say: “Our relationships are never merely the product of individual choice, but are always constituted in part by social structures that transcend the individual, and again, having us have this sense of this corporate identity that we have.”

This paragraph in particular that I just read from made me think of the question: How did society make claims on us? And how should we respond to those claims? What is it that God does by placing us in the midst of a society?

*Greg Forster*

Yeah. I think just going back to something you said a moment ago, I think, virtually all of the crises and problems that our society is facing stem from the fact that our culture is no longer able to convince people to put other people’s good ahead of their own, and that when people do not people’s good ahead of their own, literally everything falls apart. It may fall apart slowly, but it will over time fall apart, and there’s no such thing as a perfect system. I mean this is T.S. Eliot’s famous line: “We’re dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.” And there are so many people running around on the right and the left who have a system that’s going to save us. You know, just let us at this system, and this will save us from the crisis.

And the problem is there’s no system that can save us if we’re not good people. There’s a lot to what it means to be a good person, but putting other people’s needs ahead of your own desires is step one. It’s 101. If you haven’t got that, the advance course is not going to matter if you haven’t got that beginner-level course.
So your question was how does society place claims on us, and what is God doing when he puts us into society? I think, unfortunately, the culture we live in as a tendency to think of the human person as I kind of disembodied spirit who lives in a body, and the few square inches inside your skull is the real you, and then your relationships with others are kind of subordinate to your own choices, your own desires, and that’s not a realistic picture of the human person.

If you just look around you at the way human beings actually live and thrive, what you discover is human beings are made for for a relationship. Human beings are formed by their relationships. You don’t think about everything that your parents contributed to who you are. Think about everything your schools contributed to who you are. Think about – you can just go down the list of the people around you, and think about how much they contributed to who you are.

Well, that means, basically, you do not get to make up the meaning of your own life. There’s a sentence in a Supreme Court decision from back in the ‘90s that said that, “The heart of liberty –” I’m not going to get the exact words right, but, “The heart of liberty is the right to understand the mystery of human life in your own way, not in the way someone else tells you, and I think we want to safeguard individual liberties. We don’t want to go back to a sort of the Dark Ages where the individual doesn’t matter, but we cannot just have people make up the meaning of their own lives for themselves and live in whatever way pleases them, because the results of that are what you see all around you.

Yeah. The analogy I like to use, and there’s a little pastor in me so I like pictures, is imagine what it is to drive on a highway if there were no lanes to drive in. Everyone did what was right in their own – some of that goes on on the highway already – but, you know, everyone does what is right in their own eyes, and there aren’t any rules and everyone goes where they think they deserve to go, and you’re not concerned about the other people driving on the highway. That’s nothing but chaos.
And the other element, the other picture that comes to mind, as I hear you, is that when we see people only as things, as chess pieces to move on a board because they occupy a certain space, and we don’t think about who they are as people made in the image of God, what their souls are about, what the connection to them might be, those kinds of things. We really demean life.

Greg Forster

Yeah. And I think that image of chess pieces is a profound one. Aristotle actually uses the image of – it’s not chess yet, but drafts, which was a chess-like game in that culture. He said: “A human being is like a piece in a game of drafts. If you take it away from the board, it has no purpose. A human being has no purpose except to participate in the game or its social life, just as piece in a board game has no purpose and becomes a meaningless thing if it is not participating in the game that it’s made for.”

And I think creating that balance between, on the one hand, seeing every human being as precious and made in God’s image, and on the other hand having a culture with integrity is the way I like to put it. Integrity is the word that I use because it fits together; literally, the word integrity means it fits together. So we need a culture that fits together.

C.S. Lewis uses the image of ships. He says: “Society is like a fleet of ships, and if they all sail wherever they want to regardless of the needs of the other ships they’ll crash into each other or else they’ll drift apart and the fleet will disappear because all the ships sailed in 10,000 directions.”

Darrell Bock

Yeah. That’s my car analogy.

Greg Forster

Yeah, and I guess with the rise of the car that might be more relatable for people. But we do want individuals to be stewards of their own lives. This is the stewardship thing we were talking about in part one of our discussion, and I think it’s a precious gift of our culture that more than any other culture takes seriously, the dignity of the individual and the fact that people are made to be stewards, that everyone, not just a few people at the top are made to be stewards, and the challenge before us is how do we maintain sort of that precious gift of our culture that it values human beings as individuals and as stewards? How do we take that seriously and not lose it, but also have a culture with integrity?
Yeah. And the hard part here is that our own culture in the West, particularly in North America and in Europe, has so elevated the individual that the individual lives life with a sense of entitlements that come to them. These are things that I deserve, and the first lens we put on is kind of the lens of what will society give me? What am I entitled to?

