CREATIVE DESTRUCTION: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF INSTITUTIONS

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

A theology of institutions is dependent upon an imagination sparked by the cross and shaped by the hope of the resurrection. Creative destruction is the institutional process of dying so that new life might flourish for the sake of others. Relying upon the institutional imagination of James K.A. Smith, the institutional particularity of David Fitch, and L. Gregory Jones’ traditioned innovation, creative destruction becomes a means of institutional discipleship. When an institution practices creative destruction, it learns to remember, imagine, and be present so that it might cultivate habits of faithful innovation. As institutions learn to take up their cross a clearer telos comes into view and collaboration across various organizations becomes possible for a greater good. Institutions that take up the practice of creative destruction can reimagine, reset, restart or resurrect themselves through a kind of dying so that new life can emerge. Creative destruction is an apologetic for an institutional way of being-in-the-world for the sake of all beings-in-the-world.
Dedication

To Shéy
Thanks for helping me:
Learn how to see beauty
Live in hope
Walk with my eyes open
And find grace in the world
# Table of Contents

Creative Destruction: Towards a Theology of Institutions ................................................................. 1  
Desire and Formation: Smith’s Institutional Imagination ................................................................. 9  
Particular People in Particular Places: Fitch’s Local Imagination .................................................... 25   
Creative Destruction: Finding Life in Death ....................................................................................... 46   
Traditioned Innovation: Institutional Memory, Presence and Imagination at The Intersection of Life and Death ........................................................................................................................................... 75   
Reimagine, Reset, Restart, and Resurrect: How Institutions Practice Traditioned Innovation Through Creative Destruction ........................................................................................................................................... 97   
Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................ 126
**List of Figures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Life Cycle of an Institution</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Disruptive Stages in an Institutional Life Cycle</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Creative Destruction in an Institutional Life Cycle</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviations

Dan Daniel
Deut Deuteronomy
2 Co 2 Corinthians
Jn John
Lk Luke
Mk Mark
Mt Matthew
NIV New International Version
NRSV New Revised Standard Version
Re Revelation
Acknowledgments

I want to thank my parents who have spent years encouraging me to dream new dreams and instilled a desire to be willing to take the hard road for the sake of something greater. Thank you to my brothers who have been great conversation partners over the years and helped me not to take life too seriously and laugh often.

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Thank you to the faith communities that have shaped me over the years. To Cornerstone, thank you for creating space so that I might find my voice, ask new questions, and journey alongside of you in this adventure of following after God. You’ve been an inspiration to me along the way. To First Baptist Ashland, thank you for inviting me in to live out this thesis. Your courage and willingness to follow God in faithful innovation towards the future is inspiring. I’m honored to be your pastor and can’t wait to see how the Spirit of God continues to move in and through us.

It has been a joy to work with Dr. L. Gregory Jones and Dr. Jason Byassee on this thesis. I couldn’t have asked for a better Advisor and Secondary Reader. Your questions, generous time, and willingness to help me grow as a reader, writer, and person have left an indelible mark on my life. I entered this program hoping that I’d get to work with some of the best theologians and practitioners and I certainly got that with each of you. Greater than the academic endeavor, however, was your kindness and friendship throughout the entire writing process, especially when I moved and started a new job in the middle of the process. Thank you.

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Creative Destruction: Towards a Theology of Institutions

Josh Hayden

Statement of the Topic

Can institutions participate in a kind of creative destruction so that resurrection might occur, and by embodying this narrative give shape to the identity, telos, and imagination of local and global communities? The framing narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is often applied to individual Christians as they participate in institutions and wield power, but can the institutional church or, for that matter, all institutions model this narrative motif?

Conversation and critical disagreement between Reformed scholar James K.A. Smith and Anabaptist theologian David Fitch—both influenced by Stanley Hauerwas—has created theological and methodological tension between the traditions regarding how Christians should participate in institutions and how institutions should participate in the larger community. I’d like to explore whether an integration of these two traditions: (1) institutional power understood in the Reformed church as the restoration of all things through faithful presence in institutions, (2) and the prophetic witness of the Anabaptist tradition that challenges any attempts to remake Christendom through faithful differentiation, could result in a new framework for understanding how Christians can faithfully participate in institutions. An integration of these two traditions could become the framing narrative for how the church can participate in creating a shared imagination for communities both on micro and macro levels.

Review of Related Literature

Before addressing the influence of Smith and Fitch, it is helpful to acknowledge the framing work done by James Davison Hunter in To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, &
Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World. Hunter’s work articulates the challenges facing a Christian Church that is finding itself on the margins of cultural and political power in postmodernity. Through a recap of church history, followed by an examination of the current context of institutional power, Hunter makes his case for Christians to practice a faithful presence within institutions. Against the dominant postures of theological and political conservatism that is defensive against cultural engagement, theological and political liberalism that is constantly seeking relevance to cultural engagement, and the neo-Anabaptist posture of purity from culture, Hunter posits “affirmation and antithesis.” This work contributes to my project by helping to create a framework for the larger conversation and providing a Reformed perspective that highlights what is at stake in the conversation about institutional involvement for the common good. Hunter’s focus on the Christian as co-creator with God for good in this present age and as image-bearers of God, instigates a helpful place of divergence with neo-Anabaptists who begin from location of the Fall and interpret stewardship of God’s creation through the lens of sin. A gap in the conversation is how Christians can participate faithfully and vocationally in institutions while also discerning whether a differentiation of the church from other institutions like government, schools, non-profits, etc. is a necessary endeavor. How does the particular language game of Christianity impact how “the common good” can and should be understood?

James K.A. Smith begins his trilogy (the third has not yet been released) of Cultural Liturgies with Desiring the Kingdom, a book about how worship, worldview, and cultural

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1 James Davison Hunter, To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 237.
2 Ibid., 231.
formation are possible in the contemporary context. Smith focuses on how liturgies and habits (either sacred or secular) give shape to our identity and desires, ultimately our formation as a people, giving direction and embodiment to love. Smith recognizes that institutions shape habits, which shape identity and the framing narrative by which people organize their lives and participate in the world. Like Hunter, Smith makes a strong case that Christians need to be faithfully present in institutions as a response to the invitation to create in response to God. Both Smith and Hunter give much value to thinking institutionally while also dancing close to the line of a kind of trickle-down-formation that begins first with the cultural shaping institutions and secondarily with individuals. In trickle-down-formation, the size and scope of the institution could determine the way formation begins with leadership and slowly trickles down through the ranks and base participants through institutional habits. At stake is the role of institutional power and collaboration to shape the lives of individuals in the context of community as seen in Smith’s post, “Knitting While Detroit Burns?” he articulates the significance of institutional power: “While it’s uncomfortable to consider it, we might have to realize that concern for the common good still requires a culture war.” At stake for Smith is both the viability and validity of Christianity in the postmodern context, and the mission of God as Christians relate to and wield power. While Smith makes significant headway in challenging the methodology and philosophy

3 It is helpful to note the institutional context of Smith, who is a philosophy professor at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Smith is the Gary & Henrietta Byker Chair in Applied Reformed Theology & Worldview. Smith is teaching at a college started by the Christian Reformed Church in North America and named after the 16th century reformer John Calvin. As stated on Calvin’s website, “the historic creeds and confessions of Reformed Christianity guide the college’s understanding of scripture and inform its mission.” Calvin College, "Who We Are," Calvin College, http://www.calvin.edu/about/who-we-are/.


5 "Knitting While Detroit Burns?" http://www.cardus.ca/blog/2013/08/knitting-while-detroit-burns.
of the Religious Right, he continues to use language that stirs up conflict and places emphasis on the institutional work as the priority necessary for proper local embodiment.

David Fitch writes in response to Smith a post that sheds some light on the nuances in their approaches to institutions and power: “Jamie articulates a ‘both local and macro’ engagement strategy while the Neo Anabaptists prefer a ‘first local then macro’ ‘local precedes macro’ engagement strategy.” Fitch in fact lines up with much of Hunter’s portrayal of neo-Anabaptists, except for Hunter’s emphasis that in an effort to be pure from the sin of culture, Neo-Anabaptists see no value in any vocations except Christian ministry. Fitch instead argues from a place of distinction, or what Hunter describes as “antithesis” as a way more starkly to differentiate the particularity of Christian language in contrast to other organizations. Fitch spends the majority of The Great Giveaway highlighting the ways that other organizations have tried to procure the mission of the Church from the Church. It is here that some pushback against Fitch will be necessary while unpacking whether neo-Anabaptists can find ways to affirm the image of God in institutions as well as humans. Can the first local, then macro distinction be practiced, and is there ever a time for first macro, then local?

While Smith and Fitch disagree on the priority of local versus macro, it seems like there is room for a third way. Creative destruction is an alternative to destructive death. The habit of

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6 David E. Fitch, "Knitting While Detroit Burns?: The Reformed 'Both/and' Versus the Anabaptist 'First/Then'," http://www.missioalliance.org/knitting-while-detroit-burns-the-reformed.
7 Fitch is the B.R. Linder Chair of Evangelical Theology at Northern Seminary in Chicago, Illinois. He’s also the pastor of Life on the Vine Christian Community in the Northwest Suburbs of Chicago. Northern Seminary was started in 1913 to train leaders for the church. It is an evangelical seminary, begun by the Northern Baptist Convention (now the American Baptist Churches in the USA) who were concerned about the spread of theological liberalism within the denomination. The seminary has a strong emphasis on retaining its evangelical identity while being culturally diverse and supportive of women in ministry. Northern Seminary, "History of Northern," http://www.seminary.edu/about/history-of-northern/.
creative destruction is reliant upon Greg Jones’ traditioned innovation which is an institutional way of practicing the life/death/resurrection motif. Jones describes traditioned innovation as:

In our thinking as well as our living, we are oriented toward our end, our telos: bearing witness to the reign of God. That is what compels innovation. But our end is also our beginning, because we are called to bear witness to the redemptive work of Christ who is the Word that created the world. We are the carriers of that which has gone before us so we can bear witness faithfully to the future.

Innovation can only be understood in relation to the previous practices of an institution. Perhaps, traditioned innovation is a means of embodying the living/suffering/dying/resurrection narrative, and can be the Church’s contribution to both local communities and macro-level engagement in politics, institutional cooperation, and global good. Innovation hinges on death/long-suffering because death implies humility and openness to learning, growing, and not having it all figured out. Death means we all have limits. How an institution creatively dies might be the question we need to ask in a post-Christendom world in order to become lights again to the larger culture that thinks it can continue to add, multiply, and consume everything and never miss out on some aspect of life, work, family or event.

Hugh Heclo describes this in another way as “faithful reception,” where “innovation is not meant to change the game. Legitimate innovation is meant to realize, with greater skill and fidelity, the larger potential of what the game is.” Beyond the discourse of top-down or trickle-down institutional power in contrast with grassroots and from the ground up, traditioned innovation like faithful reception implies a sense of humility and action rooted in memory, presence, and imagination. By setting Smith and Fitch as opposing viewpoints and utilizing

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9 Ibid.
Jones’ work with traditioned innovation, these authors help my project to learn from current postmodern conversations, develop the ability to read institutions, all while trying to describe a new way forward tethered to institutional memory. Smith, Fitch and Jones show that creative destruction is premised on cross and resurrection.

It is also important to note that my use of creative destruction is a reframing of Joseph Schumpeter’s description in his work Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy\(^1\) that is typically understood as unintentional action happening to an industry, market, or work. For example, cassette tapes have been destroyed by CDs which have been destroyed by MP3s. Normally, creative destruction is something that happens to you. In this thesis, I am intentionally bending the inherited language to describe it as an action that should be made a habit by institutions with intention. Creative destruction is an active dying so that something new might emerge.

**Statement of the Project & Methodology**

While constructing Smith and Fitch as opposing viewpoints and Jones’ traditioned innovation as a means of integration towards a new theology of faithful presence and differentiation, my thesis points toward a theology of institutions. In a time of great skepticism and the abandonment of many traditional institutions, including the church, it seems like there is a way for Christians to embody their faith in a variety of institutions, social enterprises, non-profits, churches, and businesses with faithful presence while simultaneously maintaining a particular voice and identity within culture. Traditioned innovation is incredibly powerful because it is a discontinuous continuity. Traditioned innovation is rooted in a robust memory of

the past, entails a faithful presence and deep listening in the present, and will shape the imagination of faithful participation in the future.

Leadership that takes up the call to traditioned innovation participates in a reframing by paying close attention to the narrative and unfolding drama of the Bible to form a scriptural imagination in the context of community in an attempt to bear witness to God’s Kingdom coming to earth as in heaven. Innovators become reframers, that is, they cultivate the ability to remember where they have come from so that they may develop the eyes for another way of seeing the world, allowing scripture to shape their imaginations and help us all to see the in-breaking of God in our world today. This call to reframe and spark a scriptural imagination will lead to suffering. But contemporary leaders can usher others into an alternative reality knowing that they are followers of the one who willingly suffered so that all things in heaven and on earth might come under the lordship of the one who defeated death: ushering the future into the present not only through death, but also through resurrection and defeat of death into new life.

This work will be focused on describing a theology of institutions that will help those who are skeptical of traditional institutions but want to make some kind of significant impact in the world. It will help them make their questions heard while also discovering a way forward. Engaging the literature and framing the questions to be asked can unpack the role of institutions and contemporary suspicions that have led to the abandonment of institutions by young Christians all over the world. I would like to engage young leaders of various vocations, but especially those involved in branding, social enterprises, artists, and young pastors who have experienced a sense of disillusionment about whether institutions are capable of achieving meaningful goals and doing significant work. This thesis aims to set up traditioned innovation as a hermeneutic and means of hope for leaders who have given up on institutions and have
believed that “they should have no story except the story that they choose when they had no story.”12

Outline and Table of Contents

1. Introduction & Review of Literature
2. Desire and Formation: Smith’s Institutional Imagination
3. Particular People in Particular Places: Fitch’s Local Imagination
5. Traditioned Innovation: Institutional Memory, Presence, and Imagination at The Intersection of Life and Death
6. Reimagine, Reset, Restart and Resurrect: How Institutions Practice Traditioned Innovation Through Creative Destruction

First, an exploration of Smith’s emphasis on institutional imagination as a means of formation followed by Fitch’s emphasis on the priority of local embodiment will help one to see some differences in both the starting points and methodology for participating in institutions and contributing to the common good. From there it would be important to make a case that creative destruction can be found in the narratives, communities, and institutions that take the more difficult road of suffering and destruction on the way to new life. Creative destruction must take place in the context of the unfolding drama of God’s story, which is innovation set in the context of tradition. After unpacking the way traditioned innovation can help us to learn from both Smith and Fitch, I highlight a few institutions that have practiced creative destruction as a means of traditioned innovation whether they have reimagined, reset, restarted, or resurrected. Lastly, if institutions can embody the narrative of the life, death and resurrection by staying rooted at the intersection of death and life, I describe how a new generation of Christian leaders will be a people with a story that resituates institutions as a signpost of God’s Kingdom on earth as in heaven.

Desire and Formation: Smith’s Institutional Imagination

“All politics should be judged by the character of the people it produces.”
- Stanley Hauerwas

“Solidarity with the world means full commitment to it, unreserved participation in its situation, in the promise given it by creation, in its responsibility for the arrogance, resultant distress, but primarily and supremely in the free grace of God demonstrated and addressed to it in Jesus Christ, and therefore in its hope. How can there be any question of a generous view and understanding apart from this participation? The community which knows the world is necessarily the community which is committed to it.”
- Karl Barth

“God be in my head and in my understanding.
God be in mine eyes and in my looking.
God be in my mouth and in my speaking.
God be in my heart and in my thinking.
God be in mine end and my departing.”
- Sarum Primer, 1527

At the heart of James K.A. Smith’s work is just that: a heart. Institutions for Smith are the gathering places that form people and cultivate a vision of what human flourishing can look like in the world today. For Smith, institutions are the places where people gather to order their love and orient their desires. Even before we can think about why institutions matter, we experience the purpose of institutions by the practices we embody as a means of shaping our hearts, giving us a vision for the Kingdom of God, and helping shape the telos of our gathered community for the sake of the world. Smith makes a case for institutions as a means of orienting desire and

inspiring formation that will shape our imagination for what participation in the Kingdom of God looks like in the here and now while creating the possibility of shared flourishing for all.

Smith begins the first of his books on cultural liturgies by asking a series of questions about educational institutions:

What if education, including higher education, is not primarily about the absorption of ideas and information, but about the formation of hearts and desires? What if we began by appreciating how education not only gets into our head but also (and more fundamentally) grabs us by the gut—what the New Testament refers to as kardia, “the heart”? What if education was primarily concerned with shaping our hopes and passions—our visions of “the good life”—and not merely about the dissemination of data and information as inputs to our thinking? What if the primary work of education was the transforming of our imagination rather than the saturation of our intellect? And what if this had as much to do with our bodies as with our minds?  

If we were to swap the word education out for institution these questions help us to see how institutions get at the heart of what it means to be in the world. Educational institutions for Smith are simply one of many institutions that are meant to help form our being-in-the-world, i.e. our habits and practices that orient our desires and reveal what we love.

Smith understands that while he is aiming at education, the implications are for all institutions:

If education is primarily formation—and more specifically, the formation of our desires—then that means education is happening all over the place (for good or ill). Education as formation isn’t the sort of thing that stays neatly within the walls of the school or college or university. If education is about formation, then we need to be attentive to all the formative work that is happening outside the university: in homes and at the mall; in football stadiums and at Fourth of July parades; in worship and at work.  

There is no place we can go, no institution that we can participate in, that can keep us from experiencing a kind of formation that develops our desires. Whether shopping in a mall, voting in an election, going to church, joining a gang, volunteering in a civic club, or eating at a

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4 Smith, Desiring the Kingdom, 17-18.
5 Ibid., 19.
restaurant—participating in institutions develop our habits and those actions shape our most fundamental desires for how we pay attention and live in the world.

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith calls this kind of institutional habituation the development of a “pedagogy of desire.” They are the liturgies—the work of the people—that shape our identities and give order to how we live in the world. Smith is careful to point out that liturgy, the habits we cultivate through shared living, is synonymous with his use of the word worship:

The core claim of this book is that liturgies—whether “sacred” or “secular”—shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we love. They do this because we are the sorts of animals whose orientation to the world is shaped from the body up more than from the head down. Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies…In short, every liturgy constitutes a pedagogy that teaches us, in all sorts of precognitive ways, to be a certain kind of person.7

Institutions are the places, the organizations and shared spaces, where two or more are gathered to worship, serve, practice and bear witness to God. We gather in institutions to share in practices and develop habits that train our hearts to love. The institutional practices we embody and participate in give insight to what matters most to each one of us and to our communities of practice. Institutions are the never-ending boot camps of our hearts.

Critical to understanding how institutions can function in this way for Smith is to begin with his understanding of how formation takes place in pre-cognitive habits which reveal the *telos* of where love is directed. Smith says, “What distinguishes us (as individuals, but also as ‘peoples’) is not *whether* we love, but *what* we love.”8 Institutions are the particular locations

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6 Ibid., 24-25.
7 Ibid., 25.
8 Ibid., 52.
where communal practices take place—and the making and sustaining of institutions is itself a communal practice. The communal practices orient our vision of what the good life is like and motivate us by giving us dispositions for how we should act without having to think. Relying on the work of philosophers like Aristotle, Aquinas and MacIntyre, Smith describes how our dispositions, or precognitive tendencies to live in certain ways towards particular ends, are developed by habits. “These habits constitute a kind of ‘second nature’: while they are learned (and thus not simply biological instincts), they can become so intricately woven into the fiber of our being that they function as if they were natural or biological.”

Institutions develop habits to help people to love in a particular way and towards a particular end without having to stop to think about it. In his book about the connection of improvisational drama and Christian ethics, Samuel Wells connects habits and instincts in a similar way to Smith: “Habit develops instinct, a pattern of unconscious behavior that reveals a deep element of character.” Smith and Wells alike are connecting the regular practice of habits to form instincts that help people navigate the world and orient our hearts to love in the way God loves.

The backdrop of this philosophical commitment for Smith about habits and dispositions is best seen his works *Who’s Afraid of Relativism?: Community, Contingency and Creaturehood* and *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to

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9 Ibid., 56.
11 Smith, a professor at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, stands in the Reformed tradition with its vision of society being remade in Christ, influenced by Dutch Reformers like Herman Dooyeweerd and Abraham Kuyper.
Church\textsuperscript{13}, two books aimed at exploring the ways the church and postmodern philosophy relate at culturally significant intersections. Relying upon Ludwig Wittgenstein’s work in *Philosophical Investigations*\textsuperscript{14}, Smith helps us to see that language itself is a shared communal practice, relying upon the institution of language and the use of language as a shared way of being in the world. Institutions are like language in that they are inherently communal and contingent upon others for meaning and use. While engaging Wittgenstein, Smith points out that in language “the locus of meaning is not the line that connects the dots of a word to a thing; rather, the locus of meaning is an entire web of communal practice and conventions…Meaning is not relative to me; it is relative to the conventions of a community.”\textsuperscript{15} Communication is institutional, it stems from shared practices and conventions about how words function. Thus, grammar, punctuation, breathing, pace, tone, body posture and all the other modes of communication both cognitive and pre-cognitive are contingent upon a community of people who ascribe meaning to the shared experiences.

Language is one of the ways that we participate in the co-creation of the world we experience; our shared experience of language for Smith is one of the ways culture is created and people can be-in-the-world together. Smith writes:

Language is bound up with our investment in cultural projects; it is part and parcel of our culture making. It is part of the web by which we make our way in the world. And our culture making is inherently communal and social. We are always already indebted to those around us and those who have gone before us, even if we take up their gifts in a way that is bent on denying our indebtedness…to be human is to be social, which is to be indebted, woven into a web of meaning making that is the product of social construction.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*, The Church and Postmodern Culture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).
\textsuperscript{15} Smith. *Who’s Afraid of Relativism?*, 48.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 53.
Participation in the institution of language implies a contingency upon a community of people who have decided together in the use of language how the very act of communication is even possible. For example, if someone was to say they loved you with words while striking you in the face, it would be hard to find anyone who would think that the words conveyed the meaning being uttered.\textsuperscript{17} For communication is the entire process: both the words and the actions happening simultaneously. Language and communication is bound up with one another, that is, language is institutional and rooted in shared social practices that we take up together. Language is in this sense one aspect of the communal practice of communication.

