

**Entrepreneurial Christianity:**  
**What Protestants Are Teaching Catholics about the New Evangelization**  
“The University” Series at Sacred Heart Church in Ventura, February 27, 2018  
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In 2012, two years after José Gomez became Archbishop of Los Angeles, he published his first pastoral letter, entitled “Witness to the New World of Faith.”<sup>1</sup> In it, he called for “stronger ecclesial commitment to new evangelization” (no. 4). The archbishop wrote, “We must find new ways and new enthusiasm to evangelize – in our families, our work, and in every ministry of our Church” (no. 8). Evangelization, in short, is his priority. Although Archbishop Gomez did not explicitly distinguish the “new” evangelization from the “old,” he implied, with his comment about “families,” that evangelization is not just for those who have never heard about Jesus Christ. New evangelization means sharing the good news with those who have already heard it. Many baptized Catholics are without zeal and do not practice the faith, even within our families. New evangelization means an outreach to them.

For us Catholics the question arises, “How are we to evangelize the baptized who are lukewarm or even cold?” When we consider inactive family members the question becomes especially delicate. Theologian Karl Rahner dealt with this question in the 1950s. He was reflecting on a situation common in Europe, and now common throughout the USA, the situation of people who are Christian by culture, but not by conviction. Rahner argued that “one ought to avoid . . . advancing the disintegration of the family because one is a Christian and relatives are not.”<sup>2</sup> The potential for tension within a family is great, especially at a family dinner, when some do not join in the prayer before the meal. Life is already messy, Rahner implied, and we Christians should not make it worse by picking fights at the dinner table. There are better ways to spread the good news.

But what about Archbishop Gomez’s call for “new ways and new enthusiasm to evangelize”? What does this mean in the parish? Tonight I would like to share with you some insights from Catholic authors who have grappled with this question. The authors explicitly acknowledge a debt to Protestant Christians, arguing that we can learn from them. The books are:

- *Rebuilt: The Story of a Catholic Parish*, by Father Michael White and his associate Tom Corcoran;
- *Divine Renovation: Bringing Your Parish from Maintenance to Mission*, by Father James Mallon; and

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<sup>1</sup> Most Rev. José Gomez, *Witness to the New World of Faith: A Pastoral Letter to the Family of God in Los Angeles on the New Evangelization and Our Missionary Call* (Los Angeles: Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, October 2, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Christian among Unbelieving Relations,” in Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. III: *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. by Karl Heinz and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1967): 355-372, p. 360 quoted here.

- *Great Catholic Parishes: How Four Essential Practices Make Them Thrive*, by a Catholic layman, William E. Simon Jr.

These books acknowledge that many Catholics, even among regular Mass-goers, are tepid in their faith. Offering practical ways to evangelize, the books draw much of their inspiration from the Protestant world. They constitute a genre that I call “entrepreneurial Christianity.” Their common thesis is this: to evangelize, a parish must make enlarging the congregation a goal and manage itself so as to achieve that goal.

I will review the three books, and then ask you, at the break, to reflect with me on the relationship between what the authors say and work of evangelization.

### Rebuilt

Let’s begin with *Rebuilt*,<sup>3</sup> a book that appeared in 2013 and which is, to my mind, the best of the three. Father Michael White and associate Tom Corcoran came to Nativity Church in suburban Maryland in 1998. They expressed contempt for what they found. The experience of Mass, they said, was “moribund and depressing.” The staff was “divided and deeply dysfunctional.” Preaching by guest celebrants was “uneven” and even “conflicting.” Volunteers had no sense of accountability and “were a law unto themselves” (pp. 5-6). As Father White uncovered these problems, he said, he even contemplated renouncing his pastorate. But by 2013, when the book was published, he had turned the church around. Father White claimed that Nativity had “almost tripled in weekend attendance from 1,400 to over 4,000” and “the commitment to the mission of the Church has grown” (299). How did the parish achieve this remarkable result?

White and Corcoran identify 2003 as the turning point. In that year they attended a conference hosted by Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in California and the author of *The Purpose-Driven Church*. After several visits to Saddleback, the White and Corcoran began to implement Rick Warren’s key ideas: “to reach the lost and grow disciples through a focus on worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, and evangelization” (54). Although the two authors met resistance from parishioners and staff at Nativity, they persevered, gradually implementing the Saddleback strategy.