And what I hear throughout this entire section that we’re in of this theology that works piece is, really, the first lens that needs to go on the glasses that you use is not one of entitlement. It’s one of service. It’s one of engaging and moving towards another as opposed to asking what can they give me, and the difference in the direction of that arrow makes a lot of difference in how people live and how they make their choices.

Yeah. And I think it’s simply a matter of coming to realize how we’re made, that we are not made as isolated individuals. We are made to be in relationship; we’re made to be in community; we’re made to be in culture. And that means that whatever is going on in our culture we are implicated. When we see things happening in our society, whether it’s locally or nationally, whether it’s economic or political or family or anything, whatever kind of issue it is, we are implicated in the life of our culture because we are made to be in it. We’re embedded in our culture. We’re embedded in our local communities. We’re embedded in our national community.

These things matter, and like you said, the first lens we need to put on is how can we be of service? How can we be a blessing to those around us, because we are implicated in this web of relationships that we’re a part of?
Now a hard thing it seems to me is another concept that you put alongside this general kind of placement in society, and that’s the idea that we’re exiles, which adds a whole other dimension to the equation because it almost suggests, and I’m floating this idea, really, that although we’re in the society and a part of our society, we have to be careful that our hearts aren’t so connected to the society that we think that’s all that our identity comes from, that there’s something that transcends that cultural connection, and that is the fact that we are representatives. Exiles is one way; another image that sometimes is used is ambassadors, representing the kingdom might be another image to get at the same idea. What does that add to this kind of conception of identity that we’re talking about here?

Right. It means that we cannot reduce the mission of the church to the culture simply to the success of the culture measured in worldly terms. So the world would agree with us on a number of things that we want the culture to achieve. So if our next-door neighbor is out of a job, we want him to have a job. If there’s a broken home, we want to see that harmony restored. There’s all kinds of things on which we would agree with our neighbors in terms of what we want for the life of our society, but we cannot simply operate only in those areas where we and the culture around us agree about the ends.

And if one danger is to simply dismiss the culture because that’s the world and that’s under the dominion of the evil one, and the world has nothing to do with the church, that’s one error to think that we’re not implicated in the life of our culture.

The opposite error would be to say, “Well, it’s imperative for us to be beneficial to our culture, and we can’t force our faith on people,” which is true. “Therefore, the only thing we can do is to promote the ends that our society approves of that we also approve of.” That’s insufficient. As ambassadors of something that is higher and greater, we also have to bear witness to righteousness in those areas where our culture is going wrong ‘cause we are implicated in those areas, just as we are implicated in –

There are consequences for those choices.
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*Greg Forster* Absolutely. And ultimately you cannot do the good stuff well if you don’t bear witness against the bad stuff, you cannot go and promote the good stuff and be effective.

*Darrell Bock* This combination of images, I think, is very, very important. We’re embedded in society. We have a part in it. We contribute to it. We’re called to serve it. We have to watch that our sense of entitlement doesn’t overwhelm us so that it gets in the way of our ability to serve.

We’re here as exiles or as ambassadors, and are here to represent something that transcends the particular nation or the particular community that we’re a part of. That also gives us the ability to connect with other nations and other communities in the process because our concern is for humanity at large, not just the particular location that God has us in.

There are all kinds of ramifications for that. In fact, there’s probably a whole podcast that could be built around just those ideas that we’ve just gone through.

*Greg Forster* You just mentioned something. You said one thing that this equips us to do is to have a concern for people who are not a part of our culture. I want to give you an illustration of that that has been very powerful for me.

A coworker of mine here at the Kern Family Foundation until he retired recently, Tim Crewall, used to say: “Politicians want us to think of the Chinese as a billion people who are going to steal our jobs, and that’s how they want us to think of the Chinese.” We need to think of the Chinese as a billion customers that we could be serving, and if our economy was producing things that they wanted to buy because it was beneficial for them, they’d be better off and we’d be better off. They’d have more jobs and we’d have more jobs, too. We don’t have to be in competition with them in an ultimate sense. We can both benefit.
Yeah. I think that’s a hugely important concept for a while lot of discussions, not just areas like international trade and international relations, but even when we think about the pluralism that’s coming into our own country through the processes of immigration, etc., it certainly impacts how we view those questions whether I see a person of another race or another background as an “other” that I need to keep at arm’s length, or whether it’s someone who has something to contribute to the society as they come if we will permit it.