Alongside of Wittgenstein stands Jacques Derrida, where Smith’s recontextualization of Derrida’s deconstruction is a means of highlighting the inevitable contingency and need for community in the interpretation of texts, like Scripture, and also all other forms of communication. Derrida contributes to the philosophy of language the importance of understanding context in the role of interpretation. Words mean different things based on different contexts. If you were to be in a field hunting and someone shouts “Duck!” you would look skyward for a target; but if you were on the golf course and someone yelled “Duck!” you would scramble to the fetal position to take cover from a wayward golf ball.\textsuperscript{18} Context matters in

\textsuperscript{17} In a famous illustration from George Lindbeck, about the nature of language he says, “For a Christian, ‘God is Three and One,’ or ‘Christ is Lord’ are true only as parts of a total pattern of speaking, thinking, feeling, and acting. They are false when their use in any given instance is inconsistent with what the pattern as a whole affirms of God’s being and will. The crusader’s battle cry ‘Christ est Dominus,’ for example, is false when used to authorize cleaving the skull of the infidel (even though the same words in other contexts may be a true utterance). When thus employed, it contradicts the Christian understanding of Lordship as embodying, for example, suffering servanthood.” George A. Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine : Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 64.

\textsuperscript{18} Smith, Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church, 52.
communication. Similarly, the interpretation of institutional practices and engagement with sacred texts reveal the contingency upon community for communication:

Derrida emphasizes that there are important, legitimate determinations of context; in particular, the context for understanding a text, thing, or event is established by a community of interpreters who come to an agreement about what constitutes the true interpretation of a text, thing, or event. Given the goals and purpose of a given community, it establishes a consensus regarding the rules that will govern good interpretation.

Interpreting institutional contexts is crucial to understanding communication and the telos, or trajectory, of the formational practices embodied by members of the particular institutional community. Deconstruction helps us to realize that everything needs interpretation, thus revealing a contingency upon a community of “readers” that help us to investigate our lives: for example, the practices embodied by local faith communities; the food we buy and eat (including where we buy and eat it); the stewardship of people by companies, businesses, and non-profits; the stewardship of global resources of water, soil, air, oil, technology, etc.; even the gatekeepers of interpretation need to be interpreted by the community. One important aspect of Derrida’s deconstruction, highlighted by Smith, is the prophetic nature of deconstruction to relativize and flatten the typical gatekeeping structures of interpretation:

Wall Street and Washington both want us to think that their rendering of the world is “just the way things are.” Deconstruction, by showing the way in which everything is interpretation empowers us to question the interpretations of trigger-happy presidents and greedy CEO’s—in a way not unlike the prophets’ questioning of the dominant interpretations of the world. 19

In an effort to explore the context of communication, the process of deconstruction can illuminate the presuppositions and hidden aims of an institution’s set of practices and can reveal the disordered love pointed in the wrong direction. Deconstruction helps to clarify the role,

19 Ibid., 51.
scope, and use of language in particular contexts. John Caputo, one of Derrida’s foremost interpreters (and a contributor to the series on The Church and Postmodern Culture\(^\text{20}\) that Smith edited), writes in *Philosophy and Theology*:

> Vocabularies are like keys that only fit in certain locks, tools that only do certain jobs, and they have a drift about them. They are public or cultural entities, and they are deeply steeped in public presuppositions and prejudices and pre-established tendencies as modern produce is in herbicides and pesticides…there is no such thing as a private language.\(^\text{21}\)

Deconstruction reveals the contextual nature of all communication and undoes the possibility of a form of institutional Gnosticism that pretends to have a secret way of being in the world. Institutions are inherently public and necessitate interpretation by “readers” who have the ability to navigate an institution’s practices as a means to understand the desire and shared imagination of the gathered community.

But what does a philosophy of language have to do with institutions learning how to live, die, and be resurrected for the sake of the world? The contingency of language upon a shared social web is the backdrop for Smith’s larger project:

> There are no “private” practices; rather practices are social products that come to have an institutional base and expression. Practices don’t float in society; rather they find expression and articulation in concrete sites and institutions—which is also how and why they actually shape embodied persons. There are no practices without institutions. Second, a *telos* is always already embedded in these practices and institutions. That is, there is an intimate and inextricable link between the *telos* to which we are being oriented and the practices that are shaping us in that direction. The practices “carry” the *telos* in them.\(^\text{22}\)


\(^{21}\) *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 46.

\(^{22}\) Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 62.
This means that the ways we participate in institutions and the habits we form as a result are orienting the trajectory of our lives. What we do affects who we are becoming. And what we do together directs how, where, and what we love.

If one were to sit in the balcony of your faith community, sit at a table in your restaurant, watch footage from a recent board meeting, see your production team at work, what would they see? Smith would want you to notice the habits and practices of your institution that you do instinctually, almost without thinking, as a great way to learn about how those habits inform the telos of your organization. One of the things I noticed at a church I recently began to work with was that when we said the Lord’s Prayer together the words were nowhere to be found. The words weren’t in the bulletin, on a screen, in a book, or on a card in front of them in the pew. While saying the prayer was a good thing, an important element in the way we practiced praying together wasn’t being considered, namely: if you were a guest, didn’t know the words to the prayer, or were a child who hadn’t learned the prayer yet—you had no way to pray with the church during each service when the Lord’s Prayer was being uttered. You were on the outside looking in, even while sitting in the building. The telos of that habit reveals at best an unintended desire, but at worst an intentional exclusion of our neighbors who are coming to worship but aren’t given the opportunity to participate. That practice over a long period of time leads to a lack of awareness of who our neighbors are and why they might desire to participate in worship with us at all. It is no wonder that most traditional churches have a difficult time embracing change: their instincts trained by habits over a number of years must be reoriented in

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23 There is an argument to be made that learning the prayer through listening to the congregation mumble its way through it is itself part of the practice of learning the institutional language. Yet in the context of this conversation about institutions, less and less people are willing to take the time to learn the institutional language without it being more easily accessible.
a new direction. How many faith communities, businesses, non-profits, or governmental agencies want to be honest with themselves by spending time reflecting on what Dallas Willard says in *The Divine Conspiracy*:

“If your system is perfectly designed to yield the result you are getting.” This is a profound though painful truth that must be respected by all who have an interest in Christian spiritual formation, whether for themselves as individuals or for groups or institutions.24

Both Smith and Willard recognize that the habits our institutions cultivate help us to understand where those institutions are taking us in the long run. To understand the *telos* of an institution is to look at the kinds of people it produces.

To discern the *telos* of an institution Smith urges us to become readers of institutions. All cultural institutions are liturgical institutions: they shape and give structure to our desire. To become readers of an institution, to discern the *telos* at which an institution is aimed, we must look for places of reading between a Christian vision of human flourishing rooted in the narrative of what the Reformed Smith would say is the creation-fall-redemption-consummation25 narrative of the Gospel. This narrative must be held up in contrast to the “visions of human flourishing that are implicit in so many current configurations of cultural institutions.”26 For no habit or practice is context-less or neutral, which isn’t to say that every habit is equal or holds the same culture-shaping weight, but all habits and practices train our desires towards a certain end.27 To read the *telos* of an institution’s habits, we must ask good questions:

What vision of human flourishing is implicit in this or that practice? What does the good life look like as embedded in cultural rituals? What sort of person will I become after

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25 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 70.
26 Ibid., 73.
27 Ibid., 83.
being immersed in this or that cultural liturgy? This is a process that we can describe as cultural exegesis.\textsuperscript{28}

For everything we do shapes what we love. And our commitments institutionally tell those around us more than we may care to admit. For while we might express a commitment to justice and freedom for the oppressed, our shopping habits, involvement in politics, and faith practices might tell a different story. Our shopping habits may tell a story about new slaves in factories in a distant land that help us to get affordable jeans. Our political habits may emphasize an allegiance to our own nation-state over and against all others. And our faith practices may be welcoming to people who are already on the inside, but to those new to the institution there is no invitation into the life of the community or adequate training spaces to acclimate to the particular language game. Without examining our habits, we fail to examine the trajectory of those habits both individually and institutionally. Or worse, we can examine our habits and convince ourselves that we have done all that we can and still be just as invincible a sinner as before.

This process of examining our habits for greater clarity of the \textit{telos} leads to Smith’s second cultural liturgy project, \textit{Imagining the Kingdom}, where the desire we have cultivated must be directed towards stirring up an imagination that can orient, and re-orient where needed, our \textit{telos} for the sake of mission.\textsuperscript{29} Smith rightly highlights that much conversation about formation and desire is really a covert attempt to create pedagogies narrowly focused on epistemologies and how we know. Those epistemologies are too narrow to help discern our being-in-the-world that is informed by memory while shaping a coming future.\textsuperscript{30} The examination of our desire, language and formation reveals our \textit{telos} through a shared

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 89.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Imagining the Kingdom : How Worship Works}, Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2013), 4.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 12.
imagination. The focus of *Imagining the Kingdom* is how worship works in creating a shared imagination of memory, presence and future life:

The way to the heart is through the body, and the way into the body is through story. And this is how worship works: Christian formation is a conversion of the imagination effected by the Spirit, who recruits our most fundamental desires by a kind of narrative enchantment—by inviting us narrative animals into a story that seeps into our bones and becomes the orienting background of our being-in-the-world. Our incarnating God continues to meet us where we are: as imaginative creatures of habit. So we are invited into the life of the Triune God by being invited to inhabit concrete rituals and practices that are “habituations of the Spirit.”

The habituations of the Spirit are the experiences shared by people seeking to develop practices that participate in the narrative of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And those habituations of the Spirit spark imagination for what the Kingdom of God can look like on earth as in heaven. Christians who are empowered by the Holy Spirit while being conformed to the image of Christ are being sent into the mission of God for the world.

What exactly does Smith mean by “imagination”? Smith’s use of “imagination” is not the work of fairy tales and daydreams, and isn’t simply a practice of the intellect. Consistent with his emphasis on the heart, Smith describes imagination as something that isn’t merely:

Inventive or fantastic—the stuff of make-believe creativity—nor do I have in mind some romantic sense of Creator-like “invention” or merely an act of “pretense,” whereby we imagine something that is fiction, something “pretend,” as when we tell children, “Use your imagination!” I mean it more as a quasi-faculty whereby we construe the world on a precognitive level, on a register that is fundamentally *aesthetic* precisely because it is so closely tied to the *body*. As embodied creators, our orientation to the world begins from, and lives off of, the fuel of our bodies, including the “images” of the world that are absorbed by our bodies.

For Smith, imagination is the horizon of experience that isn’t consciously evoked by a rational observer, but is the operative process happening throughout all of experience as a kind of

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31 Ibid., 14-15.
32 Ibid., 16-17.
intelligence that creates the contours for how being-in-the-world happens and how to “make sense” of existence.

Imagination, like desire and formation, is born out of a context. Smith refers to Alasdair MacIntyre’s insight that stories govern action and practice that help people discern truth for fundamentally humans are “story-telling” animals. Since all stories are born out of a context, Smith’s emphasis on narrative relies heavily upon the institutional nature of all being-in-the-world as stories reveal the particularity of a context and people. As MacIntyre points out, “The key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the questions ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” Even the narratives that we find ourselves in today are rooted in a tradition, a communal being-in-the-world that reveals a larger context of desire, formation and institutional imagination for a people bound together. For Smith, then, liturgies of all institutions are rooted in the conscious and pre-cognitive narratives that seep into our bones and become not only the filters by which we see the world, but through performance orients us in the world and directs our love.

For Smith, everything is at stake in this discussion of desire, formation and imagination for institutions because it helps us to see what is actually happening in a culture war. It is by examining the practices and philosophical backdrop of why we do what we do that we are able to compare the visions of the good life that each institution embodies. Smith’s work is exploring our formation so that Christians might “become a people who desire the kingdom (or some other,

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34 Ibid.
35 Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 109.
rival version of ‘the kingdom’) insofar as we are a people who have been trained to imagine the kingdom in a certain way.”

Why would it matter that our imagination of the good life could be in conflict with another? Every context is not the same, and thus institutional imagination must be examined so that what has become a norming narrative can be put into a larger institutional conversation that can explore the dynamics of what happens when our love becomes disordered. Recognizing our disordered love is an element of what I call “creative destruction” which is at its simplest is the institutional process of dying so that new life might flourish. In naming rival institutional imaginations, Smith is helping us to see that not all teloi are equal:

It provides resources for us to discern the how and why of our assimilation to visions of the good life that are, in fact, rivals to the vision of flourishing and justice characteristic of God’s coming kingdom. If discipleship is a matter of Christian formation, and specifically the formation of the imagination, then we need to realize that these same dynamics of formation also characterize deformation. Disordered secular liturgies, ordered to a rival telos, also work on the imagination.37

For Smith, and for Christians, all formation, desire and imaginations are not equal. Institutions actually embody and spark imaginations that run counter to the ways communities have interpreted God’s vision of flourishing for all people. Without an examination of our habits, desire and telos we may never become aware of how we are being malformed and disordered in our love.

Smith’s “reading” of institutional imagination becomes the means of discernment for what alternative visions of the good life can be like. All liturgy then is discipleship, the means of cultivating a political (“political” meaning: public and communal)38 presence in the world, which

36 Ibid., 125.
37 Ibid., 140. There are disordered religious liturgies as well that can create a rival telos.
38 The political nature of liturgy will be further discussed in Chapter 3 in regards to David Fitch.
for Smith is a process that begins institutionally and finds its way to the individual. In other words, Smith argues for a macro examination of institutional habits on the way to contextualizing an individual’s proper use and embodiment of habits for a shared end. By “reading” the norming narratives of a community’s shared habits and teleos, conversations about counter-formation or what James Davison Hunter calls “antithesis” becomes possible. Antithesis, in Hunter’s understanding of institutions, is simultaneously affirmation and subversion:

Subversion is not nihilistic but creative and constructive. Thus, the church—as a community, within individual vocations, and through both existing and alternative social institutions—stands antithetical to modernity and its dominant institutions in order to offer an alternative vision and direction for them. Antithesis, then, does not require a stance that is antimodern or premodern but rather a commitment to the modern world in that it envisions it differently.  

Antithesis is a way of gaining critical distance between rival visions of human flourishing, and creates a necessary gap to compare how formation in the ways of Jesus stands in contrast to liturgies of other ways of being in the world. Formation in any institution, church, school, business, art, government or even neighborhoods is taking part in the very “political spaces where, slowly to be sure, disciples of Jesus are shaped by the politics of Jesus…as those who desire a different kingdom and who serve a king-in-waiting.”  

Smith’s philosophical-yet-embodied theology of institutions begins with communal practices and traces their shared teleos to individuals whose very being-in-the-world is corporately shaped and creates enough dissonance between visions of the good life to allow room for disagreement. However, in creating space for antithesis, Smith hasn’t given us instructions on how we might put the various visions of the good life into conversation or allow them to battle it

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out in a culture-making war. If there is a culture-making war, what are our weapons and what does winning look like? How can we be sure that we aren’t attempting to colonize other institutions with our own imagination of what is good, true, and beautiful in the name of human flourishing?

If all institutions provide a means of formation and the shaping of imagination, how might Christians in secular institutions be in but not of the world, that is, how can Christians participate in a diversity of institutions and yet have some sense of antithesis? For Smith, everything is formational and yet differentiating between the *telos* of institutions requires some hermeneutical lens through which to interpret the trajectory of those ends and their consistency with the desire and imagination found in the Kingdom of God. Smith begins with the big picture of how institutions shape our being-in-the-world and how each institution can orient our desire and order our love in the right direction. In light of Smith’s work on desire and formation, we must now ask how do we teach people to become readers of institutions, discerning the aims, desire and imaginations created by the habits that make up our shared life together?

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41 "Knitting While Detroit Burns?"
Particular People in Particular Places: Fitch’s Local Imagination

“There is no level of attainment to which a state could rise, beyond which the Christian critique would have nothing more to ask; such an ideal level would be none other than the kingdom of God.”

- John Howard Yoder

“If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.”

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

“When the church faces death, in point of fact, it encounters a critical moment when it may know the power of resurrection. But the church can only know this power in actually facing its death. Resurrection is not an abstraction or a mere possibility, that is, it cannot be counted on in the normal course of events. It is not a guarantee. It lies on the other side of that which cannot be known. Nothing can remove the risk implicit in death. Full stop.”

- Michael Jinkins

There is an old real estate motto for the sale of a home which insists that what is most important in the purchase is: “location, location, location.” For David Fitch, a theology of institutions begins with a priority on location, namely with particular people in particular places living out a particular call on their lives in the way of Jesus. The church is a people who are first and foremost a community of beings-in-the-world locally embodying witness to the Kingdom of God and then participating in culture-shaping institutions that work on larger scales only after faithful presence in their particular contexts. If desire and formation get at the heart of Smith’s

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imagination, then Fitch’s differentiation and particularity reveal a *telos* for faithful presence rooted in mission.

Fitch shares a set of concerns with Smith, namely the importance of belief being simultaneously present with practice for “belief plus the practice of that belief shapes a community’s disposition in the world…it shapes the kinds of people we become.” Belief is simply not enough for Fitch, and in the current postmodern context, belief is usually valued less than the practice of those beliefs for Millennials. It is the disconnect of belief and practice (as though they could actually be separated in the first place) that concerns Fitch for the sake of his particular tribe of evangelical Christians. Fitch believes that his tribe will be a people who fail to ask if “our belief and practice shape our communal life in such a way that it embodies the gospel?” Simply put: how are the beliefs and their corresponding habits forming a community of people whose practices reflect a faithful presence? These questions accentuate the tension within Christianity on an emphasis on right thinking over right living (orthodoxy vs. orthopraxy) in the evangelical context from which Fitch is writing. The result of emphasizing right belief over right practice has made it difficult, from Fitch’s vantage point, to have any kind

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7 Fitch, *The End of Evangelicalism?*, xv.

8 Peter Rollins describes this move as laying “aside the desire to know the truth (orthodoxy as ‘right belief’) in favour of being a site for the transformative power of truth (orthodoxy as ‘believing in the right way’)” (*How (not) to Speak of God;* Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2006; 103.). This connects Fitch’s conversation with Peter Rollins who articulates a move from a diminished orthodoxy as right belief to what Rollins describes as believing in the right way. Fitch is in large agreement with Rollins, except he fears Rollins’ apophaticism will never land in any meaningful practices. Ibid., 184.
of communal witness that isn’t more like an empty politic. Fitch finds this empty politic clearest when Christians are better known for what they are against rather than what they are for. By emphasizing a local starting point Fitch affirms that:

If our witness is to impact our culture, then our corporate life must be congruent with the beliefs we proclaim. It asks us to examine our way of life together as His community and to see it as indispensable for the church’s witness.

In the evangelical and neo-Anabaptist culture from which Fitch is writing, he spends his time in The End of Evangelicalism? putting the empty signifiers of three major evangelical theological commitments against the philosophical backdrop created by Slavoj Žižek which reveal how the signifiers are culturally bankrupt, producing no yield but yet garnering allegiance nevertheless.

A question that seems to haunt all of Fitch’s The End of Evangelicalism? is: how do belief and practices for Christians reveal differentiation, particularity and hope in the relationship between the Church and the world? Fitch makes the argument that the ways evangelicalism has gathered itself as a politic have largely been inhospitable to the world and God’s mission in it. “Politic” for Fitch is an organic form of institution:

I use the word “politic” to describe our way of life together unified and formed into an organic whole by our beliefs and practices of those beliefs. It is a play on the phrase “body politic” which emphasizes the idea that society’s government and its people function together as a living organic whole. I use the term “politic” then to emphasize how a group of people coming together under a common belief and practice produce a way of life that is organic and living and takes on a corporate disposition in the world. This social collective life bred in a people by its belief and practice, I refer to as its “politic.”

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9 Ibid., xvi.
10 Ibid., xvii.
11 Ibid. The beliefs that Fitch explores in this book that are inhospitable to the mission of God are: 1) the inerrant Bible; 2) the decision for Christ; and 3) the Christian nation. By challenging the validity of these signifiers, Fitch is challenging the role of these kinds of beliefs in relation to how culture is created and shaped in the church and in the world.
12 Ibid., xvi-xvii.
13 Ibid., 8.
Institutions for Fitch are a communal way of life formed into a whole through the interplay of belief and practice. The emphasis and use of the word “politic” retains the public scope and nature of institutions while at the same time highlighting the importance of the church as a public institution amongst other institutions that may have a rival telos.

Like James K.A. Smith, Fitch is also concerned with what it looks like in practice and belief to shape communal habits that inform an imagination for how God’s activity in the world takes place. In *Prodigal Christianity*, Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw write: “The point of the book is to fund imagination for Christians to patiently inhabit our contexts, discern God’s work, and practice the kingdom in our neighborhoods.”14 Relying on Walter Brueggemann’s language of “counterimagination”, Fitch is concerned with highlighting how imagination is sparked on a particular trajectory through the local church.15 Brueggemann’s counterimagination is rooted in a prophetic emphasis of differentiation:

> It is the task of prophetic ministry to bring the claims of the tradition and the situation of enculturation into an effective interface. That is, the prophet is called to be a child of the tradition, one who has taken it seriously in the shaping of his or her own field of perception and system of language, who is so at home in that memory that the points of contact and incongruity with the situation of the church in culture can be discerned and articulated with proper urgency.16

The counterimagination that Fitch emphasizes is dependent upon learning how to read institutions. Identifying competing teloi for various institutions and offering maps to understand

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them guides how Christians can find their being-in-the-world across a spectrum of institutional possibilities.

So we are left wondering, what does it look like to patiently inhabit our contexts? How does Christianity in particular, or Fitch’s evangelical Christianity, determine the boundaries of the conversation about institutions for fostering an embodied and patient inhabiting? The title of Fitch’s 2005 book reveals what is at stake and how antithesis will be his first step towards clarifying the role of the church in the context of other institutions: *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism and Other Modern Maladies.*\(^\text{17}\) For Fitch, it seems that there is something unique that the church is meant to embody as an institution in the world for the sake of God’s mission that can only be revealed by differentiation then followed by faithful presence. Without differentiation, Fitch wonders if we can even distinguish the church from any ordinary institution:

> For it is our own modernism that has allowed us to individualize, commodify, and package Christianity so much that the evangelical church is often barely distinguishable from other goods and services providers, self-help groups, and social organizations that make up the landscape of modern American life.\(^\text{18}\)

Perhaps a fitting response is to ask whether an institution can have an identity that is Christian in its orientation or *telos* without being a church? For Fitch, it seems like the only way properly to understand the the particularity of the church is to begin with highlighting the differences between the church and other institutions at work in the world. In this imagination, a proper reading of institutions hinges on the particularity and unique identity of Christians and the church in the context of other institutions. But if the church is the people of God believing in the right

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\(^\text{17}\) Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*.  
\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., 13-14.
way through embodied theologies, habituated through local practice, is it possible for the people of God to live out the telos of the Kingdom of God in institutions other than the church? Are local churches the only institution through which the restoration of all things is brought about for the salvation of the world? The other side of this question is: are there some institutions that are incapable (or less capable) than churches to bear witness to Spirit’s instituting of the Kingdom of God? To explore these questions, we must begin with Fitch’s exploration of worship and ecclesiology.

