



Our Theological Vision

By Paul E. Miller

We live in a time of unprecedented change:

1. Christendom is collapsing. The 1,700-year-old partnership between Christian “princes” and the church has disappeared, and increasingly the state and the culture are antagonistic towards the church. That means we no longer control the culture or the public square. We’ve lost the narrative. We have no voice.

2. Ancient morality is collapsing. Secular-liberalism has created a new moral order around the secularized Christian values of compassion, acceptance, and inclusion. The result is that our culture not only accepts ideas that stand in opposition to our faith; it even welcomes practices that were condemned by ancient pagans. Our culture is in a moral free-fall. The result?

Secular-liberalism feels: inclusive, kind, positive, open, global, inter-tribal, accepting, innovative, compassionate, beautiful, youthful, free.

Christianity feels: tight, narrow, harsh, negative, restrictive, old-fashioned, irrelevant, unintelligent, reactionary, odd, syrupy, boring.

We’re losing an entire generation that is turning away from a seemingly out-of-touch Christianity to the vibrant world of freedom and self-discovery offered by our culture. Our children aren’t wondering if Christianity is true, but if it is good. We can’t go on like we have.

I want to share with you a deeper, wider view of the gospel that will equip and empower the church to love in this rising tide of evil. To do this, I’ll share two stories that show 1) the needs of the church, and 2) how seeJesus’ theological vision offers a path forward.

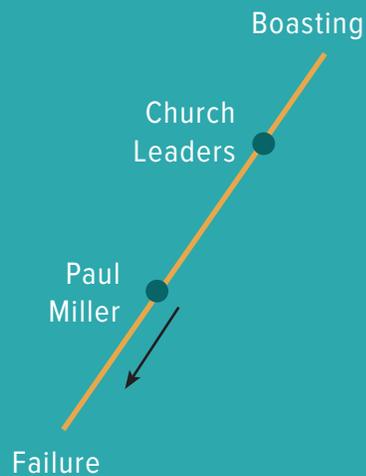
The Cell Phone Seminar

If you’ve been to our prayer seminar, you know we open on Friday evening by asking participants to spend some time in personal prayer. We don’t tell people how long we’ll let it go because we want their prayer as “real life” as possible. Then, after 5 minutes, we ask, “What was hard about your prayer time?” People are almost always relieved to learn that everyone else struggled with the five-minute prayer time too. I say almost because several years ago, I led a seminar for the leaders of a large church. The discussion after the introductory prayer time was my most difficult ever. I couldn’t get anyone to talk because about a third of them were openly on their smartphones. When I finally shifted to lecturing, they put their phones down, and we ended with a great evening.

Late that night, I debriefed with Bob Allums, my teammate and the director of our prayer seminar ministry. He was incredulous. He’d led hundreds of prayer seminars, but he’d never experienced anything like this. He mentioned several other small “slights.” I started laughing and said, “Bob, it isn’t that complicated.” I held my arm like a diagonal line and said, “They were up here and I was down here. I was below them and, thus, not deserving of their full attention.”

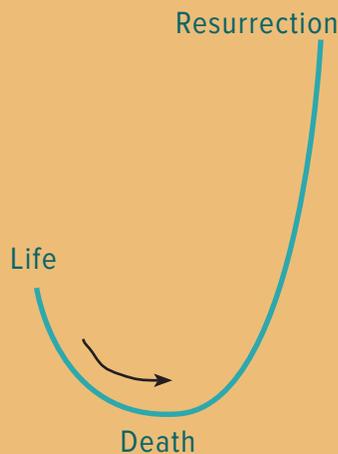
FAILURE-BOASTING

What the church sees:



J-CURVE

What Paul sees:



The church often operates out of this Failure-Boasting chart (see left), trying to marry the gospel message to an essentially secular power grid. But the two messages aren't compatible. The Failure-Boasting chart is a false, empty narrative that values wealth, prominence, and—in short—human glory. Church celebrity culture is just one indication that we've succumbed to this narrative.