And what a blessing the church could be to this culture, which is so pluralistic in ethnic, racial, religious, economic and other respects. What a blessing we could be if we showed our culture the possibilities for harmony and cooperation across racial and ethnic lines, across economic lines. So we find ways for mutual benefit, rather than seeing competition as an absolute where anything that I gain must come at your expense.

The opportunity for us as Christians to demonstrate within, not as a separate thing from our culture, but within our culture, the possibilities for harmony and flourishing and abundance that can be mutually reinforcing across these lines, I think it speaks very powerfully to the opportunity to bear witness for the work of the Lord.

And I actually think we’re walking into the ethical core of Scripture, and here’s what I mean: That at the core of what the cross is about is reconciliation, and that reconciliation is not just between the individual and God. That reconciliation is ultimately a cosmic reconciliation. It’s a reconciliation between peoples. It’s a reconciliation between the people and their function in the creation so that it’s harmonious. It’s a comprehensive reconciliation, and that’s what it’s in evidence of.

And a second dimension of it that’s also important is when Jesus gets asked, “What’s the most important commandment,” he puts both of these things together because he has, “Love God with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself,” and the two very much go together and impact each other, and so that’s what you’re evidencing.
So there’s a sense in which we have bought in – I think a mistake that we’ve made is that we have bought into the sacred-secular dichotomy that our culture wants us to have to keep religion kind of off to the side at arm’s length, but, in fact, the biblical picture is that there’s an integrative, or what you all have called consistently a holistic dimension to this in which you don’t divide the secular and the sacred ‘cause it’s all interwoven within itself. There’s no way to split that atom without having a nuclear explosion, and in the process we need to get people to see that every act that they perform out of their religious life, and no matter where it is, no matter what building they’re in, it is a sacred act of one kind or another.

**Greg Forster**

Amen, brother. Preach it. That’s all fantastic. And the only thing that I would add to that is that harmony tends to produce flourishing. It’s not an absolute every single time, but most of the time when people are in harmony and a right relationship with another, flourishing of every description – economic flourishing, clinical flourishing, you name it, society works better that way, and I think it is God’s intention for the church to help our communities flourish by creating that harmony and pointing people to how they can have it.

**Darrell Bock**

Well, another idea that’s in this paper that comes next is what you call two dangers that come out of a virtuous citizenship. You know, one thing I was going to do is have us define virtuous citizenship so let me do that before I ask this question.

It says: “Virtuous citizenship means participating in social structures, such as the home, workplace and community in a way that puts the good of our neighbors first, rather than using these structures as tools to serve our individual desires.” So what we’ve been talking about here since the beginning of the podcast.

“Just as discipleship means more than doing religious works, but is a calling for all of life, virtuous citizenship means more than doing a special set of ‘citizenship works.’” You have that in quotes – “such as voting, but is a calling that reshapes all of our participation in social structure.”

So there’s this call to participate in and to be this virtuous citizen, if you will. And you say there are two dangers. Here they are: “Social collectivism that violates the dignity of the individuals on one end, and an isolation of the individual that tends to produce over-accommodation to the prevailing culture on the other.”
Now I think you’ve already alluded to this, but why don’t you develop those dangers in terms of what we’re talking about?

**Greg Forster**

Yeah. I think one of the great things historically that I’m very, very passionate about making sure we don’t go back on is the advance that’s been brought forward in history by the church I would say especially in the Reformation, but not exclusively in the Reformation on championing the right and the responsibility of the individual to be faithful and to be virtuous and to be a steward of God’s world.

You know, I sat in on a panel discussion about five years ago where a group of theologians that were ecumenical – both Protestant and Catholic – were talking about all of the problems that are created by this sovereignty of the conscience idea, and how we’ve got to stop giving so much room for the sovereignty of the conscience, and we’ve got to let institutions tell us more the meaning of our beliefs.