In Fitch’s institutional theology, what are some of the practices that are essential to form identity, desire, imaginations and telos? We must start with his ecclesiology and work out towards other institutions. Although Fitch would argue that public worship is not the only means of formation (as in the conversation with Smith above) for Christians, Fitch places primacy and gives a special role to the church as a means of formation in relation to other institutions. The liturgy, both in its written and unwritten forms, gives shape to a particular church’s identity and formation both together and in the world. In light of the formative potential of public worship, Fitch’s theology of worship emerges especially in preaching and has implications for leadership and the role of institutions. His theology of public worship seeks to create space for all people in the community to belong, through re-imagined preaching and formative experiences during the communal gatherings.

Fitch wants us to ask what is a “successful” worship experience? To define an appropriate and good public worship gathering in his The Great Giveaway Fitch begins by asking us to define what we mean by success. For Fitch the term “success” reeks of business and economic implications and must be redefined within the body of Christ. Success cannot be determined by efficiency, numbers (whether of people or of dollars), or power, although perhaps
it may be informed by them. For Fitch, mega-churches in all of their aims and practices are not the telos in the definition of success. Success revolves around and is best understood when embodied by the church which Fitch describes as “the body of Christ.” Fitch would want us to pay particular attention to the use of the word “body” which is not an organization, or 501(c) 3 non-profit, or business group. Success is not best articulated in the church through capitalist and democratic terms, but rather in the language and beauty of the Scriptures itself. Any understanding of success that is distinguished or separated from the actual life of the transformed body of Christ and the neighborhood beyond it cannot be understood properly as success. If the people of the church are not experiencing transformed individual and communal lives, but instead reflect the same behavior patterns (e.g. divorce, sexual abuse, materialism) as those not yet of the body of Christ, public worship as spiritual formation cannot be described as being successful. Although sin will always exist, and the body of Christ will never be finished with formation, the church must embody the Kingdom of God and be understood to live in the dynamic tension of the already but not yet of the Kingdom. This understanding of time and formation will create an imagination and hope that will come into full restoration in the future. Increasing numbers of people and high financial offerings could signify radical transformation, yet the postmodern church must be skeptical of defining success in business vocabulary aimed at producing “bigger and better” churches and public worship gatherings. Fitch’s postmodern church will seek to remove the aims of efficiency and entertainment as goals of the church in planning out public worship gatherings. This includes a counterimagination for preaching especially.

The emphasis on expository preaching in evangelical contexts brings into focus the postmodern critique offered by Fitch to differentiate how Christians “know” in contrast to people who claim objectivity. A re-imagined theology of preaching would expose the myth that preaching Scripture, however close to the text, is an objective task. Preaching should instead be a communal action flowing out of an embodied tension of the Kingdom of God. The preaching of the Word is not a static, mono-interpretative scheme that would only expose what Truth lay in Scripture, but would instead develop a breadth of interpretive possibilities. Does expository preaching even live up to its objective claims? Fitch argues,

Inherent in the name *expository* is the subtle implication that expository preaching expositions the meaning of the existing text as opposed to interpreting it (or at least that interpretation is subordinate to exposition). Somehow the myth surrounds expository preaching that if we follow the text more closely we shall stay closer to the already existing, stable, perspicuous meaning inherent in the text. By following the text closely, the expository method supposedly prevents preachers from allowing external agendas and meanings to drive their interpretation of the text. The Scripture, by implication, remains in control. But does the expository method work this way? In other words, á la Derrida, can there be any repeating of the text without its meaning changing? Isn’t significant interpretation unavoidable for even the staunchest of expositors?20

Influenced by postmodern philosophers like Derrida, Fitch argues that the real myth is the belief that expository preaching can be understood as an objective task without any interpretation.

As expository preaching has in mind the audience of individuals seeking to obtain a nugget of truth intellectually to give assent to and take home to apply to their lives, a re-imagined theology of preaching seeks transformation of the pastor/leader and congregation alike. The assumed power by the pastor is exposed and the myth revealed because

Instead under the guise of “preaching the Word,” expository preachers have the final say on what the text shall mean for their listeners. The idea of a single “original intended, propositional meaning” proves to be a myth.21

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21 Ibid., 132.
And the congregation’s passivity and isolation because of expository preaching are also uncovered:

Expository preaching operates under the assumption that the congregation (or radio audience) is composed of individual Cartesian selves isolated and separated from each other yet capable of listening and receiving truth as information from the pulpit. And so expository preachers commoditize the Scripture, putting it at the disposal of the user in the pew. They make the text into an object to be dissected, cut up into three points, and distributed in “nuggets” by themselves to be used by parishioners to improve their Christian living or to receive salvation when the gospel is preached.²²

The notion that in any preaching that people are blank slates, there are objective people preaching, or context-less listening must be discarded. In Fitch’s re-imagined preaching, the sermon becomes communal and embodied. The pastor is no longer the sole proprietor or interpreter. Preaching becomes a shared communal task. The entire congregation participates in mutual submission to one another in hopes of exploring the Scriptures. Other members of the congregation could join with the pastor in sharing the story of scriptures in public worship, reading the scriptures aloud and perhaps even acting them out. Conversation after the sermon, listening sessions with one another, and any other means to create feedback loops are essential in this kind of sermonizing.

Preaching for Fitch must be a communal effort and shared habit. A more narrative-based preaching beckons the community of believers into the grand story of God at work in the world. Fitch writes,

In contrast to the presentation of information to be consumed, such preaching seeks to re-narrate for us the world as it is according to Scripture and call us into that reality. It is preaching that approaches Scripture first and foremost as a narrative. Its task is description and the shaping of a new imagination for all of us who have had our imaginations held captive by the foreign forces of North American, post-Christian life.²³

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²² Ibid., 133.
²³ Ibid., 141.
The embodied habits of listening, speaking, and mutual submission in tasks like the sermon will shape the spiritual formation of the church sparking an imagination for how citizenship in the Kingdom allows individuals and institutions to participate in God’s story of hope for the world. Yet, this kind of preaching isn’t meant to be a one-size-fits-all commodity sold as another religious good or service. This kind of preaching is contextual. This kind of preaching is for a group of people at a particular moment in time. Re-imagined preaching doesn’t deny that someone from another location could hear the message and be moved to action. The emphasis for Fitch is that good news must always be heard by particular people in particular social locations and their experiences alter the way preaching is heard, interpreted and enacted.

Re-imagined preaching requires good listening. Learning who to listen to is just as important as learning how to listen. In a world of seemingly unlimited resources, self-proclaimed experts, and incredible access through technology to information, discerning which voices to listen to can be a difficult task for any Christian. In the current postmodern situation, many emerging adults have developed a hyper-awareness of the limited scope of their own perspective. They realize the deeply contextual and limitedness of their own worldview that they have inherited, cultivated and that has become the lens through which they interpret the world. Rooted in their geographical location, experiences of race, economic situation, education, religious experience, access to information and more, young leaders are often incredibly aware of the finiteness of their own perspective. So, in a world of incredible complexity and unlimited access to information, who to listen to and trust as an authoritative voice is an incredibly difficult problem which can be an impediment to faithful leadership and barrier to thoughtful discernment in times of difficulty. Which institutions, with their desire-shaping habits and imaginative future, should Christians participate in and listen to for the sake of their formation?
Learning how to listen in postmodernity is not an easy task. In postmodernity there is a decentralization of norming narratives with new leaders speaking into the void who have recognized that there is a flattening of hierarchies in how institutions wield power. Krista Tippett interviews Seth Godin for her podcast *On Being* where Godin describes creative destruction happening in the network economy:

The Internet wasn't built by 30 people who are working for a boss. It was built by 300,000 people, many of whom have never met each other. And that this protocol and that technology work together even without a central organizing force. And that's happening to every industry. And it's happening even to the way our communities organize and the spiritual organizations that we get involved in.²⁴

The shift of understanding authority comes in the move from a universal, top-down, industrial understanding of authority and power (e.g. Senior Pastor meets CEO) to a bottom-up or sideways experience where authority is shared mutually even when hierarchies exist. Expressions of faith have also become much more tribal and specialized. In light of Godin, I challenge the notion that bigger is better, more people equals success, and expansion without destruction of current products or services is healthy progress. Of course these critiques and differentiations of how leadership is shared, understood and held in creative tension are not without their shortcomings for many emerging adults for whom “the absolute authority for every person’s beliefs or actions is his or her own sovereign self. Anybody can literally think or do whatever he or she wants.”²⁵

By decentralizing the importance of one universal narrative and replacing it with contextual narratives that have different themes of beauty, hope, truth, goodness, evil, etc., the danger is that emerging adults will create organizations that are so disassociated and specific that they will

become little more than enclaves of like-minded individuals without any sense of greater community. The old ways of being church, running a business and understanding power and authority aren’t happening in the same way anymore. The frameworks of emerging adults, with their own strengths and weaknesses, are nevertheless new and create both continuity and discontinuity at the same time with the ways of being-in-the-world they inherited.\(^{26}\)

Perhaps a primary means of learning who to listen to can be understood by first embracing a thorough awareness of the finitude of life. Fitch begins with differentiation between the church and other institutions to create a dissonance that allows for what I’d describe as institutional readings. To read an institution one must first listen to others and pay attention to their practices. Without any kind of differentiation Fitch argues what would distinguish a church from a Ruritan Club, a non-profit that works for justice, or a Bible study? Because there are decentralized power structures, whose voices still carry authority and how do we practice listening? In the same interview with Seth Godin by Krista Tippett, Godin describes what is at stake in this evolutionary leap for institutions:

> But what is important here is not only do times change, but those times change, not just our stories about ourselves and our expectations, but they actually are changing our brain. So you know, when the Industrial Revolution came, there were 20 years when basically everyone in Manchester, England, was an alcoholic. Instead of having like coffee carts, they had gin carts that went up and down the streets. Because it was so hard to shift from being a farmer to sitting in a dark room for 12 hours every day doing what you were told. But we evolved, we culturally evolved to be able to handle a New World Order. And so when we talk about evolution as a metaphorical thing where we have memetics and ideas laid on top of this idea of survival of the species and things changing over time, what fascinates me about it is that this bottom-up change in the world is everywhere all the time. So much more common than change that gets put down on us by a dictator or by someone who's putatively in charge.\(^{27}\)

\(^{26}\) Being(s)-in-the-world is hyphenated throughout, relying on the insight of Smith above, arguing that people are the embodiment of habits, desire, imagination and thinking in a whole person.

\(^{27}\) Tippett, \textit{The Art of Noticing}.  

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Living in an American culture that embraces the notion that knowledge is power, young leaders often believe they can continue to add, multiply, and consume everything while never missing out on another aspect of life, work, family, fun, other perspectives, experience, etc. Learning who to listen to becomes a priority when one becomes aware of limited time and the myth of unlimited consumption of information. In an article titled “The Unlikely Writer” in *Harvard Magazine*, Elizabeth Gudrais explores the work of surgeon-turned-writer Atul Gawande by describing his learning process for listening: “Gawande displays a willingness to be influenced by people he respects, and to recognize good ideas when he finds them.” Learning how to listen is dependent on discerning who one should be influenced by and listen to—and to learn how to listen takes time and relationships. For Fitch when the preacher isn’t listening, preaching can be the epitome Christendom, an extension of the crusade to conquer with ideas, destroying without any attempt to create new habits for beings-in-the-world.

Perhaps Fitch’s greatest contribution to the conversation about institutions is that when the locally gathered people of God—the church—embodies its unique emphasis of bearing witness to the Kingdom of God then the particularity of Christian identity across institutions can be caught through action rather than taught by proclamation. Christians are invited to both model and bear witness to the limited perspectives and finiteness in such a way that those apprenticing Jesus might learn what is looks like to discern good ideas. Dismantling the myth of unlimited time to appropriate unlimited resources is essential in helping leaders develop a counterimagination. And that dismantling may help free Christians from the paralysis that often happens when faced with the choice of who to follow.

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Fitch is adamant throughout his work that churches should be in relationship with other institutions of various types, while at the same time arguing for a particularity in the kind of institution a church is in relationship to other organizations. Fitch relies upon much of John Howard Yoder’s work, espousing a Neo-Anabaptist approach to institutional theology.²⁹ Yoder speaks of the relationship between the church and other institutions in ways that imply relationship but simultaneous difference:

It is therefore not a compromise or dilution of the fidelity of the radical commitment when the obedient Christian community becomes at the same time an instrument for serving and saving the larger culture. The distinctive faithfulness of the church to her first calling does not undermine but purges and renews the authentic human interest and values of the whole society, well beyond the bounds of the explicitly known and confessed faith.³₀

There is affirmation for the necessity of relationship between Christian community and the larger culture, yet there is a clear need to distinguish what constitutes Christian community. For Fitch, it is first the local church and then society. Fitch rejects the binary options of either/or, while simultaneously refusing both/and. Fitch argues for a first/then strategy, where local communities of faith live out their citizenship in the Kingdom of God for the sake of the world and as a response to God’s grace. First the church must live the gospel in a particular place at a particular time and then it is invited to embody the life-death-resurrection narrative in the context of the larger institutional world.

²⁹ Hunter uses the phrase Neo-Anabaptist to describe people like Fitch, as being in continuity with the early Anabaptist tradition, “but the particular ways that Neo-Anabaptists use the language of politics, their ideological affinities with certain secular movements in late modernity, and their relentless hostility to all that is not God and his ideal church, distinguish Neo-Anabaptism as something new; a political theology that reinforces rather than contradicts the discourse of negation so ubiquitous in our late modern political culture.” Hunter, To Change the World, 166. ³₀ John Howard Yoder, The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11.
Like Smith, Fitch is aware that the shifts happening in postmodernity impact the ways people experience the validity and what political-critic-turned-late-night host Stephen Colbert describes as the “truthiness”\(^{31}\) of an institution. Colbert’s creation of the word “truthiness” is to help explain how the way an institution describes itself does not necessarily correspond to reality. Truthiness corresponds to authenticity, i.e. do the core values and mission of an institution reflect its actions. The “truthiness” of an institution is more than the way it talks and is best seen by how it acts. For Fitch the “truthiness” of an institution is gauged by its actions. Because of the skepticism and cynicism towards institutions, postmodern people tend to focus on the dissonance between professed beliefs and embodied habits for Christians. Fitch affirms that in the current climate:

Postmoderns recognize truth most where it is lived day-to-day one with another. The postmodern is convinced of truth through participation, not consumer appeals; through wholly lived display, not merely by well-reasoned arguments.\(^{32}\)

Through communal practices and shared habits with a local community of people, Fitch believes postmodern pilgrims can experience conversion and find their way in the world. Much like osmosis, postmoderns will embrace truth through experiences with the “community of Christ, inhabiting it, living within it, and gradually learning the language by which we speak.”\(^{33}\) In this sense, rather than a rational defense or attack against those who are not followers of Jesus, the church itself becomes an embodied apologetic for the sake of the world.\(^{34}\) In keeping with Fitch’s ordering, Christians should first invite others into a shared way of life and then proclaim good news in the context of relationships.

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\(^{33}\) Ibid., 56.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 57.
Resisting the reformed tendencies of Smith to equate all good as God’s good, Fitch is interested to find out how to differentiate between good work that is happening in a community in contrast to the work happening through Christians being-in-the-world. Since each particular neighborhood, town, state, nation and country has its own set of particular cultures and contingencies, what is good in one location may not be good in another. All leadership is not God’s leadership. Fitch writes:

Christians have a different purpose (telos) for and a different understanding about how the way the world works (cosmology), which fundamentally alters our understanding of what it means to be a leader…evangelicals should seek to first discover the leadership we have been given in Christ before we seek its reality in the world. If we do anything else, we risk “giving away” the leadership given in Christ and exchanging it for American business because of our unexposed confidences in the myths of modernity.\textsuperscript{35}

For Fitch, people become what they practice and he hinges his understanding of institutions on the specific practices of the gathered Christian community which may translate to other institutions but not necessarily so. The church is meant to cultivate practices that differentiate itself from other institutions not at their exclusion but for the sake of the conversion of other institutional beings-in-the-world. Again, Fitch relies on John Howard Yoder

The church is then not simply the bearer of the message of reconciliation, in the way a newspaper or a telephone company can bear any message with which it is entrusted. Nor is the church simply the result of a message, as an alumni association is the product of a school or the crowd in the movie theatre is the product of the reputation of the film. That men and women are called together into a new social wholeness is itself the work of God, which gives meaning to history, from which both personal conversion (whereby individuals are called into this meaning) and missionary instrumentalities are derived.\textsuperscript{36}

Fitch’s Neo-Anabaptism places priority on distinguishing why the church is a particular institution with a telos that is unique in comparison to other institutions. From that particularity,
the emphasis for Fitch is to prioritize an enculturation in the habits, language and unique ways of being-in-the-world that may be similar to other institutions, but at times may be the very antithesis.

In a section that pulls back the curtain to reveal the ethos behind Fitch’s concern about the particularity of institutions is a Žižekian philosophical backdrop that is trying to discern what drives our shared social existence.\(^{37}\) To understand our shared life together, we must realize that “political systems have an inner social consciousness wherein there is a constant working out of conflicts, the ordering of desires, and the sustaining of meaning.”\(^{38}\) At the core of institutional existence is an ideology that appeases us, fooling us to think that we should feel better about ourselves so that we can protect what we really desire. “Ideology provides a big lie with which we can all cooperate to keep our lives going.”\(^{39}\) Ideology in this sense allows people to gather institutionally around a particular belief or signified belief while hiding the telos and desire to which those beliefs are aimed. At the core of this understanding of ideology is antagonism, or opposition, which tries to understand the different desires that shape institutional existence in the world. In Žižekian terms these are master-signifiers, which are “conceptual objects around which people give their allegiance thereby enabling a political group to form.”\(^{40}\) Words like hope, change, God, freedom, and love are signifiers that create community but lack a unified meaning across various contexts.

Highlighting antagonisms and master-signifiers allows us to expose how they function and shape the habits of networks of people. By creating dissonance between the church and other

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\(^{37}\) Fitch, *The End of Evangelicalism?*, 22.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 22-23.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 24.

\(^{40}\) *The Great Giveaway*, 26.
institutions, the remarkable move by Fitch isn’t merely to criticize the institutional “other”, but is to turn the critical eye towards the church first. Sticking with the first/then priority, Fitch begins his creative destruction process in revealing the misdirected habits of local churches (especially of the evangelical tribe) as a means to create a new horizon of possibility. In response to Smith’s Knitting While Detroit Burns?, Fitch emphasizes that while the trajectory of institutional relationships is similar to the Reformed both/and the process towards that change is prioritized differently:

Neo-Anabaptists understand the church’s entrance into culture as an incarnational process. Certainly I cannot speak for all Anabaptists on this one, but it seems the way of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is humility, vulnerability, presence and then of course embodied witness. Our engagement of culture comes first through humble service, presence, listening and embodying another way. Then, having discerned God at work, we can respond faithfully in wider cultural engagement. Our witness, embodied in the language and life lived together, lends power, integrity, credibility and even understanding to our engagement in the wider culture. So here again, we have a “both/and” but here too we are encouraged towards a “first/then” approach to engagement.

Fitch underlines that the church must embody the downward mobility of the cross before it can expect to bring about any kind of social change. Before criticizing other institutional habits, the church must first participate in humble service, faithful presence, deep listening and show people another way by action.

Fitch is clear that this hasn’t been lived out very well by evangelicals in the North American context. Instead of listening we speak first. Instead of embodying our theology we focus on the pragmatics of getting people “saved.” Instead of changing our behavior evangelicals seem to stomp their feet and blame “cultural decline” as the reason for our loss of power and

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41 Smith, "Knitting While Detroit Burns?".
42 Fitch, "Knitting While Detroit Burns?: The Reformed 'Both/and' Versus the Anabaptist 'First/Then'".
influence in the culture at large. Some evangelicals will even claim that the reason why the church has lost cultural influence is because other institutions don’t like the way we “stand for truth.”

Today however, bereft of broad cultural support for Christianity in general, we struggle for moorings in the waters of post-Christendom. Our main battlefront used to be with other Christians (those of Protestant liberal ilk) not the current cultural void of disbelief. Now, with the rug of Christian cultural consensus pulled out from under our feet, evangelicalism is groping for a place to stand from which it can gather a people.43

The cultural context for Christianity has experienced a massive upheaval and Christendom is only holding on in a few places. Fitch believes that evangelicalism’s adoption of modernist strategies for cultural engagement and lack of differentiation has lulled the church to sleep, where it dreams of a world that no longer exists.

So, how can the church embody a process of creative destruction that refuses its own temptation towards ideology that Žižek criticizes? How can creative destruction help to reveal the master-signifiers that prevent meaningful institutional engagement and relationships? Creative destruction for Fitch depends upon the exposure of master-signifiers for what they are and how they function to dismantle meaningful cultural engagement. Fitch depends on Žižek’s description of master-signifiers from *The Fragile Absolute* and his discussion of Jacques Lacan:

First, when, as early as the late 1950’s, he [Lacan] emphasized the fact that the ‘quilting point’, the quasi-transcendental Master-Signifier that guarantees the consistency of the big Other, is ultimately a *fake*, an empty signifier without a signified. Suffice it to recall how a community functions: the Master-Signifier which guarantees the community’s consistency is a signifier whose signified is an enigma for the members themselves – nobody really knows what it means, but each of them somehow presupposes that others know, that it has to mean ‘the real thing’, so they use it all the time.44

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43 This entire section is a reflection upon Fitch’s rationale for Christianity’s decline of power and lack of meaningful cultural engagement. *The End of Evangelicalism?*, 10.
The dissonance that Fitch is arguing for creates enough space to reveal the master-signifiers and their empty politic and thus create a new environment for potential collaboration. When the fantasies of ideology finally fall to the wayside, real people in real places taking on real habits can actually create something of meaning and worth together through the Spirit of God. Christians can inhabit a variety of institutions and in their faithful presence bind communities together towards a shared end.