The first part of *Rebuilt* diagnoses the central problem that White and Corcoran encountered. They described the spirit of Nativity Church as a “consumer culture.” They even confessed that, at first, they shared that culture. “Our parishioners were like customers,” they wrote, “and we were here to serve them” (8). So the two ambitiously began to create programs: religious education, youth ministry, liturgical music, and Christian fellowship. But the result was disappointing. Their efforts did not pay off in higher church attendance. They became disenchanted with consumer culture. In their view, it “erodes the sustainability of church communities because it allows the congregant to assume the posture of shallow commitment and the attitude of ceaseless demands” (9-10). Instead of forming disciples, consumer culture makes parishioners more demanding and less committed.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael White and Tom Corcoran, *Rebuilt: The Story of a Catholic Parish: Awakening the Faithful, Reaching the Lost, Making Church Matter* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2013). 280 pages plus notes (11 pp.).

Their visit to Saddleback Church showed them a different way. The second part of *Rebuilt* describes how White and Corcoran re-focused the parish's mission on "reaching the lost." The lost, say White and Corcoran, are those who "try to find a life outside a relationship with God." They are, in the authors' words, "dechurched people who no longer go to church or unchurched people who never did" (40). Nativity's new goal was to make the parish experience relevant and engaging for them. White and Corcoran began with a Sunday evening Mass aimed at young people, challenging them to become disciples, even if that meant that they had to fundamentally change their lives. Younger people welcome a challenge, the authors found, if it leads to spiritual growth.

Unfortunately, however, the older members of the parish rebelled against giving a preference to newcomers. Long-time parishioners became (in the words of White and Corcoran) "dissatisfied demanding consumers" who resisted changes. Ushers resented having to give up their prime seats to meet the needs of parish newcomers. Eucharistic ministers resented the arrival of young people with tattoos and piercings. Musicians resented having to subordinate their personal preferences to the new parish direction (49-50). White and Corcoran had prophetically called for a transition at Nativity. They acknowledge, however, that they did not manage the transition well. They had rightly challenged parishioners to become evangelizers, but established parishioners interpreted the challenge as "unwelcoming" or even "threatening" (60). They left the parish, and newcomers filled the pews. Father White confessed, "parish growth comes through attrition as well as addition" (63). The parish grew after part of the congregation left.

*Rebuilt* is a dramatic story with a happy ending. Using census tools, the authors targeted a particular demographic, identifying some 18,000 people in their zip code who did not belong to a church. White and Corcoran invited people with no church affiliation to visit Nativity, and then did everything in their power to make the newcomers and their families feel welcome. This has changed the parish. Nativity does not put its main emphasis on traditional Catholic sacramental and devotional life. Instead the parish's focus is what the authors call "transformation and life-change" (79). Newcomers to the parish want meaning in their lives. Nativity offers them meaning by getting them involved in ministry. This is one of the lessons of Saddleback pastor Rick Warren. Transformation and life-change have led to the tremendous growth of Nativity Church.

### Divine Renovation

White and Corcoran's *Rebuilt* appeared in 2013. In 2014 Father James Mallon, a priest of the Canadian Diocese of Halifax, published *Divine Renovation*.<sup>4</sup> On the book's flyleaf, there is a tribute by *Rebuilt*'s Father Michael White. He has this to say about Father Mallon: "His book is an essential guide to defining the identity of one's parish and changing the culture." Changing the culture of the parish is very much Mallon's goal. He advances the thesis that a "crisis" faces the Catholic Church. "We have forgotten who we are and what we are called to do as a Church," argues Mallon, including "why we exist as a Church to begin with" (p. 13). We exist, he believes, for

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<sup>4</sup> Fr. James Mallon, *Divine Renovation: Bringing Your Parish from Maintenance to Mission* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2014). 286 pages.

mission – for proclaiming the good news of salvation. But Catholics are overly committed, he says, to maintaining the *status quo*.

Father Mallon puts the blame on complacency. In his view, “most parishes, crippled by a culture of maintenance, focus at best on meeting the needs of parishioners” (17). In this we hear an echo of White and Corcoran’s critique of “consumer culture.” For the authors of *Rebuilt*, the problem with today’s Catholics is that they see themselves as “demanding consumers.” For Father Mallon, the problem is the “culture of maintenance.” Most Catholics merely try to maintain their congregations, he argues, serving themselves rather than extending their mission to the unchurched.

*Divine Renovation* does not cite research to prove its claim that “most parishes” merely “maintain” the size of their congregations. Father Mallon speaks, not as a sociologist, but as a pastor. In this he fully subscribes to the thesis of *Rebuilt*, namely, that a health parish is a growing parish. It grows by evangelization. Evangelization means proclaiming the gospel in such a way that it awakens a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. To do this (Mallon reports), he has offered the “Alpha” course for the past four years. Alpha, a course in evangelization developed in 1977 by the Reverend Charles Marnham at a Church of England parish in London, was highly effective at Mallon’s Church of St. Benedict. Almost 2,000 people participated in the Alpha course, he writes, “with 20% to 30% being non-churchgoers” (25). Mallon, himself a native of Scotland, offers this testimonial to Alpha: “We have . . . seen hundreds of lives changed and transformed as people encountered the person of Jesus Christ” (25). The Alpha course, in short, is Mallon’s paradigm for evangelization.