I laughed at their slights because I didn't live in their narrative. They were on the Failure-Boasting chart; I was living out of the gospel message on the J-Curve (see right). I was in-Jesus, and they were in-work or inefficiency. Participating in the dying and rising of Christ, I was freed to love while they were enslaved to their phones.

God has wisely permitted me to experience multiple J-Curves over the course of many years, so I know the cadence of participating in the dying and rising of Christ. The apostle Paul calls it a fellowship of his suffering (Phil. 3:10). Being at the bottom of their Failure-Boasting chart devalued me and left me powerless. Though I'd led hundreds of seminars, I didn't know how to lead one when people didn't interact. Their inattentiveness weakened me and drew me into the dying of Jesus. One of the things we teach in the prayer seminar is that helplessness is the key to a praying life—and their inattention made me helpless. I had to pray my way through a prayer seminar. As I cried out for grace in my weakness, I experienced his presence, because the praying Spirit of Jesus comes alive as you take the path of Jesus.

On Saturday morning, the executive pastor requested that everyone put their phones away before we started the next session. I appreciated his intervention. Later that morning, I shared with them how I'd learned to look at my wife, to value her, by studying how Jesus looked at people. In the Gospels, I'd discovered this pattern of looking => compassion => acting. I knew their inability to look at me, to value me, on Friday night showed they didn't know the person of Jesus. His cadences were alien to them.

Everything we teach and model at seeJesus is related to the Path of Jesus, the Person of Jesus, and the praying Spirit of Jesus. These three truths are either weak or missing in our Reformation heritage. In the circle chart at the top right, the orange center or "donut" is Luther's great rediscovery of justification by faith. But missing is the "donut hole" or Person of Jesus and the outer ring, the Path of Jesus (the J-Curve). Let me tell you another story to show you how these three truths come together to form a more complete theological vision.

The Talkative Woman Seminar

Not long after the Cell Phone Seminar, I led a prayer seminar with 300 attendees. At that size, we use roving microphones so we can still be interactive. I forgot to tell the mic-holders to not return to the same person. One of the mic-holders returned three times to a woman who shared lengthy rambling insights. I struggled to pay attention to her. In the Cell Phone Seminar, I was lower on the Failure-Boasting chart than my audience; here I was higher than this woman. Each presented its unique temptations. Lower and higher, of course, are fictions of the Flesh, what Paul calls rubbish.

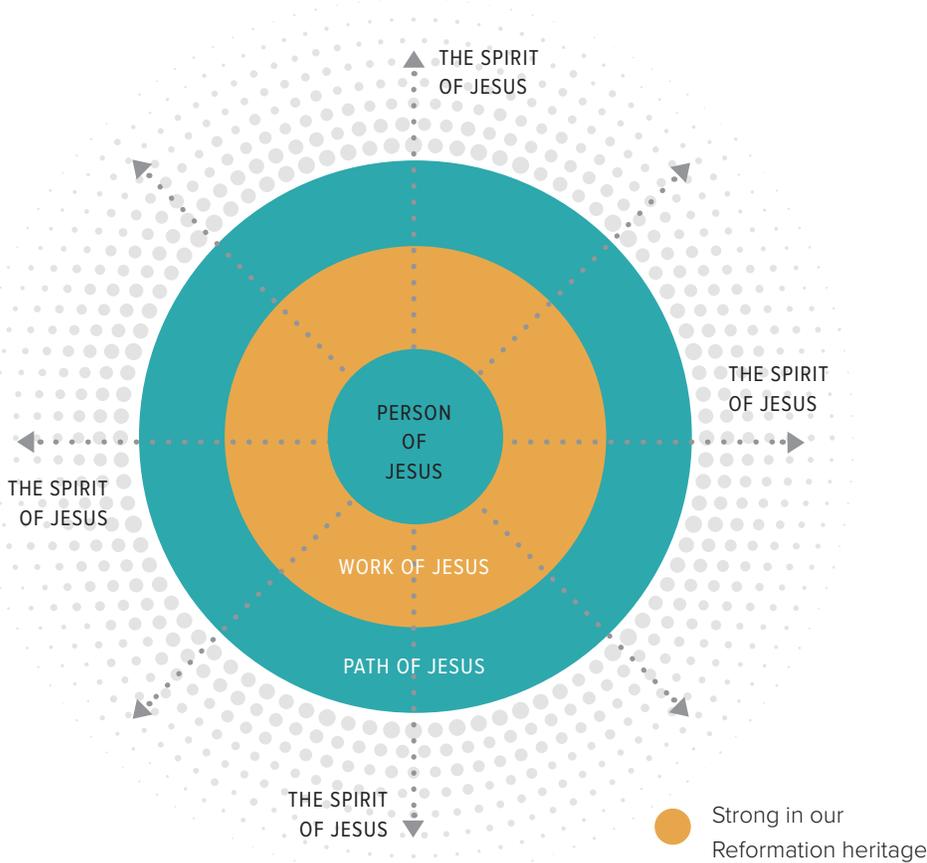
So what did I do to rescue the seminar? Nothing. I'd immersed myself long enough in the person of Jesus to know that she had instantly become more important than the other 299 people in attendance. Jesus frequently narrows his focus from