While Žižek believes that institutions will always trade one master-signifier for another, revealing an emptiness at the core of existence and the perpetual temptation to debunk one idol of a master-signifier for another, Fitch recognizes that the Christian life cannot be empty at its core. Instead, the Christian participates in the antagonism of master-signifiers through what I describe as creative destruction (an intentional process of disruption and death to create the space for new habits as beings-in-the-world). Revealing one master-signifier and the intentional shedding of its skin is driven by the goal of reconciliation in community amongst beings-in-the-world not maintaining eternal conflict. The empty core that is revealed through the creative destruction of master-signifiers is filled up by new habits that emphasize a scriptural imagination. Smith calls this “an incarnational logic” and Fitch applies this phrase to describe how at the core of Christianity is not emptiness but an abundance of meaning that cannot be contained.

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45 Fitch, The End of Evangelicalism?, 44.
46 Fitch says, ‘The scriptures and its language take on what James K.A. Smith calls “an incarnational logic.” The words speak of/embbody Christ yet always point to a reality that is bigger than can be contained. We are always in reception of God’s revelation in Christ via the Scriptures. We are never grasping it for our own possession…These ways of articulating and practicing our belief in Scripture shape our political posture so as to embody Christ in his mission in the world. This is an incarnational politic. This is a politic of fullness.” Ibid., 140-41.
The creative destruction of evangelical theology through a process of differentiation and revealing the master-signifiers creates enough dissonance to articulate a Christian telos that can spark an incarnational imagination. What seems like subversion for the sake of difference is actually a differentiation and submission to a longer-term view in the orienting of desires and the funding of imagination:

This way of being together births the Kingdom not only among “us.” It enables us to resist alternative politics of violence and isolation, to subvert them, and indeed to draw the world into the restoration of all things, i.e. the Kingdom of God.47

When the local church is decentralized from the locus of power in a community it is able to relocate into the normal, everyday lives of people in any institution the people of God find themselves participating in. Relying on Stanley Hauerwas, Fitch’s local imagination asks us who we need to be as a people of God in order to make sense of Scripture’s demands. “If we are not a community whose life can make sense of what we assert as true, we should stop trying to figure out what is true.”48 When the particular people of God are able to creatively destruct their current habits to create space for new ones, we are able to illumine possible ways toward an imaginative shared institutional way of being-in-the-world.

48 Ibid., 177.
Creative Destruction: Finding Life in Death

“No future can be stuffed into this presence except by being dead.”
- Wendell Berry

“In other words, the problem that is usually being visualized is how capitalism administers existing structures, whereas the relevant problem is how it creates and destroys them.”
- Joseph A. Schumpeter

“Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.’
- Gospel of Matthew

Can institutions embody a process of creative destruction that brings about flourishing for itself and its community? And if intentional creative destruction is possible, can it be good? It can be tempting when thinking about institutions that have experienced some degree of success to focus on the ways they are currently flourishing without looking at the hardship the gathered people experienced to get there. It can be like celebrating Easter without Good Friday. The good news of the resurrection in the larger Christian story is only good news in the aftermath of the crucifixion. Resurrection triumphs over death. Love wins over hate. The despair and darkness of mortality are overwhelmed by the Light. Yet, in the conversation about institutions, and especially what it looks like for churches, non-profits, businesses, and government to be infused by people enculturated in the Christian narrative, there can often be a mad dash to the resurrection without remembering the experience of death. Why was the crucifixion necessary?

2 Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy, 84.
Is that even the right question? We can be tempted to forget and deny our memory, forgetting our identity as “the resurrection of the crucified.” But, what if the Easter-shadowed crucifixion is the hermeneutical lens through which we can “read” institutions, as Smith asks of us, can it help us to identify the unique contribution that Christians embody within institutions aimed towards a particular *telos* as Fitch encourages? In naming creative destruction as such, we highlight the need for life to be brought out of death. Creative destruction allows the resurrection to interpret the cross and the cross to determine the path to the resurrection. Followers of Jesus can become readers of institutions while embodying the narrative of an Easter-shaped Good Friday. Christians should be cultivating practices that reorient a shared way of being-in-the-world for the sake of all beings-in-the-world.

At the heart of this conversation, if I might be allowed to step out from behind the curtain of this academic endeavor, is the experience of deep-seated suspicion of many institutions amongst my peers. A distrust and disgust at the perception and/or reality of many institutions existing and succeeding on the basis of injustice, greed, or self-preservation plagues the worldview of my millennial generation. Amidst corporate economic failures, governmental scandals, clerical sexual abuse, and media corruption— institutions often seem unredeemable and prefer “a short burst of favorable publicity and long-term loss of credibility.” It seems like we

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5 It is important in the discussion for creative destruction to have a hope-informed understanding of the crucifixion. This isn’t destruction without purpose. This isn’t the crucifixion without the resurrection. For Christians, even our focus on the cross on Good Friday is informed by the promise of Easter. The gift of time helps us to have a hope-filled embrace of the cross, knowing that death isn’t the end of the story. Sometimes it is a kind of death informed by Christian imagination and empowered by the Spirit that creates the possibility of new life.

have come to what Hugh Heclo describes as a “modern impasse”.\footnote{Ibid., 11-43.} Heclo believes the current state of affairs has created this pessimism towards institutions:

Lies, short-term thinking, self-promotion, denigration of duty, disregard for larger purposes—all these amount to one common syndrome serving to undermine social trust and institutional values. The names of particular persons and organizations fade from our memory, only to be replaced by the next day’s news of scandal and shortsighted stupidity.\footnote{Ibid., 7.}

Millennials have become aware of the temptation by institutions (and churches are no exception here!) to attempt the co-opting of our imaginations for the sake of profit, boundary-making, and siloed power. The question that haunts me in this chapter is: can institutions be concerned about more than self-preservation? Followed closely by: is the best available telos continued existence? The cost of failure by institutions is much larger in scope yet the result is always felt by the individual. As Heclo points out, “when institutions fail it is living, breathing human beings and not mental abstractions that fail.”\footnote{Ibid., 25.} While the impact of institutional failure can be systemic in scope, failure is always personal, affecting real people in real places in real time. For my peers who are abandoning churches and institutions of all shapes and sizes, my hope is that creative destruction can become a habit that reinvigorates the desire to participate in institutions again.

Heclo differentiates the effects of institutional failure as creating “performance-based distrust”\footnote{Ibid., 15.} and “culture-based distrust.”\footnote{Ibid., 32.} Performance-based distrust “draws its power from the experience of millions of ordinary people hearing about all sorts of breaches of trust by those in positions of institutional authority.”\footnote{Ibid., 15.} Performance-based distrust of institutions is earned and
deserved, marked by failures of leadership, organizational accountability and lack of changed behavior after mistakes. Culture-based distrust is the prevalent attitude of our modern times, i.e. that proper way to live is to “recognize that each of us has the right to live as he or she pleases so long as we do not interfere with the right of other people to do likewise.” Culture-based distrust is rooted in the modern mythology that one’s actions should not impact another individual. In our modern impasse, there is a “culture-based distrust of institutions both because they get in our way and also because we cannot get out of their way.” The culturally-based distrust of institutions can leave “us perplexed, burdened, and looking for some fixed points of reference.”

It is one thing to distrust an institution because of its failure and unwillingness to repent, but it is yet another thing to distrust an institution because it exists. Culturally-based distrust in postmodernity is rooted in the notion that the freedom for the individual to choose is the ultimate telos. There is certainly a danger for institutions to overstep their bounds and overwhelm individual expression, but there is an equal danger to forsake institutional value as insignificant (think of what language would be like without grammar). Heclo is right when he says

Institutions are constraints on any absolute license to do whatever we want, but they can be enabling constraints that make it possible for us to live our and further develop our humanity.

Distrust and hope must simultaneously exist if creative destruction is to be possible. A healthy distrust of institutions and their abuse of power must go hand-in-hand with a hope for institutions that instigate and participate in human flourishing.

13 Ibid., 33.
14 Ibid., 37.
15 Ibid., 39.
16 Ibid., 42-43.
Somewhere along the way, it seems like the means have become the ends, that is, the worship wars over style and consumption methods have turned even religious institutions into marketplaces of religious goods and services. Institutions seem to prioritize survival over collaboration, survival over abundance, and self-preservation against the flourishing of the whole community. Our modern impasse reeks with cynicism and a lack of hope. However, my entire project is aimed at recovering a hope and set of expectations for the role of institutions so that communities might flourish. Through a process of creative destruction, not only do institutions still hold value and play an important role in our world, but they also can be caught up in the restoration of all things. Institutions function as desire and imagination-shaping agents, orienting our hearts in the right direction while simultaneously helping us to differentiate between various teloi through shared habits.

This thesis is an apologetic for a kind of institutional being-in-the-world. In the midst of what often feels like institutional despair and when the temptation to abandon all institutional ships seems like the only option, creative destruction is a means to discover a new horizon of possibility while helping us to keep our eyes fixed on the promised land. Creative destruction helps us to row together towards a shared future.

The shared future in the evangelical (Baptist and para-church) context from which I write posits the communal hope as something only attainable after this earthly life. The emphasis from my own evangelical heritage is to place hope primarily outside of this world. The good life is something preserved for heavenly existence. We’d pray the Lord’s prayer on Sundays, “Your Kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10 NRSV) as a kind of nursery rhyme to lull us to sleep only to wake up in the afterlife. The image of heaven coming to
earth to form a new reality, an image that would reflect the vision and scope of Jesus’ prayer, would be described by the author of Revelation like this:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;

4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new (Re 21:1-5, NRSV).”

This vision of heaven coming down to earth and in this newfound relationship all of creation experiencing a kind of cosmic transfiguration was never discussed in any of my Sunday School classes. When hope was something only to be realized after one dies you were left wondering why we should try to keep on living? Why cultivate a memory or practice remembering those times heaven broke in through the work of an institution? Why keep those memories alive? Remembering would often lead to a kind of despair for life in the present. The bright future outside of space and time is blinding and keeps one from experiencing any kind of meaningful present. History taught us how not to repeat the sins of the past while the future was unattainable until after death. The memory of failures in the past coincided with the other-worldly blindness of the future to create a directionless present. Revelation’s vision of flourishing was something to escape to rather than be wed to the here and now.

Creative destruction, then, is neither an obliteration of the past or an escape to the future. Instead, creative destruction is a hopeful process to describe the larger evolutionary leaps forward when institutions find their way into a new epoch. The formation of the United States
was a discontinuous continuity from the country of Great Britain. There are many elements of governance, family life, military and communication that were indebted to British tradition, yet at some point the colonies transitioned to become a new country. Colonies would die and a country would be born. The printing press was a new way of communication born from oral storytelling leading to individualist experiences with a more static text that flattened hierarchical institutions of interpretation. Like Neil Armstrong’s comments when stepping on the moon, sometimes what feels like “one small step for a man, [is] one giant leap for mankind.”\(^\text{17}\) That is, there are times when institutions must take a greater leap forward after a series of smaller steps. From believing at one point in history that the sun revolved around the earth to watching a man walking on the moon was a series of both: small evolutionary steps in understanding how the universe was ordered and the death of particular theories about how to understand reality replaced by new horizons of possibility. Neil Armstrong’s comments in the midst of such a historic moment reveal the hope at the heart of creative destruction, which resonates with Paul’s exclamation in 2 Corinthians: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Co 5:17, NRSV)” Creative destruction is the way an institution’s being-in-the-world experiences a version of the life-death-resurrection motif. Some of the traditional understanding and practices that had been essential to the institution’s way of being-in-the-world might simply die, but that death is never empty or without an aim. The old going away allows the new to come. On this side of the Easter event, any crucible for an institution holds within it the possibility of new life.

In economic conversations, creative destruction is often understood as a mighty, destructive force that is creative only for those who are not casualties in the aftermath of the terrible storm. Death is for the losers and creativity is for the winners who will one day become the next losers. In a book about the examples of creative destruction in global markets, Tyler Cowen points out that creative destruction is often perceived as a mighty gale but in reality “cultural growth, like economic development, rarely is a steady advance on all fronts at once. While some sectors expand with extreme rapidity, others shrink and wither away.”18 Capitalism is a relentless force that destroys old products along with old industries and replaces them with new products and new industries. Destruction and creation are both inherently relational, as one way of being-in-the-world evolves into another. Tapes are replaced by CD’s which are replaced by iPods. Cowen argues that “the ‘creative destruction’ of the market is, in surprising ways, artistic in the most literal sense. It creates a plethora of innovative and high-quality creations in many different genres, styles and media.”19 Creative destruction has a sobering but hopeful orientation to it even though it means the end of some particular ways of being-in-the-world.

In *Legacy Churches*, a book about churches that are dying and want to leave a lasting legacy, Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond put an organizational life-cycle on a standard bell curve like this20:

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19 Ibid., 18.
20 Franklin Dumond and Stephen Gray, *Legacy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2009), 54.
Centrally, creative destruction is an intentional process of disruption at the transition from maturity to plateau through the downward spiral towards death that facilitates a return to the journey of birth, growth and maturity. Creative destruction can and must happen throughout the life-cycle of an institution, like the pruning of a plant to create the possibility of new life. Until creative destruction weaves through the cultural DNA of an institution, the telos is usually maturity or plateau, (what I’d call stability), for most organizations. It isn’t an easy process intentionally to disrupt an organization seeking maturity for the sake of continual learning or growth. The affirmation of creative destruction is recognizing the importance of the regular practice of creating not only new products, theologies, or resources, but also creating an ecosystem that can foster the birth and life of those new mediums. Creative destruction is an intentional destruction of certain practices, or even whole institutions, to facilitate new life. It could look like this:
Figure 4.2 Disruptive Stages in an Institutional Life Cycle

The dotted lines represent an intentional disruption of the life-cycle to experience new life. Once an institution has reached the maturity-plateau threshold, it has already begun the process of death. The further down the process towards death the longer and more radical the destruction must be to experience creativity again.

What might it look like for an institution intentionally to destroy old habit or forms in order to create new ones? What might it look like for an institution to disrupt its own maturing process to resituate its mission and work into a new context? Can an institution take up its cross, so to speak, so that it might experience a death that leads to resurrection? It is my hope that institutions could become systemic signs of what the restoration of all things looks like from a cosmic vantage point. Perhaps this lifecycle cannot be avoided except for some institutions that will choose a death earlier in the journey of decline so that the distance to participation in new life can be a shorter gap or less drastic in nature. The telos must shift from plateau towards a regular process of life-maturity-destruction-resurrection. And to decrease the severity of the
destructive process, the earlier the disruption can happen the less sweeping the changes must necessarily be.

Creative destruction relies on disruption to the status quo, not for dramatic effect, but because the inherent creativity necessary for human existence and survival fosters innovation. Clayton Christensen calls this “disruptive innovation” and describes this as a positive force in the world.  

Disruptive innovation is

The process by which an innovation transforms a market whose services or products are complicated and expensive into one where simplicity, convenience, accessibility and affordability characterize the industry.

Translated into theological frameworks, this could be part of the process by which an innovation transforms the institution whose way of being-in-the-world is complex and difficult to maintain into a simpler, contextually appropriate, accessible and transforming set of practices. Christensen believes that unless the leadership of an organization willingly seeks disruptive innovation it will always try to pour new wine into old wineskins.  

Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel, “Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Mt 9:17, NRSV).” Disruptive innovation generates the possibility for creative destruction as the disruption provokes an inventory and examination of how “the definitions and trajectories of improvement change.” With the advent of new technologies, flattened communication, and greater access to information, disruption is happening on multiple levels in various industries effecting change in

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 47.
24 Ibid., 44.
how institutions understand one another and seek out the possibility of collaboration. Institutions can be preoccupied in protecting their own turf rather than collaborating with others. Collaboration in this networked economy is a change in the way institutions work together and understand the ecosystem of systemic partnerships.

Institutions that cultivate an “us vs. them” mentality are often more interested in self-preservation and are marked by a lack of imagination for communal flourishing. What might “us for them” look like as a means for a collaborative institutional future? Without collaboration, institutions continue to foster the modern impasse that Hugh Heclo described. The impetus to create an ecosystem of collaboration amongst institutions is described by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer, in their efforts to prescribe a way of institutional being-in-the-world, as creating clusters of shared value. Collaboration is a kind of institutional destruction that would intentionally create space for the flourishing of many institutions rather than only one. Porter and Kramer describe the situation like this:

> The capitalist system is under siege. In recent years business increasingly has been viewed as a major cause of social, environmental, and economic problems. Companies are widely perceived to be prospering at the expense of the broader community. Even worse, the more business has begun to embrace corporate responsibility, the more it has been blamed for society’s failures. The legitimacy of business has fallen to levels not

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25 We will not fight their wars  
We will not fall in line  
Cause if it’s us or them  
It’s us for them  
It’s us for them  

We reject the either or  
They can’t define us anymore  
Cause if it’s us or them  
It’s us for them  
It’s us for them  

seen in recent history. The diminished trust in business leads political leaders to set policies that undermine competitiveness and sap economic growth…They continue to view value creation narrowly, optimizing short-term financial performance in a bubble while missing the most important customer needs and ignoring the broader influences that determine their longer-term success. How else could companies overlook the well-being of their customers, the depletion of natural resources vital to their businesses, the viability of key suppliers, or the economic distress of the communities in which they produce and sell? How else could companies think that simply shifting activities to locations with ever lower wages was a sustainable ‘solution’ to competitive challenges?27

Businesses, governmental agencies, non-profits, churches and other institutions often exemplify this way of avoiding the crosses necessary for long-term success for the sake of short-term profit (whether that profit is financial, membership totals, fame, power, etc.). Distrust in institutions has been increasing for the last few years across the board with only a couple of exceptions. Most institutions are receiving less than 50% total of either a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust; and this list includes banks, churches or organized religion, medical systems, public schools, newspapers and more.28

Porter and Kramer make the case for institutions working together for shared value, where by virtue of working together more value is created and whole communities can experience greater long-term benefit. These clusters of shared value should blur the lines between for-profit and non-profit institutions. Creative destruction in this kind of collaborative effort redefines the meaning of profit:

Not all profit is equal—an idea that has been lost in the narrow, short-term focus of financial markets and in much management thinking. Profits involving a social purpose represent a higher form of capitalism—one that will enable society to advance more rapidly while allowing companies to grow even more. The result is a positive cycle of company and community prosperity, which leads to profits that endure.29

27 Ibid., 4.
Ultimately, Porter and Kramer are arguing for an institutional collaboration that creates value by thinking of others and not just oneself. Businesses, non-profits, and governmental agencies create shared value by sitting at the community table working together for a common good. The common good exists beyond any one institution but hinges upon each one’s sacrifice of short-term gains for a broader and more inclusive telos. When institutions bring their habits, imagination and desire into a cluster of other like-minded institutions working towards a good end, the destructive forces that can slow down short-term gains create space for longer-term trajectories of creative growth towards greater flourishing. Shared value allows businesses with a more broadly defined telos than monetary profit the opportunity to utilize their skills, resources, and management capability to lead social progress in ways that even the best-intentioned governmental and social sector organizations can rarely match.  

Intentional collaboration can feel like a kind of destruction for institutions forcing them to alter habits and think about other organizations, resources, and societal impacts besides their own work. The willing embrace of putting others before oneself can help Christians cultivate a translate the life-death-resurrection motif across sacred or secular institutions. Short-term death creates the possibility for long-term resurrection for more organizations that translates into a larger number of individual people thriving. 

Shared value through collaboration can be seen even in the ecosystems found in nature. Creative destruction takes place in a short film focused on the transformation of a bionetwork when wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park after being absent for nearly 70 years. Wolves are hunters of many animals but they also create the possibility of life for many

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30 Ibid., 17.
other species at the same time. The deer population in Yellowstone had gotten out of control because of the absence of wolves and or any other meaningful predators. Human attempts to control the deer population led to the erosion of vegetation and an insignificant population decrease of deer. As the small population of wolves were reintroduced into the park, they did hunt and kill some of the deer, but more interestingly, they changed the deer’s habits. The deer began to hide in places less easily tracked and as a result the vegetation in the park surged with health. First near the banks of the rivers and then extending outwards, the vegetation that had been decimated by the out-of-control deer population came back to life. In some places the heights of the trees quintupled in six years. Trees were able to grow on previously barren hillsides, slowing down erosion and regenerating the tree population. Birds migrated back to the park. Beavers who like to eat and use trees began to come back to the park and live in the rivers. As the wolves killed coyotes, the population of rabbits and mice increased which allowed the population of foxes, badgers, hawks, weasels and many other animals to increase in population as well. With more trees and and the slow down of erosion, the bear population increased as there were more berries to eat from the regenerating bushes and the carrion left behind by the wolves. Because of the wolves being introduced and changing the habits of the deer in a short number of years there became increasingly healthy and sustainable vegetation in the valleys and gorges along the rivers that had been destroyed and eroded because of the out-of-sync ecosystem. Once the trees and vegetation were given the opportunity to grow, it literally changed the physical geography of the rivers allowing them to have less erosion, charting clearer paths with more fixed landscapes for the rivers to travel. The introduction of wolves (creativity) into the ecosystem of the park brought about death for some animals (destruction) but in turn brought greater thriving for a larger number of species and total number of animals, along with the
vegetation and rivers for the park. Creative destruction made possible a greater flourishing for the entire ecosystem and geographical landscape. Death brought the possibility and reality of new life.

Change, a necessary byproduct of creative destruction, brings about both loss and hope in this process. It is a loss of what “was” towards a hope of what “could be.” In a book titled *Change or Die* investigating how individual habits inform the possibility for change in institutions, Alan Deutschman writes:

One of the most difficult aspects of profound change is that it often forces you to make a sharp break from the old community that has shaped your beliefs up until then. When you absorb a dramatically new way of thinking, feeling, and acting, you face possible rejection or alienation from the colleagues, friends, and family members who shared your old conceptual frameworks…Changing your own life often means changing your community, which is hard to foresee and very difficult to get through.\(^{32}\)

The cost of change, or the cost of discipleship in this narrative of life-death-resurrection, is high. The on-ramp is not steep, but the cost is enormous. If stability and stasis is the goal for an institution, it will ultimately find rest in its closure.