Mallon has been active in Alpha since 2001, and in 2009 he gave Alpha workshops in Chihuahua, Mexico (36). He admires Alpha’s threefold-approach to evangelization, an approach he calls “belong-believe-behave.” The first step is to create among participants a sense of belonging. Then, during the ten-week Alpha process, says Mallon, “the truth of Jesus and his Gospel begins to knock on the door of their hearts.” Participants make a decision to follow Jesus, and the result of believing (he says) is “a total re-evaluation of lifestyle and behavior, as the journey of discipleship begins” (142). In Alpha-style evangelization, belonging comes first, followed by believing and ultimately behaving as Christians.

Mallon embraced Alpha, he says, out of a sense of frustration. He describes himself as “a proud John Paul II priest” who “believed that the path to renewal in the Church would be found in personal holiness and orthodoxy” (51). But frustration set in:

I was convinced [he writes] that if I just preached enough homilies on the need to grow spiritually, to serve in ministry and to put more in the collection, and if I just provided enough opportunities for parishioners to take programs to help them change their behavior, then it would all work. (141).

It did not. When not enough people grew spiritually, or ministered, or contributed to the parish, Mallon turned to Alpha. Now, he says, Alpha is “foundational” to St. Benedict’s “identity as a missional and evangelizing Church” (143). At St. Benedict’s, parents who want their children baptized must take the Alpha course. Young people are enrolled in it. Taking Alpha is one of the requirements for serving on the pastoral council. Alpha may

have originated in a Protestant context, but that is not a liability for Mallon. He believes that its “ecumenical base” will “enhance the effectiveness” of the parish.

In summary, the book *Divine Renovation* offers to bring the Catholic parish “from maintenance to mission” by awakening faith through a proclamation of the gospel. Father Mallon has found in the ten-week Alpha course the most effective way to do so. The key is what he calls “the radical, scandalous mercy of God.” Human beings are “deeply damaged” by original sin, he says, but unwilling to admit it. Original sin prevents us from acknowledging our neediness. Mallon puts it this way: “Never having tasted the sheer, naked mercy of God, we are not filled by his mercy, and therefore are not merciful” (68). If we are not sinners, he says, we feel no need to acknowledge God. Mallon’s remedy is for Catholics to recognize their sinfulness so that they can experience God’s forgiveness. The Alpha course, by proclaiming the gospel, offers this remedy.

### Great Catholic Parishes

Let’s review our progress thus far. We said that White and Corcoran’s *Rebuilt* aims at replacing the “consumer culture” of the Catholic parish with the five key ideas of Saddleback pastor Rick Warren: worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, and evangelization. The book urges parishes to create a welcoming environment that emphasizes personal transformation and life change. Then we turned to James Mallon. His *Divine Renovation* aims at replacing the “culture of maintenance” in parishes by focusing on the mission of Jesus Christ as taught in the Alpha course. The goal is to help people acknowledge their brokenness and their need for God’s mercy. In both books, Protestants have inspired Catholic authors, focusing them on discipleship and mission.

The last book we are going to consider is entitled *Great Catholic Parishes*.<sup>5</sup> William E. Simon, Jr., the 2002 Republican gubernatorial nominee for California (whose father was Secretary of the Treasury under Presidents Nixon and Ford) wrote *Great Catholic Parishes* in part as a promotional tool. Simon founded “Parish Catalyst,” a non-profit organization that invites Catholic pastors and parish leaders to join “leadership communities.” The communities, consisting of representatives of no more than twelve parishes, meet four times with Simon over 18 months. His goal is to help them foster peer collaboration, new ideas, and strategies to build up the Church.

Simon acknowledges that he got the idea for “Parish Catalyst” from “Leadership Network,” a Dallas-based organization of evangelical churches. Bob Buford, a retired cable television entrepreneur, established Leadership Network in 1984. He wanted to identify and support pastors with innovative models of ministry. Leadership Network brings pastors together to share best practices. Buford inspired Simon, who wanted to take the model of Leadership Network from the Protestant to the Catholic world. Simon developed Parish Catalyst. *Great Catholic Parishes* lays out its underlying philosophy.

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<sup>5</sup> William E. Simon, Jr., *Great Catholic Parishes: A Living Mosaic: How Four Essential Practices Make Them Thrive* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2016). 178 pages + 10 pages of appendices, 10 pages of notes, and 4 pages of bibliography, for a total of 202 pages.