a large crowd to just one person. Our prayer seminar had momentarily become a seminar on love. This woman was my lost sheep. So here I was caught off guard, in another J-Curve, with 299 sheep watching. It was just her now. I prayed quietly as I concentrated on what she was saying. I can still feel how difficult it was to make sense of her. Her interruptions were about ten minutes total, and it passed quietly.

At the break, the associate pastor came up to apologize and said, “That won’t happen again.” Evidently, he’d talked with the woman. For a second I was unsure of what he was talking about—I was so engaged with her, I’d forgotten she interrupted the seminar. I thanked him, but I said, “You know it’s not the worst thing in the world for people to see me loving her. I get to display the beauty of Jesus.” He said, “I’ve never thought about it that way.” When I’ve told this story at pastor trainings, the reaction is always, “I would have focused on how she was ruining the seminar.”

The vision of the circle chart (the Person of Jesus, the Path of Jesus, and the Spirit of Jesus) was operating in my heart:

- **The Person of Jesus showed me what normal looks like.** I knew the face of beauty. Years of studying, meditating on, and teaching the Person of Jesus had driven his image into my head and heart. I knew his cadences.



- **The J-Curve provided the map so I wasn’t thrown by the mini-suffering.** She wasn’t ruining my seminar; she was drawing me into Christ. I wasn’t disoriented by something going badly—I knew my location—I was in-Him, moving downward for a brief moment of dying.

- **Finally, I needed the Spirit of Jesus, his presence in my heart and life.** Nothing in me naturally disposed me to listen to and value her. So I prayed as I listened. I needed help to love. I couldn’t do it by myself. The chain of love worked: she weakened me => I prayed for love => that allowed the Spirit to shine through me ever so briefly to 299 other people.

The Person of Jesus showed me what to do, the Path of Jesus showed me where I was, and the Spirit of Jesus showed me how to do it. Our Reformation heritage offers us the foundation of justification by faith,

the frame of the Word, and a fervor for evangelism. But it has not given us a compelling vision of Jesus.

The beauty of Jesus emerges as we participate in the dying and rising of Jesus with the template of the person of Jesus. It’s the end product, the goal. We picture it on the circle chart through the arrows that come outward from the center. The Spirit not only makes the J-Curve work, but also shapes its goal: imaging Jesus. So, instead of the fleeting glory of a well-run seminar, we get the glory of the cross—that’s where the beauty of Jesus shines.

If you reflect on your own life, I suspect you’ll discover multiple opportunities to enter the dying and rising of Jesus. You’ll see ways you can image Him and show a new generation that Christianity is both true and good! The beauty of Jesus is love at its most robust and glorious; it is light so bright that it exposes all other “lights”—including secular liberalism—as false. As our world collapses around us, there has never been a time in the history of the church when we needed to discover and display these three truths more. ■