Change is always relational, depending upon the connection of the past to the future, but its orientation in that relationship must critically depend upon hope. Deutschman writes that for leaders and organizations attempting change,

The first key to change isn’t offering protection or admonition. It’s about inspiring hope—the belief and expectation that they can and will change their lives. They need you to *believe* in them, which encourages their lives.\(^{33}\)

Creative destruction is difficult because it depends on the ability to continue to learn, to repel this idea that we are finished products or that our desires and imaginations are perfectly aligned to the

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\(^{33}\) Ibid., 155.
correct telos at all times. If discipleship is the boot camp for our hearts, then institutions must find ways to inspire hope even though the path leads to and through the cross.

Even when we think the situation is hopeless, there’s usually a different way, a way out; it’s simply that we can’t see it because it’s outside our conceptual frame or we’ve stopped trying new solutions because we’re demoralized by past failures.34 Change through the process of creative destruction is a signpost along the journey towards our shared future that new life is irrupting into the present. When we can think of “change as learning”35 the former ecosystem that allowed for the flourishing of the few at the expense of the whole is reframed as a failure—death without the possibility of resurrection.

My own early development of the phrase “creative destruction” was born out a reflection on the contingency of language and the problem with defining what an institution “is”. The early Christian mystics recognized that language was a helpful tool in communicating about the Divine while simultaneously failing to capture “God” with words. No matter how bright, thoughtful, insightful or parsed out theologians have been in their attempts to talk about God, our language about the Creator of the universe always seems to come up short. Apophatic theologians like Pseudo-Dionysius would put two words together that normally would be seen as opposites as a way to affirm the essence of meaning as beyond the capability of language. Negative theology in relationship to postmodernity provides a philosophical framework to participate in creative destruction while simultaneously helping to traverse a similar modern impasse for institutions as postmodernity relates to cynicism and paradox. The institution of language, as discussed in the context of negative theology, can help provide a philosophical

34 Ibid., 213.
framework for institutions where they can move beyond cynicism or remain stuck in paradox, but instead chart new paths of creative destruction.

There are two important distinctions about this type of negative theology employed by Dionysius that are important to note in the creation of apophatic theology. The first is that “if negative theology is a certain kind of skepticism, it is not agnosticism in any usual sense. It operates on the assumption that God is real, indeed, as superessential, more real than the most exalted creature.”36 That is to say that apophaticism makes the “paradoxical claim that it knows enough about God to know that God is unknowable.”37 Negative theology is a realization of the finitude of all human language, especially in the task of speaking about God. The second distinction about negative theology to remember in the creation of Dionysian apophatic theology is that “the primary home of negative theology, in the Christian forms that primarily concern us here, has been orthodoxy.”38 Dionysius is not trying to destroy God-talk through the creation of apophatic theology, but rather seeks the union of individual humans with God through a dramatic shift of understanding how one can know God.

The opening prayer of Mystical Theology affirms this posture of situating apophaticism within the Christian tradition: “Trinity!! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness! Guide of Christians in the wisdom of heaven! (Pseudo-Dionysius, The Mystical Theology, 997A)” The Dionysian apophaticism is not created to prevent union with God through the denial of affirmations and denials of the concepts of God, but rather to enable union with God beyond knowledge. “Just as the thick darkness is not so much the deprivation of light as its

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
transcendence, so here un-knowing is not so much the deprivation of knowledge but its transcendence, a knowing “beyond the mind by knowing nothing.”

Acknowledging human contingency and the contextual nature of language cultivates a posture of humility in how we know and how we speak about God. Practicing the art of remembering habituates our heart’s thinking in humbleness. The practice of remembering reminds us that we are not God and God’s ways are not necessarily our ways.

This is not because God is far off in some distant place, but because of the nature of our relationship. Peter Rollins describes this as God’s “hypernymity”:

In this way the God who is testified to in the Judeo-Christian tradition saturates our understanding with a blinding presence. This type of transcendent-immanence can be described as ‘hypernymity’. While anonymity offers too little information for our understanding to grasp (like a figure on television who has been veiled in darkness so as to protect their identity), hypernymity gives us far too much information. Instead of being limited by the poverty of absence we are short-circuited by the excess of presence.

God is not veiled as some attempt to keep humanity at arm’s length but is too much for our senses to fully comprehend. God-talk reveals a contingent and limited ability for all humans to comprehend and understand all things. Embracing this contingency fosterst a posture of humility in how persons can be-in-the-world.

Creative destruction then is an attempt to point out that the essence of an institution and the way an institution cultivates a particular way of being-in-the-world for beings-in-the-world hinges on an epistemic humility that weaves into the very fiber of our whole person. This

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40 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.
conversation and use of destruction depends upon the philosophical tradition of deconstruction. Deconstruction finds its roots in the dynamic interplay and playful dialectic of philosophy in both its memory and its imagination, and the specific ways deconstruction irrupts the reign of pure reason and concepts of Ultimate Reality. “For deconstructive thinking is acutely sensitive to the contingency of our constructions, to the deeply historical, social, and linguistic ‘constructedness’ of our beliefs and practices.”\(^{42}\) Deconstruction helps to develop an awareness of the contingency of truth claims, objectivity, totalizing tendencies, and assertions of authority. Jacques Derrida and his philosophy of deconstruction are often perceived as the tried-and-true enemies of the Enlightenment, but John Caputo asserts that Derrida continues what is best about the Enlightenment, but on different terms, Derrida’s “interests lie in provoking not an anti-Enlightenment but a new Enlightenment, in questioning the ‘axioms and certainties of the Enlightenment,’ and to do so precisely in order to effect ‘what should be the Enlightenment of our time.’”\(^{43}\) The roots of deconstruction gain nourishment from the critical and thought-provoking reason cultivated in the Enlightenment, yet also seek to move into other soil and find sustenance in places not yet found. Culturally, deconstruction informs the term postmodern, and “is basically employed to describe the cultural emergence, or perhaps decline, from the ‘modern’ age of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought.”\(^{44}\) The roots of deconstruction take shape in both the continuation and break with the Enlightenment project for developing pure reason and objective categories. Deconstruction breaks down the boundaries asserted by philosophy


\(^{43}\) Ibid., 54.

(and theology for that matter!) that are supposedly off-limits, and becomes much more interdisciplinary. Deconstruction in coordination with postmodernism, “acknowledges the breakdown of essentialist categories—that is, that we can ever reach or speak of the essence of anything, whether that is God or merely language itself.”

The evolution into deconstruction from the Age of Reason is the turn where philosophy is brought under the same scrutiny as theology (which makes space for their eventual re-union). Reason and faith are brought back together through a need for both to remain in creative tension with the other. Deconstruction frees up the ability for theology to be on an equal footing with philosophy through the critique of autonomous and independent reason. Caputo writes of the status of philosophy in the light of deconstruction:

Philosophy is right to ask any question about all that we hold sacred, even and especially about reason and philosophy itself. Does that mean that philosophy itself comes into question in deconstruction? To be sure, but always from a love of philosophy, or from a love of what philosophy loves—knowledge and truth (no capitals, please) and ethics and every other honorable and prestigious name in philosophy’s intimidating repertoire. But in deconstruction this love demands that we admit that philosophy does not have the last word on the things that we love.

Deconstruction critiques philosophy’s attempts at making totalizing truth claims and instead proposes a deeper awareness and expectation of the “wholly other.” Deconstruction seeks to stop the flow of context-less truth claims and instead proposes that the “circumcision of deconstruction cuts it off from the absolute, cuts off its words from the final word, from the totalizing truth or logos that engulfs the other.” An openness to the other is made possible in cooperation with deconstruction and openness to the wholly other enacts deconstruction.

45 Ibid.
“Deconstruction proceeds not by knowledge but by faith and by passion, by the passion of faith, impassioned by the unbelievable, by the secret that there is no secret.”\(^{48}\) Deconstruction seeks to de-colonialize language and meta-narratives from the destructive or violent situations that often proceed from those who have created totalizing truth categories.

If the roots of deconstruction are seen as simultaneously continuing (memory) and breaking (imagining) from tradition\(^ {49}\) and the Enlightenment project, then the evolution into deconstruction away from the modernist scientific claims for objective and absolute truth in universal categories is characterized by a freeing-up, an unleashing, and move to openness through playful boundary breaking. Caputo describes deconstruction as “a work of memory and of imagination, of dangerous memories as well as daring ways to imagine the future.”\(^ {50}\) In this sense, deconstruction seeks to remember and keep alive the memories of the past insofar as the remembering helps to imagine the future and make the impossible possible.

Remembering is a theme that runs throughout the scriptures: God beckons his people to remember his steadfast love towards them amidst their despair and destructive behavior;\(^ {51}\) God’s

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\(^{48}\) Ibid.

\(^{49}\) Tradition in this sense is the context, culture and history of the person or people group from which they live in the world. Tradition includes the habits, practices and forms of institutional living, while also representing the narratives, language, and imaginations of those same persons or community of people. Tradition in this sense implies relationship and historical context between people and institutions.


\(^{51}\) I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.  
I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.  
Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:  
Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;
people struggle to remember times when they were not enslaved;\textsuperscript{52} Christ invites humanity to participate in the Eucharist, habituating the practice of remembering how salvation is born from the grace of his life, death, and resurrection.\textsuperscript{53} The salvific event is the entire story of God’s activity stretched out from the beginning of time until the consummation of all things, and it all begins with remembering: remembering who is the Creator, who this God is who calls his creation into relationship and instructs them on the proper ways to live. Salvation begins with remembering the story of God, not parts of it, or only the stories of the New Testament, but the stories throughout all of human history (and preceding it), where God invites all of humanity and all creation into deep relationship, reconciliation, and a hope-filled future. The habit of remembering creates the possibility of a Christian imagination.

One of the unique contributions Christians can make within any institution is the practice of remembering well. Cultivating a good institutional memory helps to avoid the pitfalls of thinking an institution is incapable of failure or hopelessly incapable of creating value. Because we have been invited by the Creator of the universe to exercise a good memory, we can take on the habits of remembering both the times of flourishing and failure as a means of imagining a new future and understanding the experiences of the present. Christians place special emphasis on remembering the Incarnation as a unique event in the salvific process—the life, death, \textit{and} resurrection of Christ—as a means of habituating our memories around significant creative-

\textsuperscript{52} “Then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.” (Deut 6:21 NRSV)

\textsuperscript{53} “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, \textsuperscript{24} and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” \textsuperscript{25} In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” \textsuperscript{26} For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Cor 11:23-26)
destructive moments in Christian history. Christians practice anamnesis regularly, a remembering of Christ’s death in the Eucharist that allows us to experience the promise of new life in Christ with each experience of the meal. Practicing remembering helps to cultivate an imagination for how the Easter-shaped crucifixion stories of institutions can be interpreted in the here and now. We especially pay attention to the means by which Jesus brought about reconciliation for creation as J. Denny Weaver writes:

Jesus’ rejection of the sword has the potential to shape our understandings of all other dimensions of theology, and in particular what theology has said about Jesus and how the contemporary church should understand the work of Christ.54

We remember, we listen to, and we reflect upon the story of the Incarnation in particular because we believe that it has the power to change us, and it is story of the Kingdom of God, of God’s “already.” Remembering creates space for imagination and provides the identity markers for what the “not yet” will look like.

Institutions that practice remembering will create a network of roots that can facilitate growth which can be sustainable for a longer period of time and is contextually appropriate. Beth Ann Gaede describes this institutional process as “rooting.”55 While this process is described for a church, it could be translated to most institutions:

A time of rooting in tradition is meant to help the group form a “corporate memory” or “get on the same page” with their history. There seems to be a general myth in congregations that “everyone knows the story,” which generally is not true…Storytelling in spiritual discernment calls for putting all the pieces of the story together, so that everyone knows the “thicker” story.56

56 Ibid.
Rooting is the intentional art of remembering to build a common framework from which to imagine a collective future. Looking back and cultivating a common sense of history can help build unity in the present while framing an institutional future.

In keeping with these ideas of memory and imagination, deconstruction aims to become aware of a text’s auto-deconstruction as part of the remembering process that helps to inform the future. What deconstruction has found in remembering various texts, is not that memory is unhelpful, but that the network of steps and the aim of tracing the footsteps of philosophy is impossible to pin down with scientific accuracy because it is difficult to know which steps are whose.\(^{57}\) Deconstruction is sitting amongst the various traditions, voices, ideas, and perceptions highlighting how it is nearly impossible to know which path is exclusive to a particular tradition, voice, idea, or perception. It can be expected in employing a hermeneutic of deconstruction that the event of the wholly other will exceed the present horizons of the individual, as deconstruction beckons the individual into a perpetual openness towards the other. Even in places where the footsteps are more clearly identifiable, deconstruction is not a recollection or recovery of previous interpretations dependent upon a static meaning lying underneath the text. Memory does not equate to knowledge (if knowledge is understood as the objective, time-less truth excavated from a text). Rather, Caputo writes that deconstruction

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\text{Is not a Platonic “recollection,” a getting back to where you already were or a recovering of a possession that you did not realize you possessed all along. It is not a matter of becoming who you already are but of becoming something new, a metanoia, a new creation, which eye has not seen nor ear heard nor the heart imagined, an openness to the coming of the other, which we don’t already possess. Thus, in deconstructive analysis, you could never simply “derive” an idea or a practice from its “sources,” as if it were already implicitly there. It does not flow from its “origin” as a more or less inevitable}
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Deconstruction is the affirmation of the impossible and wholly other—a recognition of the need for continuity with traditions in the present while also cultivating a posture oriented and open to the future through imagination.

The evolution from the Enlightenment into deconstruction is the affirmation of the radical turn to the reader as a responsible agent of interpretation while also recognizing texts as dynamic entities that are not hiding a singular meaning beneath its words. Deconstruction has shaken up the static meaning of the text seeking to preserve the possibility of dynamic meanings and a multiplicity of perspectives from interaction with the text. Derrida is perceived as articulating three levels of the text which preserves the impossibility of having a secret static knowledge of the meaning of a text: 1) a text as a physical object can be lost, misquoted, or altered; 2) the text may not be understood by its recipients; 3) the text remains in principle capable of being understood differently by readers in different situation (there is no context-less reading!).

Interpretations always “reflect something of the one who makes the claims.” In articulating these three different levels, Derrida points out the various ways in which a text and reader are capable of being deconstructed while also making way for the imagination. If the text and reader must necessarily auto-deconstruct then imagination is the creative partner. Where memory remembers and invites deconstruction, imagination affirms the impossible possibilities of the other that invites the affirmation within deconstruction. Imagination is the creative impossibility that beckons the reader toward the promising future in hopes of being perpetually open to the

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58 Ibid., 53-54.
59 Ibid., 47.
60 Rollins, How (Not) to Speak of God, 19.
other—whether the other is God, people, creation, or the stories and memories of the past.

Memory without imagination would miss the affirmative aspirations of deconstruction. And imagination without memory would create a context-less void from which to interpret whether a new chapter in the narrative is faithful to the particular telos the story is aimed.

When Christians embody the faithful practices of memory and imagination in any type of institution we create the environment for creative destruction: beings-in-the-world for the sake of all beings-in-the-world. We are able to practice the kind of sacrificial discipleship as a gathered people, becoming “servants to one another as Christ served us—through sacrifice.” Since the capital-C Church is made up of people who are constantly evolving while bound together by tradition, the people of the Church can participate in various institutions through their vocation and connect the telos of their individual lives as Christians to orient the trajectory of any institution they inhabit towards the restoration of all things. According to Stanley Hauerwas, because of our shared baptism, our memories and imaginations as Christians have been

Made part of God’s counterhistory, counterkingdom, countercommunity that would rather die before we kill. Moreover, we believe as we are made a people of such memory we offer the world a history not destined to repeat our murderous past…It is a frightening and terrible thing God has done to us by making us part of Christ’s sacrifice. Yet in that doing we have been freed from the history of sacrificial vengeance and murder.

Our very desires, imaginations and the trajectory of our stories have been shaped by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Christians embodying this narrative in any institution can lead courageously because of our identity with the resurrected Lamb of God. This creates the possibility for Christians to inhabit any institution and help it to participate in the salvific work of

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62 Ibid.
dying for the whole world. This means churches may have primary responsibility in embodying the restoration of all things but churches do not have exclusionary rights to that telos.

Creative destruction, a process of remembering and imagining, informs the way institutions can prune their habits to allow room for new growth and recalibration of telos. In gardens “pruning is the deliberate cutting back of plants usually applied to trees and shrubs. It is a method of controlling size, training to shape and encouraging flower or fruit buds to form.”63 It may seem counter-intuitive that to encourage stronger and more vital growth from a plant that you would cut it back, but that principle is exactly what allows a plant to thrive. Different plants need different types of pruning, too. For herbs, some “must be trimmed back after flowering to keep them compact and within bounds.”64 Some hedges, especially those with thorns, “need to be pruned back hard immediately after planting.”65 For roses, “the harder you cut back, the more vigorously the shoot will grow.”66 Shrubs, bushes, trees and vines all need to be pruned, literally have parts of them killed in order to grow and thrive, be more productive, and live longer lives.

Jesus invites his disciples into a life of creative destruction in the Gospel of John: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. (Jn 15:1-2, NRSV)” Pruning leads to a more excellent life. Pruning can involve the death of programs, firing of staff, parishioners leaving and more. When institutions participate in an intentional pruning process, whether the pruning is aimed at products, social impact, reduction in poverty, worship culture, or education, the possibility to bear more fruit is made possible. It doesn’t guarantee productivity,

64 Ibid., 237.
65 Ibid., 78.
66 Ibid., 114.
but it prepares the institutional ecosystem for the possibility of new life. Creative destruction is the intentional process by an institution to prune existing and living parts of itself for the possibility of a fruit-bearing and productive life for the sake of others. Creative destruction is a communal habit that places hope in a mystery of death that brings new life. Although this process of creative destruction may make an institution feel more vulnerable, the people gathered together are a symbol of

The power of God who transforms death into life. That is our hope, that God is doing the impossible: changing death to life inside of each of us, and that perhaps, through our community, each one of us can be agents in the world of this transformation of brokenness into wholeness, and of death into life.⁶⁷

Pruning is intentionally taking up the cross as an institution, then naming and confessing the brokenness that distracts from the full scope and priority of God’s mission through Jesus for the sake of the world. Creative destruction is the hopeful embrace of the cross as a means to experience the power of the resurrection.

Traditioned Innovation: Institutional Memory, Presence and Imagination at The Intersection of Life and Death

“I couldn’t see the future, I liked the past too much.”
-Ryan Adams¹

“Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living, tradition is the living faith of the dead.”
-Jaroslav Pelikan²

“Cultural legacies are powerful forces. They have deep roots and long lives. They persist, generation after generation, virtually intact, even as the economic and social and demographic conditions that spawned them have vanished, and they play such a role in directing attitudes and behavior that we cannot make sense of our world without them.”
-Malcolm Gladwell³

“I’ve learned that there is no currency like trust and no catalyst like hope.”
-Jacqueline Novogratz⁴

Institutions are always more than the sum total of their individual parts. Institutions are part memory, presence, and imagination, but they also are more than each of those three practices of seeing the world. Institutions are living and breathing organisms made up of people. People with histories and futures who are trying to figure out how to live in the present. Institutions have hearts because they are made of people, collections of people with shared habits, desires, stories, arguments and an imagination for what it means to be-in-the-world. Those habits, desires and imaginations are oriented towards an end, a telos, that reveals the deepest ordering of love in a particular direction along a particular trajectory. For Christians, the

¹ Ryan Adams, "Blue Hotel," in Follow the Lights (Lost Highway, 2007).
hope for all institutions is rooted in the restoration and reconciliation of all things through the
life-death-resurrection of Christ. Traditioned innovation is the practice of holding the
institutional memory and future in tension to illuminate how an organization should be-in-the-world in the present. Because both the past and future must be interpreted, the present will be no different, necessitating a faithful means of reception and innovation from the past towards the future.

Traditioned innovation depends upon a faithful reception and stewardship of the past, imagination and cultural care for the future, and creative destruction for the present. When traditioned innovation is embodied at the intersection of life and death, or death and new life, the dynamic interplay of memory and imagination create the possibility for a faithful presence in the present. Traditioned innovation avoids the temptation to replicate the past or rush to the future, but insists on cultivating a way of being-in-the-world that is hopeful in orientation without glossing over the cross necessary to experience resurrection as an institution. With distrust of institutions at an all time high, Christians participating in any institution have much work to do to reorient the institutional ships at sea towards a new horizon—just don’t expect to be able to find a dock in the middle of the ocean to get one’s bearings. The reorientation must happen while out at sea.

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5 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col 1:15-20) The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989.

6 Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions".
The Rule of St. Benedict says that you should “keep death daily before your eyes.” But remembering our mortality isn’t easy, for people or institutions. And the last thing an institution wants to talk about is death. Traditioned innovation avoids the temptation to render the past as utilitarian or describe the future as utopian. Greg Jones, originator of the phrase “traditioned innovation”, explains how innovation will impact the institutional landscape:

Sometimes that will mean we innovate within existing institutions; at other times we will allow some forms to die so that other ones can rise up in their place. And at still other times we will give birth to new forms to address challenges and opportunities. But even our most dramatic transformations ought to be tethered to our most life-giving past.

The pressure for institutions to keep death before them is an uncomfortable task, but without remembering the past, institutions might become untethered from their own histories. Traditioned innovation depends on a heightened awareness of context. Remembering can often feel like a kind of death—a tethering that limits freedom. Michael Jinkins in The Church Faces Death writes: “It would appear that following Jesus means giving ourselves over to him in such a way as to invite a kind of death, a freedom consisting in the denial of being-free to do as we wish.” Throughout this entire work, I’ve tried to demonstrate that there is no context-less life for an institution. Language, telos, habits and desire are all born out of a place and a people. From an American context, the tethering of freedom to a context will be seen as a kind of death for many who advocate freedom over community. Yet, there are no institutions that are blank slates because there are no people who are blank slates.