And I was kind of impertinent. I raised my hand. I said, “You know, I was just trying to think what Martin Luther would say if he were here. What’s he supposed to say to the Lord? You know, Lord, I wish I could have borne witness for you at the Diet of Worms, but the human self is situated in this dense web of human relationships that is constitutive of its personhood, Lord,” and they squirmed a little bit in trying to answer that question. I think we never want to go back on Brother Martin. We never want to go back on the fact that, as Brother Martin puts it, every individual is responsible for his own faith. He said, “Every man is responsible for his own faith.” And I think we don’t want to reduce people to cogs in a machine. We’ve got to make sure that just as Brother Martin in the 95 Theses was standing up for the spirituality and the freedom of every person in the church over against the attempt to exploit them by powerful elites. We’ve got to keep that dignity of every human being front and center.

At the same time – this goes to the other danger – if the only piece we have is that dignity of the individual thing, then every individual will start to make up his own plan for what we’re going to do in the household, in the business, in the community, and people will begin to serve themselves instead of serving others, and that can be very insidious. It’s not always an explicit, “I’m going to be a selfish person and just lie, cheat and steal to serve myself.” It can be very insidious. It can be very self-deceptive.
What we do is we think that we’re serving other people, but we’re serving other people in a way that we define, and because the heart is deceitful, we define service to others in the way that actually delivers the payoff to us, whether it’s a payoff in material benefit or a payoff in some psychological benefit that we get out of using other people in various ways – emotional benefits, status, wanting to be in a certain position in the relationship or whatever it is, and that runs the gamut from the top to the bottom ‘cause the problem is not one party or the other, one class or the other. The problem is in the human heart, and we’ve all got that problem to deal with.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn made this famous comment after having been imprisoned and tortured by his enemies simply for standing up for the right to tell the truth and not just parrot what the Soviet authorities told him to say. You know, if anybody can say I’m good and my opponents are evil, it would be Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn sitting in the Gulag being tortured, but he had this famous line where he said, “The line between good and evil is not a line between one party or another. It runs through every human heart.”

And for him in that place to say that really, I think, is a sobering reminder of how insidious this tendency to serve ourselves can be. So we have to be very careful to be on the watch for that, and not only in our own hearts, but we need to think about how can we build a culture, how can we participate in a culture that leads people in that direction? Because it can’t just be me thinking about me and you thinking about you because then it just becomes narcissistic and selfish again.

**Darrell Bock**

That’s right. There was a quote this week in Time magazine. They had interviewed Pope Francis I and asked him to describe himself, and he replied in one sentence: “I am a sinner.” And I thought that was interesting that that would be the place where he would start because that takes the sense of entitlement out of the equation. That tells you that I am a person who has need for a spiritual connection and a spiritual transformation, a spiritual metamorphosis, and it may not be something that I can supply for myself.

**Greg Forster**

Absolutely. And I was about to say that is not natural for human beings to do that.

**Darrell Bock**

That’s right.
Greg Forster: That’s why, if you look back in history, you see a dramatic difference between cultures where Christianity has been an influence, and cultures where Christianity has never been an influence or where the influence is long past because after the gospel passed away for a long time, see dramatic differences in many ways. These cultures find ways of affirming values of service to others in ordinary everyday life. I don’t want to be triumphalist and say, “Well, Christian cultures are better than non-Christian cultures so we should let them roll forth and conquer the world,” but I do think there’s a striking difference in history where the gospel has been an influence in the culture. You do find that, and I think that is an indispensable part of what Christianity is. If we don’t have that, then there’s a piece missing from our Christianity because, again, we’re made to be in culture. We’re made to be a community.

Darrell Bock: Well, the interesting thing here is we’re entering into a section of the discussion where it talks about participating in social structures, and you say on the one hand there’s an affirmation of the value of that participation that needs to take place.

On the other hand, there’s a participation that needs to be critical about how we do it, and what’s interesting is when you look at society you break it down into three pieces, and I found this fascinating: The family, which everyone talks about so that’s an obvious one; the workplace, where everyone functions, but we don’t talk about it very much; and then thirdly, civil community where I think for most Christians they would go family, workplace and church.

So there’s this whole dimension of our connection to the larger world that goes missing. I’m being critical, not of what you’ve written, but in thinking about these three areas.

In the family area I think we give a lot of energy and attention to how the family works and how it should work. I think for the most part we do okay there. We may not perform well there, but at least we’re talking about it and engaging it and trying to think through how it ought to work.

Greg Forster: Like C.S. Lewis said: “The road is hard, but the path is clear.”
Darrell Bock

Exactly. And when it comes to the workplace I think most people are without a clue. I mean I think they go in their jobs; they do their work; they take their paycheck, but the way they view it is, “This is something I have to go through and do in order to do the rest of what I really want to do with my life.” And so this huge chunk of where they invest themselves is this kind of schizophrenic experience. They know they have to do it, and they’re going to be there, but they don’t have any clue what really to do with it or how to view it.

And then the third area also is a problem – the whole civil community idea – because we define our community so narrowly in terms of our own spiritual experience and our spiritual community that we forget a vast web of networks that we automatically live in and that aren’t a part of the community that we tend to identify with, not that church community identification isn’t important. It’s actually a part of that civil community idea, but the civil community is much bigger than that, and our view and our engagement has to be much bigger than that in order to be holistic. A fair summary of what we’re dealing with?

Greg Forster

Oh, absolutely. And I would only say that the only reason church is not on that list is because I’m assuming church is the launch pad, if you will, from which we are going into these areas, and I’m trying to list what are the areas to which the life of the church grows out from the aircraft carrier in the church we launch our missions. Where do we launch them to? And I think the civil community, if you look at the writings of any of the great figures in Christian history who were reformers or revivalists, you find consistently they have things to say about their civil communities. As C.S. Lewis famously said: “The people who believe most firmly in the existence of an eternal life are the ones who were the most concerned and did the most good for the temporal world.”

The more people were rooted in heaven, the more good they were to the communities in which they lived, and I think that’s true. I’m not remembering word for word the quote there, but it’s close to that.

Darrell Bock

Yeah. We’re so heavenly minded we actually are earthly good.
Greg Forster: Yeah, I know. It was funny. There was a pastor in my church, one of the younger pastors who gave a sermon in which he said: “I heard this saying, ‘He’s so heavenly minded he’s no earthly good.’ I think it’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard. If you’re heavenly minded, you’ll be earthly good.”

Darrell Bock: That’s exactly right.

Greg Forster: If you’re no earthly good, you’re not heavenly minded.

Darrell Bock: Exactly.

Greg Forster: Wow. For one thing I’ve met too many people who conform to that saying to be surprised by it. It’s delightful to be, to see him actually shocked, and that’s a wonderful sign that he hasn’t just become jaded about it ‘cause that’s where I often am.

Yeah. I think just seeing the civil community as a place into which we launch our mission from the church is a really important thing.

Darrell Bock: So on the one hand we’ve got this affirmation. We’re in the society. We’ve got to function in it. We’ve got to not only affirm our role in it. We are participants in it by default, whether we recognize it or not, and so then the question becomes how do we participate in it and participate in it well?

And then the second part of it that’s also important is what you call transformation, which implies that as we engage the culture there is a critique that is going on, and there is a counter modeling, and I’m saying both intentionally here because the critique deals with what we may say verbally about what goes on in our culture, how we address it, but the modeling is a way of picturing that critique, of giving it flesh and blood and breath and life. So that the critique isn't just an academic exercise of words only, but you actually see it in practice.
And what I’m seeing you encourage people towards is a holistic life that does both; that is conscious about what verbally it says about what’s going on in the society, and that also is making effort to be a model in a counter kind of way. And I want to make a distinction here between not merely just shaking your finger at the world, and saying the way you live is wrong, but actually trying to produce a positive model for what right living looks like so that there’s something put in its place that people can see and grasp and get their hands around and hopefully move towards.

**Greg Forster**

Absolutely. One of my favorite examples of that is Josiah Wedgwood, who is an 18th Century figure who was known to Evangelicals largely because of his work in the anti-slavery movement, which we Evangelicals think and talk about quite a bit, but not many people know how did he come to have the money and the social prestige to contribute to the anti-slavery movement? Well, it’s because he helped to invent the modern factory, and it’s a fascinating story.

If you look at the early factories that emerged during the Industrial Revolution, these new towns were springing up in the middle of nowhere where nobody lived there before, and now suddenly tons and tons of people are tightly packed in around the factory. And they choose to be there because the wages are better than farm life, but there’s no boundaries because there’s no established culture. There’s no rules. Sort of the rhythm and cultural boundaries of agricultural life have all been disrupted so you had rampant alcoholism; you had absenteeism. And the factory owners really very often had a sort of aloof paternalistic and arrogant view of their works as, “Well, what do you expect? Of course they all get drunk and of course they’re showing up at noon because they were hung over. What better could you expect?”