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8 Jones, "Traditioned Innovation" traditioned innovation.
Practicing the art of remembering begins with locating our identities as Christians in Christ:

We are called to actively participate in Christ’s responsibility, which means that our union with Christ necessitates a kind of dying as a way of living and a kind of rising that is an actual sharing in Christ’s selflessness and self-forgetfulness, the denial that is a betrayal of survival even as it is also a living into a hope of the power of the resurrection that is not in its own grasp.¹¹

There is a tension at the heart of traditioned innovation that reflects the “already, but not yet” paradox of the Kingdom. But the paradoxical tension doesn’t leave us paralyzed, instead, the tension points us to sign posts along the journey to pay attention to. If the signs are “be happy”, “be free”, or “don’t worry about a thing” these are not the markers of the journey of traditioned innovation and creative destruction. The path forward for institutions cannot gloss over the real work and Easter-shaped crucibles that will be necessary to overcome.

Traditioned innovation and creative destruction are not synonymous terms but creative destruction is dependent upon a practice of traditioned innovation. Creative destruction is dependent on a kind of traditioned innovation that urges destruction for the sake of new life. You can be innovative from the context of tradition without necessarily destroying, but creative destruction will depend on the kind of innovation that urges the end of some practices so that new life will be possible. Traditioned innovation may be an extension of a tradition or a resituating of a tradition in a particular context without anything old passing away. However, creative destruction is always the intentional and active practice of pruning the old and fruit-squelching branches of a tree so that fruit might be born.

The invitation to follow Jesus towards the resurrection through the cross comes in each of the synoptic gospels, but the invitation is interestingly translated in the NRSV in Mark’s gospel

¹¹ Ibid., 25.
as “their cross”. The encouragement to take up the cross in discipleship is a communal invitation.

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 12

We may be baptized one at a time but we are never baptized as individuals. Our identity, formation, and discipleship takes place in the context of community, including the invitation to follow Jesus on the road to the cross. When the church is gathered or scattered institutionally, “The church has crosses to take up and on which to suffer for the sake of Christ. The church is an offering, a sacrifice, a Corpus Christi. The church has its own deaths to die Eucharistically.” 13

The path of the cross is large enough for a group of people to travel together, and on that journey we remember whose footsteps we are following in, remembering the Christ who both invited and traveled ahead of us to show us the way. When discipleship doesn’t include the cross, but is an escape plan from hell, participation in the slow-but-steady work of dying so that new life is possible seems unnecessary. Discipleship that takes seriously the invitation of the cross avoids the illusion that following Jesus should always be easy or fun. Institutions that are interested in this kind of deliberate and incremental movement forward reveal the bankruptcy of those who are trying to rush ahead and break the bonds of community and tradition instead of finding a path towards a shared future with some degree of unity.

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12 The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. (1989). (Mk 8:34–37). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. It is important to note the historical oddness and anachronism of this passage that Jesus would invite his disciples to take up torture devices as a symbol of faithfulness to God. While before the crucifixion this invitation must have been incredibly strange, in light Christ’s death this invitation must have been terrifying.

The particularity our stories is not a curse but a blessing. The plurality of voices in the Scriptures help train us to be good readers, not only of texts, but of institutions. The people of God make up an institution (the collected people of a tradition, set of practices, desires, telos, and imagination) and we have had to remember and practice listening in order faithfully to innovate towards a future. The narrative begins with God creating out of nothing. Then the Genesis story becomes a story about the rescue and redemption of God’s people throughout history. And the whole of the story is a response to what it means for humans to be made in the image of God. That response is embedded in God’s graceful posture towards a world often aimed at self-preservation instead of self-giving love. The unfolding drama of God’s story should become steeped like a fine tea in the waters of our imagination. We learn how to think with our hearts, listening to the stories of Israel’s calling, crises, and conversations with God and see how the future is brought into the present with Christ, the church, and then stretched back out as we look forward to the restoration of all things at the end of time. To think with our hearts is to live in relationship both with God and one another. When we think with our hearts we remember that every story is a story bound by relationship and should cultivate a posture of contingency upon one another and God. The polyvocality of the Scriptures is a gift rather than a curse. It reveals the myriad of ways God can speak to, with, and through the various particular contexts as a gift,

Realizing that the Scriptures were not produced in spite of the social and cultural peculiarities of their authors and editors but because and through these very peculiarities. God does not reveal Godself despite the incarnation, in other words, but through the incarnation, because this is who God is. God’s revelatory engagement through history is the essential reality of and content of the gospel. There is no transhistorical kernel within God’s revelatory engagement through history. God’s revelatory engagement with

14 Jinkins describes Avery Dulles’ taxonomy of churches as creating space for a “polyvocality” that “more closely approximates the polymorphic nature of reality.” This is to say that people always make sense of the world through their own experiences and unique way of participating in the world. Ibid., 52.
humanity through history is the thing itself in all its husk-i-ness that is God’s self-disclosure.\textsuperscript{15}

Because each Christian and each institution have multi-faceted stories, it will be because of and through those very particular stories that God will make Godself known. Institutions like churches, businesses, governmental agencies, and nonprofits are in the midst of an evolutionary leap forward, but for each of those institutions they:

Must remain doggedly true to their historical rootedness, the canons of sacred texts and confessions, of narratives and communally reinforced habits and practices that provide them with meaning and arise out of the particular forms of life observed in particular communities.\textsuperscript{16}

In remaining tethered to a history, a people, a context— institutions refuse the modern myth of objectivity and are freed from the pressure to be everything to all people. The remembering helps to clarify the mission and vision from the past which will give shape to an understanding of the future and inform how innovation in the present is even possible.

There is an art to receiving the past with humility, letting history speak into the present like a still small voice in our ears. Without the voice of history, we might forget the injustice, sin, and abuse done by institutions that have brought us to the modern impasse. Traditioned innovation is the art of knowing what can be redeemed, what must be cast aside and what might be preserved. Jones writes

We do not need radical change. The task of transformative leadership is not simply to lead change. Transformative leaders know what to preserve as well as what to change. We need to conserve wisdom even as we explore risk-taking mission and service. Too much change creates chaos. Transformative change, rooted in tradition and the preservation of wisdom, cultivates the adaptive work that is crucial to the ongoing vitality and growth of any organism, Christian institutions included.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{17} Jones, "Traditioned Innovation".
Traditioned innovation helps us to remember that there is no story, no person, and no institution that is outside the scope of salvation. The telos of traditioned innovation is not change but transformation, i.e. movement from brokenness towards restoration. The hope of God meets the broken-hearted, exiled, and religiously outcast as well as the obstinate, failed, and destructive individuals—no one is past the reach of God’s grace—so why not institutions, too? Redemption and restoration are made possible through the power of Christ who helps people, and therefore institutions, to lay aside the sin that easily entangles us so that new horizons of possibility emerge for the here and now as well as the future. People that practice traditioned innovation help us to remember how our “capacity for sin points us back to the significance of institutions, revealing our need for the church to teach and train us, through faithful practices and holy friendships, to unlearn sin and learn holiness.”18 Traditioned innovation is a unique process of perpetuating tradition through an intentional awareness and remembering of the past so that it might be properly translated and re-contextualized into the present. Traditioned innovation is a faithful stewardship of the past in the same way the managers are tasked with multiplying resources in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). Perpetuating tradition isn’t merely conservation for the sake of survival, rather, continuation of tradition is meant to be utilized and put to work for the sake of the greater good and so that it might be multiplied for the flourishing of all people and creation. Institutions represent the various persons tasked with multiplying the talents and all will be held accountable to the Cosmic Manager when asked how they stewarded their resources of time, money, talent, and power. Destruction is burying talents in the ground and letting the talents waste away. Institutions practicing traditioned innovation preserve for the

sake of investment and mission rather than survival. When institutions practice traditioned innovation that process can become a habit that creates the boundaries for what faithful innovation can look like, simultaneously revealing what must be preserved and stewarded towards a new future.

It is in the denial of our history that we bring about death—death that does not lead to new life. Across various institutions, there is a growing concern from some of the most faithful innovators that there is a loss of historical perspective and appropriation of tradition. Samuel Freedman in his *Letters to a Young Journalist* writes of this predicament:

> Trendiness is overrated when it isn’t outright wrong. My concern is with tradition. I am the product of two institutions steeped in tradition, *The New York Times* and Columbia Journalism School. I don’t mean tradition as a set of rote reflexes, as formulas repeated ad infinitum, as a fig leaf for laziness. I mean tradition the way you hear it in a song by Muddy Waters or Hank Williams, not necessarily something ancient, but something venerable, something tested, something durable and true.\(^{19}\)

Tradition doesn’t have to signal death. Relying upon Smith, we all have traditions, stories, and desires. The question is, where do those particular traditions, stories and desires orient us? Innovation isn’t possible without a deep appreciation and stewardship of tradition. Traditioned innovation helps us to avoid the arrogance of thinking we might finally articulate the perfect, capital-T Truth that is outside of space and time and can be imported or exported into any culture without any contextual hesitation. Rehearsing our histories helps institutions and the people that inhabit them to avoid the pitfall of thinking history begins when we look in the mirror or talk by ourselves instead of listening to others first.\(^{20}\) When traditioned innovation is practiced with

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\(^{20}\) Freedman says that “tradition is the irreplaceable foundation; the tradition is the place to start. I think there’s more to learn by looking out the window than by looking in the mirror, more to learn by listening to others than by talking to yourself.” Ibid., 14.
excellence, tradition becomes like a series of bright stars guiding in a dark sky. It helps light the way for a faithful innovation that is resourced by tradition.

Lynn Gosnell, writing for Duke’s *Faith & Leadership*, tells a story about a renovation project for the children’s ministry at Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio where leadership wanted the tradition and stories from scripture to become an imagination-shaping agent in kids’ lives.\(^{21}\) After the church received a significant donation to renovate the children’s ministry area of the building, the leadership decided to avoid putting up Disney characters to liven up the place, but instead worked with an artist to tell the stories of scripture through massive murals. The murals, some three stories high, tell the traditional stories of scripture in an innovative way. Not many churches have three stories high paintings on their walls, but this innovative step was an attempt to hold the tradition and value of scripture in a Baptist context in relationship with the need to communicate in innovative ways for the sake of the children. Remembering the stories well led to creative retellings of the stories through art.

However, remembering isn’t easy, especially in the context of institutional sinfulness and violence. Sometimes we remember so that we can faithfully innovate, but sometimes we remember so as not to make the mistake of believing we are incapable of the same horrors. Institutional memory depends upon a kind of truth-telling and death, for: “Christ redeems the past; he does not undo it.”\(^{22}\) The people of God have a long history of forgetting God, forgetting the faithfulness of God, and forgetting our own sinfulness in the midst of hardship, suffering or injustice. A faithful reception of tradition is a willingness to enter into the messiness of human


\(^{22}\) L. Gregory Jones and Célestin Musekura, *Forgiving as We’ve Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace*, Resources for Reconciliation (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2010), 94.
history without washing our hands like Pilate—pretending like it never happened—or because it didn’t happen on our watch we are not responsible for the consequences of the institutions we find ourselves in today. Christian participation in any institution must be serious about the art of remembering for it will necessarily involve the practice of forgiveness as we “attend to the wounds of memory and consider how they are healed in Christ.”23 Stewardship and faithful reception depends upon an intentional practice of remembering the good and the sin so that we might more carefully and hopefully orient ourselves towards a future marked by the resurrection and restoration of all creation. The art of remembering helps us to develop the “moral imagination to put ourselves in the shoes of other people,”24 which will be an essential tool to cultivate habits of faithful traditioned innovation. If Christians cannot be truth-tellers in their institutions, practicing confession, forgiveness and reconciliation, then “who will tell the stories so that people don’t forget?”25

Faithful reception will involve some initial elements of creative destruction—remembering failures and the importance of selflessness will create the backdrop for new possibilities. Faithful reception of tradition and its context is letting go of the myth that we are a people who can choose our own stories or pretend like there were no stories before ours. Practicing traditioned innovation is a prophetic work. The prophets are not loose canons looking

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23 Ibid., 87.
24 Novogratz, The Blue Sweater: Bridging the Gap between Rich and Poor in an Interconnected World, 217. Novogratz throughout her book makes a bridge between the past and the future. Without stories people cannot remember well and without remembering well people cannot imagine a shared future. For Novogratz, remembering and imagination seem to find an intersection in the ability to practice and embody forgiveness. While interviewing some women who survived the Rwandan genocide, Novogratz had a woman say: “We listen to one another and look into one another’s eyes and we see suffering. It is that suffering that binds us. It is that suffering that reminds us that we are all human” (176).
25 Ibid., 164.
to dismantle the tradition and break down boundary markers of identity unless those boundary markers and traditions have become inconsistent and divergent from the memory that birthed the contemporary incarnation of the community and its shared story. In this sense, Jesus is not only a prophet, but also a reframer, whose memory of the tradition and story of God is reoriented to new possibilities, and is a fulfillment of the spirit of the memories of the past. Jesus did not come to abolish the law or prophets; no, Jesus came to fulfill them. Fulfillment is only possible with knowledge of what came before so that it may be actualized in the present. Reframing is providing an alternative lens through which to interpret a situation, experience, passage of Scripture, worldview, relationships, God or anything of life. Reframing is an artistic endeavor, that creates space for ambiguity, complexity, and generosity towards the “other.” In the book Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice & Leadership Lee Bolman and Terrance Deal write, “Artistry is neither exact nor precise. Artists interpret experience and express it in forms that can be felt, understood, and appreciated by others. Art allows for emotion, subtlety, ambiguity. An artist reframes the world so that others can see new possibilities.”

Faithful reception of tradition can be seen in great artists who evolve first by mastering the tradition and then faithfully innovating from within that tradition into new possibilities. Freedman reflects on the experience of seeing Pablo Picasso’s work in chronological order,

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26 Ellen Davis makes it clear that to be a prophet you have to first be a lover. She says that in 1 Corinthians “Paul is not writing about romantic love, nor even familial love; rather he is describing the kind of love that holds together the community in a “way” that is genuinely beneficial for each of its members.” Ellen F. Davis, Biblical Prophecy: Perspectives for Christian Theology, Discipleship, and Ministry, First edition. ed., Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 199.

27 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. (Matt 5:17, NRSV)

seeing him evolve from a traditional artist into an artist who explodes the tradition after mastering it:

What looks like spontaneous creation, divine inspiration, the visitation of the muse, is so much more often the end result of an assiduous work ethic and a conscious effort to develop skills...It is to be so much in command of your instrument that you understand why and how you create any given effect. ²⁹

Without actually knowing the rules and contours of the tradition, innovation is impossible. Traditioned innovation depends upon habits of practice that have created skills and a specific knowledge base from which to pull from and innovate with purpose.

The prophetic tradition is a kind of institution, where they would warn God’s people while retelling the stories of God’s faithfulness as a reminder and reframing of the current situation in light of the past. Time and time again the prophets would retell the stories of God’s activity from their history as a way to understand how to act in the present. The prophets were steeped in a kind of institution that embraced a faithful reception of tradition while raising questions about how “tradition embodies continuities of conflict about the practices that constitute the tradition.” ³⁰ A faithful reception of tradition is caring for the stories of the tradition of an institution in such a way that the memories can bear witness and give direction towards the present and the future. The historical context is to bear witness and provide the means for translation in the present. As learned from Fitch, the particularity of the people and context will inform the telos of the the institution’s reception of the past towards an imagined future tethered to the story of God’s activity throughout an institution’s being-in-the-world. Faithful reception of

²⁹ Freedman, Letters to a Young Journalist, 88,90.
tradition means a rejection of modernity’s claim that there is no story except the story we choose in freedom. Faithful reception is a rejection of this myth:

That the world we inhabit is a world that can be adequately understood, explained, and reckoned without any connection to the past. Moreover, the world is a place that can be reckoned with most accurately by abandoning memory in favor of the future, progress, and what we can observe with our senses. 

Stewardship, “being put in charge of something that belongs to someone else,” in this context means receiving the tradition, desires, stories, aims and imagination from our institutions and trying to do right by them. One of the basic premises of this thesis is that institutions matter, have mattered, and will continue to matter. The question has been how can participation within an institution happen with a Christ-like posture that orients our hearts in the right direction for the sake of others. Fundamental to this way of being-in-the-world is the awareness that

As a basic orientation toward life, institutional thinking understands itself to be in a position primarily of receiving rather than of inventing or creating. The emphasis is not on thinking up things for yourself, but on thoughtfully taking delivery of and using what has been handed down to you.

Faithful reception habituates humility as a marker for faithful presence in the midst of any institution. This kind of posture makes institutional listening possible and is essential to reading an institution, too.

The urgency to practice traditioned innovation is rooted in a missional way of being-in-the-world. Matthew 28:16-20 does not neatly fit into any one specific genre or category, but commissioning narratives provide an important backdrop for this pericope. Jesus, as seen

31 Tim Keel, Intuitive Leadership: Embracing a Paradigm of Narrative, Metaphor, and Chaos (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007), 39. Keel also quotes Stanley Hauerwas about the myth of modernity in relation to understanding our history, tradition, and story: “The Story we have is that we should have no story except the story we chose when they said we had no story.”
32 Heclo, On Thinking Institutionally, 143.
33 Ibid., 98.
throughout Matthew, both appropriates and then reframes the tradition as the one who has been given authority in heaven and on earth to interpret Moses, the Law, and what it means to be obedient to God. Matthew writes:

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The repeated use of the word “all” highlights the cosmic and comprehensive scope of Matthew, that the risen Jesus has the authority, perspective, and ability to establish a re-centering of tradition that is rooted in his own life, death, and resurrection. W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison explain, “The resurrection marks the end of the exclusive focus on Israel. The Jewish mission is now the world mission...We believe it includes Israel: universal lordship means universal mission.” A cosmic scope of authority creates an expansive mission to the whole world and all people.

Matthew’s unique expression of the commissioning narrative is consistent with his commitment to both highlight Jesus’ fulfillment of the tradition and Law while also allowing that fulfillment to reorient how the tradition, Law, and Old Testament story can be understood in response to the resurrected Son of Man. Davies and Allison propose that Matthew is redacting a chiastic scheme of commissioning narratives into a triadic speech. However, Donald Hagner

36 Ibid., 677.
points out that while there are similarities to words of revelation, theophany, farewell speech, priestly blessing, and covenant renewal, there are closer connections to commissioning (defined by: introduction, confrontation, reaction, commission, protest, reassurance, and conclusion, in which our present pericope lacks the elements of protest and conclusion) and enthronement (defined by: presentation, proclamation, and acclamation) narratives, but none fit exactly. This points to Matthew’s unique articulation and collection of the prior tradition to fit his motif.\(^\text{37}\)

Stanley Hauerwas points out in his commentary the convergence of the resurrection on the life of the disciples by writing, “The truth that is Jesus is a truth that requires discipleship, for it is only by being transformed by what he has taught and by what he has done that we can come to know the way the world is.”\(^\text{38}\) The disciples must learn to tune their ears and adjust their eyes to seeing through the comprehensive scope of the risen Jesus who is on a mission to fulfill the original calling to Abraham, that those in covenant with God would be on mission with God to bless all nations (Gen 12:1-3). This commission is laced with all of the political connotations embraced in Jesus’ speech on authority, presence, re-naming (under the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thus undermining allegiance and identification by another name, e.g. Roman), and mission to all nations. So, the disciples are invited to live apocalyptically, that is, with a new imagination: “The world is not what it appears to be, because sin has scarred the world’s appearance. The world has been redeemed—but to see the world’s redemption, to see Jesus, requires that we be caught up in the joy that comes from serving him.”\(^\text{39}\) The disciples are sent out with a new message, inaugurated by the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus: “Repent, for the kingdom


\(^{39}\) Ibid.
of heaven is present.” And the Kingdom is present to all people of all nations through the authority of the risen Jesus.

The contingency of the mission given to the disciples does not rest on their own authority or power however, but on the Son of Man who sends them. As Richard Hays points out, “The community can exercise Jesus’ authority because Jesus is present with them (cf. also 28:20). Thus, they are not acting merely on their own authority; they are acting under Jesus’ instructions and under his continuing guidance.” The scope of the mission finds its authority in the risen Jesus but in the Gospel there was a shift in the focus of Israel as experiencing salvation alone towards a universalization of the mission to all people. This is a change from earlier statements by Jesus in Matthew. In an earlier commissioning, Jesus sends the Twelve out with the instructions to stay away from the Gentiles and to prioritize the mission to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt 10:5-6). As Jesus draws nearer to the crucifixion, the Pharisees, scribes, chief priests and elders continue to misunderstand and reject Jesus and the stage is set for the Gentile inclusion as Jesus is more readily accepted and recognized as an authority by those outside of the house of Israel (Matt 15:21-28).

The opening of the mission to all nations is a continuation of the themes running throughout Matthew, but is also a prophetic reframing of earlier Old Testament traditions by emphasizing that Jesus is fulfilling the promises made by God to include all nations from the beginning of scripture and as seen clearly in those who are not of Israel worshipping and

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40 Ibid., 249.
recognizing Jesus as God. Hagner points out that Matthew has been setting up the expansion of this mission throughout the Gospel, which reaches its pinnacle in Matt 28:16-20:

Now we finally arrive at the full inclusion of the Gentiles (on this, see Hre Kio) in the history of salvation (cf. Dan 7:14), something hinted at in the Gospel from the very beginning and throughout (cf. the allusion to Abraham in 1:1 but also the magi in 2:1-12, the centurion in 8:5-13, and the Canaanite woman’s daughter in 15:21-28).\(^{42}\)

The scope of Jesus’ authority is directly related to the range of the mission, and the mission has been extended: “The Gentile mission extends the Jewish mission — not replaces it; Jesus nowhere revokes the mission to Israel (10:6), but merely adds a new mission revoking a previous prohibition (10:5).”\(^{43}\) Jesus has not turned against the lost sheep of Israel but has universalized the mission in both scope and priority. Traditioned innovation is a prophetic work, a remembering and conservation of the past so that faithful presence and hopeful imagination is possible in the here and now. Traditioned innovation conserves the past while simultaneously opening it to new interpretations in the present for “the truth of Christ’s loving forgiveness compels us to see the entirety of our past, but it does so for the healing of our memories and the restoration of our hope in the future of God’s Kingdom.”\(^{44}\) Jesus’ life, death and resurrection was both an appropriation of the tradition and simultaneous innovation from within the context of the Jewish people living in the Roman Empire. The scope of salvation was broadened and while also being a reaffirmation of the previous covenant with Abraham for the sake of the world.