Well, Josiah Wedgwood came in and said: “No, no, no. This is not the way human beings are made to live. We’re going to give you a proper community. We’re going to give you a clean environment.” Sanitation was a huge issue. “We’re going to give you a clean environment. We’re going to give you medical care. We’re going to have religious services. We’re going to have all of the services and things that a normal community has.”
“In exchange we expect you to show up for work every working day. You will show up on time. You will work very hard. You’ll work the entire day. You will have specific tasks that we will assign you to do ‘cause the old way was just you showed up and you did whatever task was lying around.” Right? “No. We will specialize you so that you learn to do this task with excellence, and I will set high standards for your work because I expect that of you.”

And this was just a tremendously better model for how to run a factory, and as I like to say, it was more productive because it was more humane, but it was also more humane because it was more productive. That is, you set high expectations for these workers and they deliver, because human beings are made to be workers, and it was the factory workers who did not expect hard work, who did not expect productivity. Those were the people who were really being demeaning to their people, but Wedgwood set very high standards and was strict about the quality of work and the amount of work that he expected from people, and it was better for them. The workers wanted to work in that factory where the standards were high because it was a better way.

And what he did, this is why I bring it up to you question, it demonstrated that this was a better way –

**Darrell Bock**

It was an incarnational model of what it is we’re talking about.

**Greg Forster**

Absolutely. And so other factories emulated it because it was proven better, and my view is that Christians -if Christianity is what we claim it is and what the Bible claims it is, Christians should be able to do stuff better because we have inside information about how the universe works because the Spirit has set us free from the chains of our old nature, and so forth. We ought to be able to do that kind of thing. Josiah Wedgwood was able to do what he did because of the Christianity that he had, and I think we ought to be able to do that as well, and if we’re not, then shame on us.

**Darrell Bock**

Yes. Well, I think this gets at another theme that comes right off of this sense of this calling in terms of being both a participant and an affirmer and contributing to the transformation, hopefully, in a positive way.
When we did this podcast with Andy Crouch, he talked about that transformation happening in a very localized level, but I as an individual may not be able to change the world; that may be an unrealistic vision, but I can impact my neighborhood. I can impact my local school, the places where I am regularly. I can impact my workplace by how I live.

And one of the things you talk about is a productive call, which is the idea of producing blessing. I think that’s a simple way to think about it; that if you ask what does service do? Service produces blessing. It serves and it serves well, and in the midst of serving and serving well, it produces blessing, and it produces blessing as a virtue for anyone who comes across it, and hopefully the person who experiences that blessing senses that and appreciates it, and is drawn towards it as a result.

I’m sensing that’s kind of – if I can say it – the goal of where you’re trying to take people. Fair?

**Greg Forster**

Right. I think that is fair. I’m greatly influenced by Lester DeKoster, who wrote a book called Work: The Meaning of Your Life, and he identifies two major elements of getting God into our work, and one of them is we serve our neighbors, that we are making the world a better place because of what we do. I think that doesn’t just apply to work. It’s just a general calling to the way we live our lives; that what we do should make the world a better place.

And the other one was that we inwardly do it for God. I think you need both, and if you leave out the inwardly do it for God part, then you’re moving in the direction of reducing people to cogs in a machine because the only thing that matters is your effect on the world. Your inward motivation and identity are being left out in that case, and because individuals matter, we don’t want to lose that, but we have the danger of integrating faith and work or integrating faith and culture without that other call of are we objectively making the world a better place? Can we point to things and say, “The world is better, and here’s a way and here’s a way and here’s a way that the world is better because of what we do.”
Because if it’s only about doing it for God inwardly, and we’re not actually holding ourselves accountable to produce blessings for our neighbors, then it becomes narcissistic. Faith/work integration becomes just another way of navel gazing and thinking about how wonderful we are.

**Darrell Bock**

Yeah. I think that’s a profound observation in the sense that either if it’s just for God and I really don’t care about the neighbor that I serve, I only reach out to them because I want a notch on my belt, if I can say it that way.

**Greg Forster**

Yeah.