There is a virtuous spiral of intersecting relationships between the practice of faithful reception and imagination. Stewardship of the past requires imaginative translation into new

\(^{42}\) Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 33b, 887.
cultural contexts. Imagination itself is born out of a context, a story, a people and series of experiences that created a continuum of expectations and hopes for a new future. The dynamics of the relationship between the past and future is described well by John Paul Lederach as the moral imagination, that is “the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist.”\(^45\) Institutions must imagine a future that does not yet exist and come to a place of decision in light of the memory of the past. Andy Crouch calls this process “culture making.”\(^46\) Culture is the environment for habits, desires, and telos to develop and foster ways that we can “behave ourselves into new ways of thinking.”\(^47\) Crouch is adamant, like Smith, to argue for culture creation that does not start in the mind but rather it begins in the heart and the habits which train it. The fundamental rule for Crouch in his conversation about change, leadership, and cultural development in institutions is that “The only way to change culture is to create more of it.”\(^48\) To care for culture is to continue to make culture. Institutionally speaking, to create culture is to bear fruit in the world that brings flourishing to others.

Imagination for institutions is seen by the way they care for the culture not only of their own organization but for the welfare of others. For Crouch, “culture is what we make of the world. Culture is, first of all, the name for our relentless, restless human effort to take the world as it’s given to us and make something else.”\(^49\) Institutions of all types are making culture all the time, e.g. non-profits that serve clients rescued from human trafficking, businesses creating new


\(^{47}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 67.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 23.
products to replace old ones, churches broadening their theology to include previous outcasts. Crouch agrees with the process of traditioned innovation where innovation can only happen from within a context and tethered to a history:

All culture making requires a choice, conscious or unconscious, to take our place in a cultural tradition. We cannot make culture without culture. And this means that creation begins with cultivation—taking care of the good things that culture has handed on to us. The first responsibility of culture makers is not to make something new but to become fluent in the cultural tradition to which we are responsible. Before we can be culture makers, we must be culture keepers.50

Traditioned innovation is undergirded by a humility and self-awareness habituated within an institution for the sake of a possible future not yet seen. When an institution practices cultivation of a culture and embraces its living traditions, new life is born out of a familial context and will bear a family resemblance. This helps an imagined future to be an extension of the family name and bear its resemblance while simultaneously being different from the parents at the same time.

Remembering and caring for the existing culture is essential for imagining a new future, as both memory and care for the present state of affairs are means of rehearsal that train our instincts and habits to imagine faithfully and in contextually appropriate ways. Samuel Wells describes this process of rehearsal in the context of theater and improvisation as a training for Christian participation in the world:

Rehearsal is the theatrical moment when roles are tried and tested, interactions practiced and perfected, words are filled with action and the silences between them filled with significance, when text is given body, voice, and character, when mistakes are not disastrous but instead become ways to discover deeper meaning.51

Improvisation, then, is when those trained to work in the theater are “schooled in a tradition so thoroughly that they learn to act from habit in ways appropriate to the circumstance.”52

50 Ibid., 74.
51 Wells, Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics, 62.
52 Ibid., 65.
of the tradition trains the habits and helps orient the heart in the right direction when innovation is required.

Good habits, regular rehearsal, and a clear telos help develop instincts within an institution that shapes the trajectory of the imagination. For the ability “to see simultaneously what is and what might yet be is the creative force of training in how to live well.” A great institutional imagination is formed out of the past but is not stuck there. The practices of remembering and imagining become feedback loops that inform our interpretation and train our habits for being-in-the-world. Institutions must imagine themselves like a formation factory. When a person begins a relationship and takes on the habits, practices, reception of history and stewardship of resources through the institution, how will they be-in-the-world? Institutions must ask what is the character, attitude, posture, knowledge, and feelings we hope a person would embody and profess once they have experienced the formational processes of our organizations. Is that person now equipped to make the translation and innovations that new experiences and relationships will surely bring? Will the rehearsals lead to a great performance? Crouch points out, “we can only create where we have learned to cultivate.”

One way that traditioned innovation is made possible is to acknowledge the mystery of creative destruction as a necessary intersection point between memory, presence, and imagination for the flourishing not only of the institution but for the community in which the institutions are embedded. Crouch highlights this mystery: “The strangest and most wonderful paradox of the biblical story is that its most consequential moment is not an action but a

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53 Ibid., 76.
54 Ibid., 148.
55 Crouch, Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling, 76.
passion—not a doing but a suffering.” 56 Traditioned innovation is a hopeful habit to cultivate in the aftermath of creative destruction. Creative destruction for Heclo is “not a negation of self but a giving of self.” 57 Creative destruction is a willingness to sit at the intersection of death and new life, being faithful to the tradition, imagining a future from that context and then letting that tension inform the present. Change will always be a necessary part for any institution’s survival, but the kind of change embodied through traditioned innovation will be rooted in inheritance:

A sense of inheritance backward and forward in time can always keep finding fresh work for such stewardship. To put it another way, institutional thinking shapes conduct by making it beholden to its own past history and to the history it is creating. The present is never only the present. It is one moment in a going concern. 58

Creative destruction in light of traditioned innovation is always tethered to a bigger context, a larger narrative. Creative destruction recognizes that the present is one chapter in a long book filled with chapter after chapter of a life-death-resurrection motif patterned after Jesus’ own story. For, “any Christ-shaped calling is cross-shaped.” 59 Traditioned innovation is hopeful orientation of an institution that has learned to practice faithful reception of memory through a stewardship of the past which creates the context for a traditioned imagination and cultural care for the future which makes creative destruction possible in the present. Traditioned innovation relies upon a rehearsal and mastery of the tradition so that innovation can be sustainable (even if disruptive) and imaginative for the future.

56 Ibid., 142.  
57 Heclo, On Thinking Institutionally, 128.  
58 Ibid., 110.  
59 Crouch, Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling, 262.
Reimagine, Reset, Restart, and Resurrect: How Institutions Practice Traditioned Innovation Through Creative Destruction

“We give dignity to each other by the way we listen to each other, in a spirit of trust and of dying to oneself so that the other may live, grow and give.”
- Jean Vanier

“As soon as the generals and the politicos can predict the motions of your mind, lose it. Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail, the way you didn’t go. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. Practice resurrection.”
- Wendell Berry

“The Christian story—the story of the abundance of God’s grace at every turn—outnarrates the scarcity of momentary Christian experience.”
- Samuel Wells

“Love made me an inventor.”
- Maggie Barankitse

Institutions that practice creative destruction will depend upon faithful people who embody the mystery of death that leads to new life—pruning so that new fruit may grow for the sake of the world. Creative destruction depends upon a rehearsal of tradition that will give orientation and particularity to the horizon of imagination for an institution’s being-in-the-world. Imagination, desire and habits are born out of a context and rely upon the particularity of an institution’s people to discern a telos. Creative destruction is the intentional process embodied

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1 Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, 36.
4 Jones and Musekura, *Forgiving as We’ve Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace*, 96.
by institutions to practice traditioned innovation rooted in a love of tradition that informs imagination and sheds light on which habits need to experience death so that new habits might be enacted.

An undercurrent for creative destruction is the practice of repentance. Repentance is a difficult concept for individuals and the people who make up those institutions. Creative destruction will require institutions to admit fault, failure and even sinfulness as it remains tethered to a history, present and imagination. Just as the invitation to wholeness through discipleship is realized along the journey to and with the cross, creative destruction has images of restoration and flourishing through death, too. In Luke 13:1-9, Luke tells two stories about two tragic current events for his audience that must have been the talk around the proverbial water cooler of Jesus’ day. After the two stories, Jesus tells a parable that is meant to help interpret the stories:

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 

3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 

5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” 6 Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 

7 So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ 8 He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 

9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’ “

One story is about a state-sanctioned terrorism and one is a random accident. Both stories see people’s lives snuffed out with little warning and for no apparent reason. Both stories would have had people scratching their heads, their hearts full of questions, thinking about how

precarious and fragile life really can be. Jesus implies that the people who were killed were no worse than anyone else. They weren’t the sinners of all sinners or the vilest of the vile. They hadn’t done anything specific to cause their own demise. We could imagine that at this point Jesus might go the direction of trying to defend God. Jesus could try to convince folks how God manages the tragedies of the universe quite well. But that isn’t the direction Jesus takes. Jesus implies that we shouldn’t equate tragedy with divine punishment. Sin doesn’t prompt God to cause great atrocities. Hard things simply happen. Life is fragile and often feels rushed with urgency.

Jesus seems to hear the anxiety about how the crowd is processing these two difficult and tragic events and he turns the attention away from disasters, victims and “why” questions, and turns his attention to those of us who are still living. Jesus turns to those of us who have survived the hardships and hazards of the universe and what society has brought our way. Jesus wants us to be careful not to mistake our good fortune as a special blessing from God. For to do that would be to imply that bad fortune is a punishment from God. Instead, Jesus orient the conversation to talk about repentance. The need for repentance is a universal condition. Random victims need it just as much as folks who survived when they made it through the event with fingers-crossed. We all need to repent—to change the way we perceive ourselves, the way we understand God and to change the way we see one another. Jesus responds to both of the tragic situations with the same answer: unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Jesus seems to recognize the current horrors and stress caused by the massacre and accident and he is not afraid to stress the suddenness of death and the unpredictability of life. And if Jesus ended the story here, we might think Jesus is just like every fire-and-brimstone preacher we’ve heard about from TV or characterized by most preachers in movies. But Jesus
doesn’t stop here. Jesus follows a slightly different path. Jesus doesn’t promise freedom from calamities, but he does urge his listeners to be wary against false assurances that things don’t happen to them because they might sin less than someone else. It’s like the story you hear about the two hikers in the woods. They come upon a bear and the two friends look at one another and get ready to run. One hiker pauses, slips on his running shoes and gets ready to take off. The other friend still with his hiking boots on says, “you know you can’t outrun that bear with the running shoes, right?” The friend with the running shoes say, “I don’t have to. I just need to outrun you!” Life isn’t like some great race to sin less than our friends or neighbors so that God gets them first! And often institutions will measure their success, viability, or telos against the backdrop of other institutions instead of the life-death-resurrection motif of Jesus. Instead of a telos aimed towards cosmic reconciliation and human flourishing, institutions can be content with a lowest common denominator or make self-preservation (keeping the lights on) the signpost for the end of the journey.

When institutions race to the bottom everyone loses. The people of God, who have been rescued from oppression and sinful institutional expressions (Egypt, Babylon, Roman Empire and even their own Israelite kings). Therefore, we are invited to repent and embody participation in another kind of Kingdom. Christians must then find a way to help embody particular institutional habits oriented towards a flourishing for all creation. An institution aimed at being slightly above the bottom of rung of the ladder undermines its own value and removes itself from a participation in clusters of shared value. Seth Godin writes:

Let's not race to the bottom.

We know that industrialists seek to squeeze every penny out of every market. We know that competitors want to drive their costs to zero so that they will be the obvious commodity choice. And we know that many that seek to unearth natural resources want all of it, fast and cheap and now…
But the problem with the race to the bottom is that you might win.

You might make a few more bucks for now, but not for long and not with pride. Someone will always find a way to be cheaper or more brutal than you.

The race to the top makes more sense to me. The race to the top is focused on design and respect and dignity and guts and innovation and sustainability and yes, generosity when it might be easier to be selfish. It's also risky, filled with difficult technical and emotional hurdles, and requires patience and effort and insight. The race to the top is the long-term path with the desirable outcome.6

The race to the bottom for institutions is not embodied out of the narrative of Jesus’ downward mobility7 but is an expression of self-preservation and a habit of selfishness at the expense of others.

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7 The entire passage is relevant to this discussion as the habits that Jesus embodies are relevant for individual practices to shape the desires of our hearts and posture towards one another. But the downward mobility of Jesus to take the form of a slave and orient his life to the cross is especially important for institutions:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess
In the parable following the two stories of tragedy, the tree that has been cared for and is living, but does not bear fruit, is a symbol for a lack of repentance. Unless the fruit tree begins to bear fruit, the tree will meet its just and swift destruction. Perhaps repentance is a story about what it is like when good things happen to an unsuspecting fruit tree.\(^8\) Jesus makes a pretty startling claim in this parable: just as we shouldn’t think our sinfulness brings tragedy—neither should we think that as individuals or institutions, simply existing means that we are bearing fruit. Just because an institution hasn’t been cut down that doesn’t mean that is living the good life or bearing fruit. The tone of the parable seems to emphasize that it is Christ’s continual patience and mercy to keep the ax from cutting down the tree. The gardener pleads with the owner of the vineyard, when the owner has found the tree without fruit for year after year, ‘please, let me get the soil ready, let me give it fertilizer.’ Institutions are like trees and God is like a great gardener, doing everything possible to get the soil of our institutional beings-in-the-world ready to bear fruit. God never leaves us to our own resources, but fertilizes our landscape with love to bring about fruit and repentance. The question for institutions is will we bear fruit with enough time to thwart the ax? Creative destruction is marked by repentance (pruning and death) that leads to restoration (fruit and life). Keeping the lights on isn’t enough. Destroying resources for the sake of profit isn’t enough. Having money in the bank is not enough.

Life is fragile and urgent, not because God is out to get us, but because when we repent, and reorient the way we see God, our own sin, and one another we can bear good, nutritious, life-sustaining fruit for the here and now. Repentance is a gift from God and habit that makes

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that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:3-11, NRSV)
fruitfulness possible. Like pruning, repentance may be painful but that doesn’t mean it is supposed to be an obligation or burden. Repentance is a kind of gift, i.e. an opportunity to reorient our love in the right direction. God carves out a beautiful opportunity to show us incredible graciousness despite the hard things life makes urgent for us. Creative destructors are prophet-like in their role, reminding the people of God where they have come from in order to imagine a new way forward in their current context, responsive to the ever-present voice of a super-abundant God.

The grace of God is not like aid given from one bank or nation to another nation when they are in crisis to bail out their economy. The gift of repentance is not simple charity that leaves no room for transformation. The gift of grace and repentance from God are together much different than aid, i.e. they are a recipe for transformation. When leadership is practiced with imagination and taken up with the task of reframing, a telos comes into view that creates fertile ground for work that stretches beyond aid into a developed and sought after end. Creative destructors are reminded that without the “elimination of aid effective implementation of the new, better, development regime will remain shoddy, ineffectual and even dangerous.”

Creative destruction relies upon the practice of traditioned innovation which recognizes that the long-view must be kept in mind so that imitatio dei is possible, and true listening can take place. While there is no naked leadership, or leadership that is universally good for all times, places, or

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9 Marva J. Dawn, The Sense of the Call: A Sabbath Way of Life for Those Who Serve God, the Church, and the World (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006), 35. Dawn writes that the regular practice of Sabbath helps to provide practice against the tyranny of the urgent. Practicing Sabbath “emancipates and enriches us so that the Kingdom reigns through us before others, on behalf of others, sometimes in spite of others, and always with others. In fact, Sabbath keeping is itself practice for the culmination of God’s Kingdom, for it is a weekly, day-long anticipation of eternity.”

situations, creative destruction must learn from God’s action in the past so that participation in
the Kingdom of God being on earth as in heaven can be made real today.

Creative destruction intersects with traditioned innovation through a process of
integrative thinking. Roger Martin in his book *The Opposable Mind*, describes the unity of
mastery and originality as integrative thinking, a necessary habit that helps traditioned
innovation to become real:

> At its core, integrative thinking requires the integration of mastery and originality. Without
> mastery there won’t be a useful salience, causality, or architecture. Without
> originality, there will be no creative resolution. Without creative resolution, there will be
> no enhancement of mastery, and when mastery stagnates, so does originality. Mastery is
> an enabling condition for originality, which in turn, is a generative condition for mastery.
> The modes are interdependent.\(^{11}\)

While some institutions will want to emphasize originality over mastery or vice versa, an
integration and dependency upon both is how the habits of remembering tradition and faithful
imagination are embodied. When mastery and originality integrate, there is a microcosm of
creative destruction: death and new life, rehearsal and improvisation, mastery and originality. To
remain stuck in one aspect of the dialectic would be to miss out the new pathway opened up by
originality and mastery working together to reveal a mutually beneficial future. Crucial to
creative destruction, especially in the reading of an institution, is to create systemic feedback
loops that help to hold the whole system together through a dialectic of mastery and originality
rather than isolated into its individual parts:

> System dynamics tools help integrative thinkers consider complex causal loops in
> creating their models and help them build modes in which the whole is viewed together
> rather than split into discrete components. In fact, in system dynamics, the whole *must* be
> held in mind to capture and understand all the relevant causal feedback loops.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{11}\) Roger L. Martin, *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win through Integrative
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 153.
In this sense, the *telos* informs the system dynamics which informs the causes which then informs the *telos* in a kind of feedback loop that helps the institution to intentionally break down parts of the institution that aren’t working to reveal new habits that will enable a greater movement towards the *telos*.

The intentional feedback loops required for integrative thinking and the process of creative destruction keep the past and future in a creative tension and hold the seemingly opposed binary options together to see what new possibility might be revealed. Creative destruction is hopeful, believing that with integrative thinking a leader can

Have the predisposition and capacity to hold two diametrically opposing ideas in their heads. And then, without panicking or simply settling for one alternative or the other, they’re able to produce a synthesis that is superior to either opposing idea.\(^\text{13}\)

Integrative thinking helps leaders to wield institutional power well. Andy Crouch writes that: “power is simply (and not so simply) the ability to participate in that stuff-making, sense-making process that is the most distinctive thing that human beings do.”\(^\text{14}\) Creative destruction is a dying to self, like fasting from the practices that keep new life from emerging to utilize power for the sake of others. “Power is for flourishing. This means power is a gift worth asking for, seeking—and should we receive it—stewarding.”\(^\text{15}\) Creative destruction is recognizing power as a gift that institutions must steward for the sake of the whole world. Institutions must regularly question their practices and prune so that power might be used to steward for the flourishing of all. Institutions must have a broader understanding of what self-interest looks like in the context of institutional community:

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 6.
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 37.
It’s in everybody’s self-interest to be the keeper of the community, to create conditions where people can live healthy lives and have the opportunity to grow and prosper. It can’t just be for the employees of your company, or for your shareholders. It has to be for the human community, if it’s going to be sustainable.\textsuperscript{16}

When power and self-interest are oriented in the right direction towards a shared telos, even institutions that aren’t branded by Christian leadership or Christian vision statements might be an instrument of the Kingdom because of their orientation. Because we share a human DNA, made in the image of God, institutions that order their love and point it in the right direction is itself a kind of gift from God and can create new culture.

Institutions that are unwilling to repent, prune, and reorient their habits towards a telos of flourishing and restoration for all people will die, but that death will not lead to new life. Instead, their death will add to the toxic suspicion already present toward institutions and cast a shadow of anxiety on all others organizations while contributing to the cynical-modern impasse that we find ourselves in today. Andy Crouch calls these zombie institutions\textsuperscript{17}, who have emphasized self-preservation over risk and continued learning. Shining the spotlight on churches, Crouch says:

Zombie churches exist to keep the lights on rather than to be the light in dark places; they turn inward rather than outward; they serve insiders and ignore outsiders.

The paradox of institutional life is very much like the paradox of individual life: only those who are willing to die can truly live. Only institutions that squarely face their own decay and decline can avoid the fate of the zombies.\textsuperscript{18}

When institutions become habituated around self-preservation, the degree of dying necessary increases to move back onto the growth side of the bell curve. Creative destruction isn’t merely

\textsuperscript{17} Crouch, Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power, 199.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 200.
destruction—it is death for new life. Zombie institutions are the walking dead, people enculturated in a traditionalism that no longer makes sense and is devoid of creativity from the future that might shape the present. There are some institutions that need simply to die: racism, war, abuse, terrorism, and slavery. Yet, even in their dying we do not forget our shared history so that we might imagine a future where their memories no longer haunt and orient our future. Creative destruction helps us prune institutions from the communal landscape for the sake of a more hope-filled future. As people of faith, we don’t proclaim hope in a brain-less and absent-from-the-body resurrection—no, our failures, sin, shame, and destructive systems are overcome through the life-death-resurrection of Jesus. As Christians, we reveal the emptiness behind the political embodiment of institutions when they deny power instead of acknowledging their propensity to waste or misuse power.

Zombie institutions are institutions that have not faced the truth about their own failure. And because of their access to privilege—their ability to continue collecting rent—they continue to exist, crowding out institutions that might create true shalom. Zombie institutions are dedicated first and only to their own preservation, not to anyone’s flourishing.  

Institutions, especially churches, don’t have time or the excuse of time to wake up from their institutional slumber. The time is now, to become a marker of a telos that has broken into the here and now through the power of Jesus.

Institutions that participate in habits of creative destruction and traditioned innovation become what artist Makoto Fujimura describes as “cultural estuaries.” Estuaries are the places in a waterway where salt water mixes with fresh water, forming a unique habitat for various plants and animals particularly suited for that environment. Estuaries act like a kind of buffer

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19 Ibid., 199.
20 Makoto Fujimura, Culture Care (Salem, MA: Fujimura Institute and International Arts Movement, 2014), 81.
where some fish will lay their eggs so they might be able more easily to swim downstream after
birth; or, there are particular kinds of animals that are more directly in competition with one
another and are interdependent upon other species for survival. The purpose of an estuary then is
“not so much protection as preparation.” Estuaries help build strength and competition between
various species and increase the capacity of the animals and plants within them for better
participation in the ecological culture. Estuaries like the Hudson River in New York Harbor have
been dependent upon oysters to filter the water, even turning some pollutants into pearls. They
can only filter a certain amount of toxicity before becoming toxic themselves. The oysters
prepare the estuary to be an estuary, taking in some death so that the life and relationships within
the river can thrive. Christians in institutions have this same call—to die with the pollutants so
that the entire ecosystem might live. Helping the diversity of institutions to flourish “moves
beyond mere tolerance to respect for the other in the context of our common life…[into] the
macro vision for stewardship that cares for the overall system and respects many types of
contribution.” Cultural estuaries are clusters of shared value, and the Christians within those
ecosystems must function like oysters taking the pollutants out of the water and restoring the
water to a healthier existence. The filtering process for Christians participating in various
institutions can build a movement with macro implications:

    Movements don’t emerge because everyone suddenly decided to face the same direction
at once. They rely on social patters that begin as the habits of friendship, grow through
the habits of communities, and are sustained by new habits that change participant’s
sense of self.  

21 Ibid., 82.
22 Ibid., 83.
(New York: Random House, 2012), 244.
The habit of filtering, taking out the old so the newly restored might flourish alters the ecosystem of institutional involvement and begins to model for any institution why the habits of creative destruction might be helpful. Christian participation in creative destruction within institutions helps reframe the starting point and telos: “the starting point is to recognize that change is not a threat. It’s an opportunity.”