**Darrell Bock**

That becomes obvious. That usually becomes obviously transparent to the person you’re trying to serve, and they actually recoil from that to a certain degree. And if I just serve people without the sense of my accountability and responsibility and my desire to please God, then I lose this tension which happens in a fallen world, which is I may be very, very faithful in my effort and my attempt. It may not be entirely appreciated by the person who[m] I seek to serve, so if my value is totally left in the hands of how they respond to what I’m doing, I could be left out in the cold to a certain extent.

But if I understand that I’ve been faithful to a living God, whether that service has been entirely appreciated or not, I have another place for my identity to get its sense of value for what it is that I’ve done.

**Greg Forster**

Yeah. I mentioned DeKoster. He got interested in this whole connection between faith and work. He was a professor at a Christian college, but in the evenings he taught a speech class for factory workers in his city, and he was just very pained by hearing them talk about how their work was burdensome to them and how they just felt like there was no meaning or purpose in it.
And he wanted to point them to the meaning and purpose of it, and the reason I bring this up from what you said is he knew that the fact that their work had a positive impact on the world was not enough; that they had to have this sense of inward identity and motivation that were rightly ordered; that that mattered just as much; that it’s insufficient to say we’ve got the factory workers at the machines doing their jobs and keeping the city running. He knew that it mattered whether those factory workers understood what they were doing and were doing it for the right reasons and had the right sense of their own identity and their own understanding of their place in the social system that their work participates in. So that’s why he wrote the book.

Darrell Bock

That’s interesting. Well, I think that there’s another observation in the midst of this discussion that I thought was also worth reflecting on, and it goes that what we’re not talking about here is a seizing of control and power. It says: “Insofar as relationships and institutions legitimately come under our stewardship responsibility, we are called to make them more like the way they should be, and if we discern a calling we should not be shy about following God into spaces we might not otherwise enter. While God doesn’t like busybodies, he does bless entrepreneurial thinking, enterprising, adaptive responses to challenges.”

And then you go on to talk about that: “The goal here is not a seizing of power, but really a stewarding or a serving well; that if you ask what you should assess, it’s not how much do I control what’s happening here or how much did I seek to control more of it, but am I really serving in the way I ought to?”

Greg Forster

I think that’s right. The tension that I’m trying to – as you can see, a consistent theme here is there are two errors and we’ve got to steer between them. Yeah.

Darrell Bock

That’s right.
In this case on the one hand we don’t want to be complacent. If we have a genuine opportunity to move into a space and be a force for good there, we want to be entrepreneurial and self-starting rather than kind of sit back and only deal with the things that happen to drift into our sort of sight, our line of sight. We want to be proactive and entrepreneurial and going out and finding opportunities to do good things, but we can’t let that become a desire to seize power. We only want to go out and do these things in places where we genuinely have a stewardship, where we genuinely have a calling to be there and a calling to be stewarding that area.

It’s a major mistake to think that the goal is to start by going out and grabbing as much power as we can, and then once we’ve got that power, we can start using it to impose godliness on the areas where we’ve grabbed that power because that just doesn’t work for all kinds of reasons.

The number one reason being that our neighbors, who are not Christian, are also made for stewardship. That the image of God was defaced by the fall, but our neighbors are still made in the image of God and they’re precious in God’s sight, and we don’t want to take away their stewardship, and if seizing power becomes the dominant force or becomes the major way in which we’re engaging with our culture, then we become in competition with the stewardship of our non-Christian neighbors. We don’t want to be in competition with the stewardship of our non-Christian neighbors. We want to acknowledge the stewardship that God’s given them. We want to, again, seek that harmony in flourishing together.

Well, I think what you mean to some degree, talk about another concept, when you talk about infusing shalom into civilization; that what we’ve just been talking about, how we serve, that it’s not a seeking of power, but it is an attempt to contribute to flourishing and to contribute in a way that is both affirming and yet critical in moving towards transformation in the society is the concept of infusing shalom. Is that –?

Yes, and I’m drawing on some theological work there that is not my own, and I’m always hesitant and nervous when I start to get into technical theological terminology, but really the point I’m trying to make there is that we are transformed by our faith. We need to be transformed by our faith, and when we then go out and participate in society in a way that is transformed by our faith, that does not just impact us. It impacts the society around us.
So in a sense the transformation that’s worked in our lives by the Holy Spirit is manifested and has an influence in human culture not in a redemptive way, I mean that’s the social gospel we don’t want to down that route, but while we need to avoid a social gospel, we do need to say if we are living faithfully, we should see an infusion of that transformation impacting our culture; that our culture is different than it would be if we were not present.