At stake in this conversation about institutions is an apologetic for an institutional way of being-in-the-world that reflects the hope of the restoration of all things and the Easter-shaped suffering necessary for the eternal to break into the here and now. Institutions, and namely the people who make them up, can help create culture and use power for flourishing in communities that otherwise might not exist. As Jason Byassee points out in reference to Greg Jones’ work on traditioned innovation and how we might repent of our cynicism:

The church in Africa doesn’t lack dynamic, inventive, creative geniuses. What they lack is functioning institutions: hospitals, banks, universities, governments, denominations, businesses. Christians there do not mock, lampoon, or pillory institutions. They need them. So do we. We just take their presence for granted and so snidely dismiss them.

The modern impasse can be overcome as institutions embody new habits of death that lead to new life and demonstrate a clearer answer to why they exist and who they serve.

There are four main ways that I’ve observed institutions utilizing the power inherent in traditioned innovation by practicing creative destruction. Institutions that are tethered to memory while still imagining a future must often practice creative destruction in the present in very specific ways in order to flourish for the sake of their communities. 1) Reimagine, where an institution intentionally disrupts its own successful processes in order to avoid plateau and stasis.

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It is incredibly difficult to disrupt growth and stability in order to adopt a posture of regular learning and reformation, but organizations that intentionally adapt and evolve through reimagination are the institutions that make a habit out of creative destruction, i.e. dying so that new life might emerge. 2) Reset, where an organization recalibrates mid-process without having to close their doors but must intentionally return to a more original position in order to make forward progress again. 3) Restart is a means of returning to the beginning through an intentional pause, reorientation of telos, then a new beginning. 4) Resurrection, where an institution must die to one way of being in the world in order to experience new birth. All processes involve creative destruction but they vary in depth.

Below is a figure that highlights when these processes of creative destruction occur in the life-cycle of an institution. While institutions may actually participate in a hybrid of the various stages of creative destruction, resurrection is the most intrusive and challenging because it involves the deepest most thorough destruction in order for new life to flourish. All involve a degree of denial and cross-bearing but once an institution begins the downward slope towards death, the degree of destruction increases to return to the pathway of growth and new life through creative power. The figure helps to illustrate that what is at stake is a gathered people in an institution who reflect a telos consistent with the hope of Christianity, that the end breaks into the present. In the collection of essays titled Thriving Communities: The Pattern of Church Life Then and Now, C. Kavin Rowe and Greg Jones describe telos as

Our end is this: to cultivate thriving communities that bear witness to the inbreaking reign of God that Jesus announces and embodies, in all that we do and are. That is our goal: Christian communities that are a picture of and testament to God’s reign.26

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Institutions that embody creative destruction embrace the cross as a signpost of hope in a God that brings new life in the aftermath of death and is a process where even death will not be wasted.

Figure 6.1 Creative Destruction in an Institutional Life Cycle

For an institution to embrace creative destruction through a process of reimagination, it must intentionally disrupt and ask questions while still in a trajectory to achieve its end. The most challenging part of reimagination is being willing to provoke change and adaptation while still moving along a trajectory of growth past maturity. Reimagination is a posture of anticipating change, an intentional dying to make room for new growth, perspective, clients, or services offered before the need comes into full view. Greg Dees along with Miriam and Peter Haas
describe this as “mastering the art of innovation.”27 They list among the ways to innovate (relying upon Joseph Schumpeter’s categories for the first five) as:

- Creating a new or improved product, service or program
- Introducing a new or improved strategy or method of operating
- Reaching a new market, serving an unmet need
- Tapping into a new source of supply or labor
- Establishing a new industrial or organizational structure
- Framing new terms of engagement
- Developing new funding structures28

Whereas in Schumpeter’s work creative destruction is something that happens to an institution, product, market, or structure, I’m using creative destruction as an intentional action done as an institution to disrupt stability for the possibility for new life. The process of innovation is reliant upon the telos staying the same while the means to that end adapt through change. These are incremental innovations that continue to weave a posture of humility and continual learning through the institution.29 An institution practices creative destruction through reimagination when it examines its habits and recontextualizes them into a newly emerging cultural landscape.

An institution that reimagined its habits to better achieve its telos is charity: water.30 The mission of charity: water is to “bring clean and safe drinking water to every person in the world.”31 In an interview with Rob Bell the founder of charity: water Scott Harrison described one of the major impediments to the success of his organization was fundraising.32 People were suspicious about where their donated funds would go, how much administrative cost would be

28 Ibid., 163-64.
29 Ibid., 170.
31 "About Us," http://www.charitywater.org/about/.
taken from their gift, and how their donated funds could be seen in action. So Harrison reimagined the donation process and guaranteed that 100% of donations (including the transaction fees for credit card processes) would go directly to the field work of providing clean drinking water in the most impoverished places in the world. While some charity organizations claim to send 100% donations to the field, Harrison noticed that many had caveats for administrative costs. Harrison innovated by having private donors cover 100% of the operating costs for charity: water (including the underwriting for the credit card transactions for donations) so that any other donation went directly towards their work in the field. Charity: water would further innovate by allowing people to track where their donated funds go on the field (creating a partnership with Google Maps so you can see where the work is being done) and consistently provide transparent bookkeeping for financial accountability. The reimagination of the fundraising process helped charity: water to raise $27.9 million dollars in 2014.  

An institution that reimagines its habits will take pruning seriously, regularly examining the ways it accomplishes its mission, pruning the good to make room for the great. Fruitfulness will be directly tied to an institution’s willingness to foster innovation as a means of dying to some habits to create room for new ones to emerge amidst a changing landscape. This form of creative destruction is difficult because it requires institutional self-awareness among leadership to avoid the temptation to plateau and instead be willing to disrupt success for a longer view of sustainability and adaptation. Reimagination requires a self-awareness and regular listening so that small and incremental innovations can continue to form the habits of the institution for the sake of a strategic telos.

Resetting an institution is the least destructive experience, happening while an institution is still at work, but the effect is the same for an institution whether a restart, reset, or resurrection: the strategic end has moved to a new location requiring a new pathway to find it. Institutions that need to reset have a decreased clarity of mission and means to achieve that mission. An institution that needs a reset is one that has experienced some degree of mission drift, which Greg Jones describes as

Mission drift occurs when the work separates from the identity. The phenomenon is something quite different from, and less obviously perceptible than, not having a mission, losing a mission or giving up on a mission.\(^\text{34}\)

An institutional reset is a strong return to the past for the sake of a reimagined future. To reset, an institution must return to the beginning of its story and examine what it is measuring as success and put those measurements against the backdrop of its imagined future. Often times institutions that need to reset have begun to measure the wrong habits or outcomes. A reset does not guarantee success, but it can help an institution to gain greater clarity about what it is measuring and whether the measurements are accurately reflecting the imagined telos.

IBM was founded in 1911, 105 years ago, and over that time period has had to reset its work onto new trajectories a number of times. The most recent opportunity to reset happened through the leadership of Louis Gerstner, Jr. When Gerstner became CEO of IBM in April 1993, the company was a mess: financially it was nearly bankrupt and the products were poor. Central to this creative destruction process was a reset on metrics for measuring success. Previous to Gerstner’s tenure, IBM was mainly focused on its own products, with isolated measurements for success and limited ways to act because of its precarious financial situation. Innovation was the

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target while the quality and use of the products by customers wasn’t a measure of whether the innovations were helpful or useful. The reset hinged on learning how to measure success and steer away from telling stories that missed out on serving the customer for the sake of the business. Gerstner explains, “People do what you inspect, not what you expect.” By this, Gerstner meant that IBM had the tendency to fool itself by inspecting data that would support its own projected milestones and meet its own expectations, rather than focusing on the actual claims and criticisms of its customers to make better products. Creative destruction involved dismantling the processes and aims of measurement to better assess the reality of failure and places in need of improvement. It would seem foolish to make the numbers look like you were failing when they previously pointed to success, but the truth was never consistent with the imagined future.

In Gerstner's own words, "fixing IBM was all about execution" and required "an enormous sense of urgency." His whole approach was to drive the company from the customer's view and "turn IBM into a market-driven rather than an internally focused, process-driven enterprise." And it worked. It was all about execution -- and honest ways to measure its effectiveness. Before Gerstner arrived, IBM had a tendency to fool itself with bogus indices and data (e.g., customer satisfaction numbers generated from hand-picked samples; subjective product milestones, etc.), but he changed all that.

For Gerstner, being institutionally alive wasn’t enough for his plans for IBM. “I came to see, in my time at IBM, that culture isn't just one aspect of the game; it is the game. In the end, an organization is nothing more than the collective capacity of its people to create value.” IBM’s reset, led by Gerstner, turned the ship around, helping it to stabilize and lead its industry financially for a number of years. IBM focused on innovation and efficiency without assessing

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36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
along the way if their innovation was being received well or was perceived as helpful for its customer base. Without practicing creative destruction, IBM would have never reset its course and it wouldn’t be creating value any more. Instead, it is talked about as one of the second most dramatic turnarounds (Apple being the first) in the technology industry, today.

To reset an institution, there must be leadership in place that is able to read the institutional outcomes and habits before an overhaul of a whole culture becomes necessary. If institutions can ask some of the questions essential to traditioned innovation, creative destruction can become a means of reset

For it returns us to basic questions that all organizations, for-profit or not, must ask: Why must we exist? What do we do that no one else can do as well? What would be lost if we disappeared?  

Reset becomes a way to clarify the mission, create measurements of success, and calibrate habits towards the strategic end. Institutions that need to reset have experienced seasons of growth, health and vitality, but have moved past a point of stability into a state of decline. Institutions that can embrace a reset will avoid a thoroughgoing destruction process, but will need to form new habits to measure success for their strategic end. Like IBM, institutions must resist the temptation to believe they have nothing from which to repent. A reset is a return to the past through an examination of how a shared clarity and set of habits in relation to the institutional mission became distorted along the way and prevented progress towards the imagined end.

An institutional reset will require thoughtful leadership that is perceptive enough to ask questions about how to measure the set of habits and outcomes. Good questions are able to reveal the actual telos of those practices rather than the hoped-for telos that was lost along the

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38 Jones, Thriving Communities: The Pattern of Church Life Then and Now. Kindle Locations 66-68.
way. Essential to a reset is listening to different voices than the ones who created the measurements of success that have created the environment of decline and having the leadership willing to prune the evaluation processes and redirect them to bring consistency for the sake of institutional mission. This means that the institutional leadership represented by the old guard will have to loosen its grip and understanding of reality to let another voice into the conversation. Reset depends upon a listening that hears from the other, and attempts to perceive reality from the vantage point of the person on the other side of the process, e.g. a guest experiencing worship for the first time in a church, a first-time coffee drinker in line at Starbucks, or a displaced family looking for emergency shelter after their home burned down. Institutions that learn to reset will stave off death, but will still need a major recalibration of cultural practices and evaluations to be faithful in its mission towards an imagined future.

Restarting an institution is an incredibly helpful means of creative destruction when an institution realizes that without an intentional reorientation of telos the institution will cease to exist. Restarting an organization requires a willingness to experiment and high levels of adjustment along the way. David Bornstein and Susan Davis describe the requirements necessary for a restart when talking about the challenge of creating a social entrepreneurship for

At the outset, the process requires unusual levels of commitment. It also requires humility and faith, because in most cases, early efforts are small, fraught with error, and take years to show significant results. If the process is successful, what emerges is a new institution whose staff, board members, and supporters bring together the skills, knowledge, and influence to advance a new approach.39

One example of a restart can be found in Arlington, VA where a church began in 1946 to meet the needs of a growing community on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. Various families came

together in the Fairlington and Park Fairfax neighborhoods and they built two different buildings to use for worship and fellowship opportunities. In 1960 the sanctuary was built and was needed for the growth the church was experiencing. Fair-Park Baptist Church saw times of growth, innovation, and its creativity was clear in its modern building design for its sanctuary with lots of light, color, and mix of traditional elements at the same time. Over time, the neighborhood would change and northern Virginia would continue to explode with people. However, after 50 years and a steady decline of congregants, Fair-Park Baptist Church would merge in 1996 with Duke Street Baptist Church to become one congregation. With numbers of congregants continuing to decline, this combined congregation who met at Fair-Park decided to take a bold initiative in 2005 to restart the church. “Recognizing that the church was no longer effective in meeting the changing demographics of the surrounding community” the congregation brought in three decision-making trustees to search for new leadership and a new vision for the church.\(^{40}\)

In 2006 Fair-Park invited Lisa Cole Smith, a recent graduate of The John Leland Center for Theological Studies, who was also an actor, director and artist to consider submitting a proposal to restart Fair-Park as an experimental church. With a unique vision for combining the practices of church and art, Convergence was born out of an intentional process of creative destruction. Hinging upon the question: “What would happen at the intersection of art, faith and human experience?”, Convergence became a restart, retaining some of the membership and acquiring the building and property along with initial funding to innovate and restart the church under a different name. Over the last ten years Convergence has blossomed into a creative community of faith, where art and spirituality could live in creative relationship with one another and become a safe place for exploration for the community at large. Relying on the creative and

\(^{40}\) Convergence, "Our History," https://ourconvergence.org/about/history.
generous tradition of Fair-Park, Convergence was able to become new life for a congregation that had previously lacked much hope to go forward into the future. Convergence restarted the heart of Fair-Park while also helping it to faithfully innovate into a future it would not have seen if it had not been willing to die to a version of itself.

In that death, a door was opened and the wind changed direction:

By opening our doors to local artists and arts organizations and creating a forum for public dialogue on faith and cultural issues we believe we will be better equipped to meet current and future challenges. We want to encourage more churches to do this so we no longer feel the need to “catch up” or battle culture and so that artists have a truly valued place in society; neither celebrity nor misfit, but humble contributor with a credible voice. We hope this creative convergence will promote a society whose culture reflects the deep spiritual and existential concerns of all people and promotes the human experience as one dedicated to higher purposes.\textsuperscript{41}

Restarts are never blank slates, but they involve a process of creative destruction that relies upon a looser tethering to the past in order to imagine a new future. Convergence helps institutions to realize that without regular practice of traditioned innovation over the years, institutions can lose touch with their surrounding community and fail to make the kinds of connections necessary to create clusters of shared value for one another. Fair-Park’s willingness to lay down its building, time, history, and understanding of itself for a larger mission and purpose is a generative practice of creative destruction that fosters hope.

The restart was made possible through a few key institutional moves by the church which relied upon a good reading of the institution. First, the church leadership and congregants asked for outside help. The outside help, which happened to be denominational leaders in this case, were able to provide some objectivity and help identify the practices that needed to end so that new life might emerge. While the outside consultants weren’t native to the institution, they were

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
able to help translate the stories of innovation from the history of Fair Park Baptist into a new context. Outside people who are good at reading institutions and who like to help others succeed, while also not being a current member of the institution, can be crucial for an accurate reading of the institution during a restart. The outside perspective can help an institution to begin to put into practice the work of examining the past, taking time to pause and regroup in the present, and reorient towards a new telos for the future. Also essential to the restart was a deeper awareness and listening in the neighborhood and community so that Convergence could be born to meet a need that had been ignored previously in Alexandria. Convergence would restart as a church that retrofitted many of its spaces to create residency workplaces for artists, a black-box theater for creative arts, and its foyer has become an art gallery. Fair Park Baptist Church hit pause, invited outside perspective, listened to its community and then invited new leadership to help it become a unique kind of institutional restart for the sake of its community. A great signpost of Convergence’s success is that its community (through various institutions in government, public, and private life) often rents, utilizes and depends upon Convergence for creative experiences in the City of Alexandria.

Institutions that are going to restart will need to have the ability to pause for a season keeping the bare minimum of programs in existence to allow the most opportunity to evaluate what can be pruned. While a restart isn’t a complete death and resurrection of an institution, it is setting a new trajectory for the where the institution is headed. It will depend upon new habits and programs, new leadership, and community of people with institutional memory who are committed to imagining a new future.

Lastly, creative destruction through resurrection can mean the end of one institution to give birth to another. St. John’s Catholic Church was founded in 1856 and constructed its
building in 1858 in Louisville, KY. At the time, the Roman Catholic population was surging throughout the city, and for the first service over 2,500 people arrived for the consecration of the building and mass. After over 100 years of work in the city and the church was experiencing a lot of change after Vatican II and the population began to trickle away. Eventually, the church found the courage to ask the City of Louisville if there were any pressing problems that their building might help to solve. In 1984, St. John’s approached the city to form a task force to address the number of homeless individuals who were living in the city. In 1986, St John’s Catholic Church sold its building to the City of Louisville for one dollar. In the death of the church a homeless day shelter for men was resurrected. The city had seen men who had places to stay at night die on the streets during the day because they had nowhere to be that was warm during the daytime. Since 1984, St. John’s conversion from a church to the St. John Center for Homeless Men has become a signpost in the city for what creative destruction can look like when it happens in the context of collaborative relationships. The death of a particular church gave birth to a group of people being church while resourcing the community to meet a real need in its community. The death of one institution and its resurrection into another has literally brought new life to the city. Some of the homeless men that previously were dying now have the opportunity to stay somewhere warm, safe, and hopeful during the day. At the center they also work with other agencies and are making gains on eliminating homeless throughout the city.  

Similar to St. John’s Day Center is an institution now called The Gateway Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Before The Gateway Center was a hub to end homelessness in the southeast it

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42 St. John Center for Homeless Men, http://www.stjohncenter.org/who-we-are/.
was the Atlanta City Jail.\textsuperscript{43} The jail was closed and in 2010 as a result of a ten-year study about ways to end homelessness in the city of Atlanta and its neighboring region by the United Way, a recommendation was made to make progress for chronically homeless individuals to find permanent housing through a new gateway center that would foster collaboration across non-profit, business, government, and faith community relationships. “The Gateway Center philosophy rests on the guiding principle that homeless individuals can ultimately achieve permanent housing through their own dedicated efforts combined with a collaborative process built on a foundation of support from a skilled staff, intensive case management, and trained volunteers.”\textsuperscript{44} The former jail that once detained 330 people who caused trouble now is a gateway out of trouble through care and collaboration that helps individuals move out of homelessness, while addressing “the underlying reasons for their homelessness, such as unemployment, addictions, mental illness or domestic abuse.”\textsuperscript{45}

A church that died and resurrected as a men’s day shelter and a jail that died to become a gateway to new life are both institutions that experienced a death of one way of being-in-the-world in order to resurrect into something very different. And these institutions did not die to become condos or new restaurants, instead something missional was born. The death of the church and the jail didn’t create new institutions that were antithetical for life, they created the possibility for greater flourishing for some of the most marginalized people in their respective cities. The alternative to resurrection is destructive death or a death without meaning. The scope of change and transformation in an institution that experiences death in order to embark on a

\textsuperscript{44} Gateway Center, "About Us," http://www.gatewayctr.org/about/.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
journey of new life is deep and wide. First, the depth of leadership change will run throughout the entire institution. The further along the decline and death trajectory the greater change must happen throughout every tier and level of institutional leadership. Not only must the top executives or lead pastors step down or be let go, but the managers and change agents of the institutions will likely need to exit as well. Because the breadth of change must begin at the center and move to the margins of the institution, an overhaul of leadership will be essential to move towards a resurrected future.

The new culture is only possible when there is a decided death of one institution for the sake of creating a new telos and means to achieve that telos. To resurrect an institution will require an active imagination, first to cultivate a memory that holds the stories of past success loosely while recognizing that the stories of that past may have to be reinterpreted in light of the context of death. Then, good translators who are able to recontextualize the institution for the sake of a new telos will be essential for an institutional rebirth. This process will likely include a change in name, identity, governing stories, and tethered relationships, all part of the branding or storying process, along with the overhaul of leadership for resurrection to occur.

Institutional resurrection is the most challenging, wide-sweeping, and tumultuous expression of creative destruction. It is painful, all-encompassing, and relentless. But when the process of creative destruction can be embraced, the smell of death can be overwhelmed by the fragrance of new life. Like Mary with pouring her jar of perfume on Jesus’ feet in the home of her newly resurrected brother, the smell of new life will fill up the entire house and overwhelm the stench of destruction.46 Institutions that must face resurrection will depend on fantastic

46 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’
leadership, a long-view for the possibility of transformation, and a willingness to write a new ending to the story of their institution’s future. While institutional resurrection isn’t easy, it is perhaps the most hopeful. Like the profundity of a dead man coming back to life, when an institution is willing to forsake survival for the possibility of a new way of being-in-the-world, heaven comes down to earth. The mystery of the incarnation of God through Jesus, the signs of healing in the face of brokenness, the pruning that leads to greater fruitfulness, and the death that defeats death through resurrection bears witness to the overwhelming hope born of God that is on mission to restore the world to its intended wholeness. Through a cosmic practice of creative destruction in Christ all things are made new.

Institutions that practice creative destruction can participate through reimaginations, resets, restarts, and resurrections but the heart is the same—death leads to new life. When a group of people gathered together towards a shared end with a common vision of the good life embody habits directed by the cross and infused by the power of the resurrection, whole communities can change. People young and old can begin to have hope that institutions are not simply out to trick me, get my money, or pad their numbers. Creative destruction levels the playing field, raising up the valleys and bringing down the mountains to remind all institutions of the need to collaborate in clusters of shared value. Creative destruction may not always be easy, but it can be very good. And the very good is not only for the people gathered in the institution, but hopefully, through regular practice of memory, imagination, and deconstruction the good can be for all people. The mystery of moving from death to new life may not be the easy path, but the resurrection reminds us that the good path is marked by life-sustaining fruit trees that will please

feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (Jn 12:1-3)
owner of the vineyard. It is my hope that when institutions practice creative destruction situated at the hopeful intersection of traditioned innovation Christians can find ways to participate in institutions without having to abandon their faith and by their very lives they become an apologetic for how to break out of the modern cynicism and impasse of institutional life.

For my own generation, I hope this work is a reminder that we too must die to our own understanding of how discipleship should feel and the myths we have desired that have convinced us that new is always better. If creative destruction becomes part of our own cultural DNA as people of faith, we might be able to contribute to the resurrection of institutions and break some of the cycles of institutional injustice that divide us today. As we keep our eyes fixed on the horizon of possibility, the past tethers us to a story and creative destruction reminds us to walk humbly in the present for the sake of the world.
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