Published in 2016, Simon's book offers to show "how four essential practices" make great parishes thrive. The four practices are (1) shared leadership, (2) the fostering of discipleship, (3) an excellent Sunday experience, and (4) evangelization. Simon and his research team interviewed 244 Catholic pastors in the USA. The pastors were identified, Simon tells us, by experts – "diocesan offices, ministry leaders, and pastoral professionals." He asked the experts "to name healthy, vibrant parishes and the pastors who lead them" (p. 4). Anyone who has read *Rebuilt* or *Divine Renovation* will find no surprises among the recommendations in Simon's book. In a "great" Catholic parish, the pastor consults with his staff and councils, challenges his parishioners to become disciples, celebrates the Sunday Eucharist with joy and beauty, and makes the parish a place of welcome and hospitality for newcomers. Bill Simon's "four essentials" reflect the practices championed by Mallon and by White and Corcoran.

What makes *Great Catholic Parishes* distinctive is its willingness to apply contemporary managerial practices to the parochial setting. Simon advocates, for example, a "management by objectives" approach. If the parish hopes to foster a deeper spirituality among members, it must define spirituality as a goal and define objectives for reaching the goal. Every parish initiative should contribute to it. The "initial step in disciple making," Simon writes, "is the decision to align all programming and training in such a way that every parish opportunity begins and ends with encountering Christ" (63). Encountering Christi becomes the criterion by which to judge all parish programs and educational efforts.

The "great" parish, having defined spirituality as a goal, wants to know whether it is achieving it. There are vendors that will help the parish do just that. Simon recommends a service of the polling company, Gallup Inc. Gallup's Member Engagement (or "ME") Survey aims, according to its website, "to empower faith communities to measure, manage, and maximize spiritual engagement." In short, Gallup will measure a congregation's spirituality quotient. That measurement provides a baseline. Whenever a parish makes efforts to deepen its members' spirituality, it will survey the members to see if its efforts were successful. The parish wants to know if it is reaching its goal.

Traditionally, Catholics would offer a retreat or parish mission to heighten spirituality. Simon has a newer approach. He concedes that, "The idea of creating a survey that can measure spiritual development and then provide parishes with a branded product or kit to track and increase an individual's or a community's spiritual growth is a recent one" (81). In the past, Catholics did not survey parishioners about whether the parish mission contributed to a deeper spirituality. Simon's approach may be recent, but it is becoming more popular. He profiles other authors or organizations (apart from the Gallup survey) that offer to track spiritual growth. Once a parish defines spirituality as its goal, concludes Simon, then it should seriously pursue it, measuring whether it is meeting the goal or not.

If every parish event "begins and ends with encountering Christ," in Simon's words, how is this to happen? He argues that ready-made programs for parish renewal can facilitate the encounter with Christ. Simon lists 14 different programs to nurture discipleship, including "Alpha," the evangelization course endorsed by Fr. James Mallon, and Simon's own "Parish Catalyst." In short, a "great" parish's spirituality depends on

proper management. According to Bill Simon, strengthening discipleship is a matter of (1) making it a goal, (2) allocating resources such as the cost of a ready-made program, (3) implementing strategies, and (4) revising them as needed. *Great Catholic Parishes* approaches discipleship and evangelization as investments that will pay off, if only pastors make them a priority.

Let's take a few moments to reflect on the contributions of Michael White and Tom Corcoran, of James Mallon, and of William Simon. Each of them wants to contribute to the new evangelization. What are their strongest contributions? What questions do they raise?

### Conclusion

Having looked at the books by White and Corcoran, by Mallon, and by Simon, what can we say about "entrepreneurial Christianity"? All three authors regard the pastor as an entrepreneur who aims to increase the size of his congregation by good management practices.

In *Rebuilt's Church of the Nativity*, the authors targeted a specific demographic, the 18,000 people in their zip code who did not attend any church. White and Corcoran believed that, if they could attract young married men to the church, their wives and children would follow. The parish defined its mission, not in terms of traditional Catholic sacramental practice, but in terms borrowed from Saddleback's Rick Warren, namely, "to reach the lost and grow disciples through a focus on worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, and evangelization." Although the authors met resistance from parishioners and staff, their program of transformation and life-change succeeded after a period of "attrition" (during which they lost parishioners). The growth of the congregation from 1,400 to 4,000 testifies to their success.

Father James Mallon's *Divine Renovation* offers another example of entrepreneurial Christianity. He wanted to revive in people's hearts a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. People must confess their own sinfulness, so they can acknowledge the mercy of God. But Father Mallon became frustrated as he discovered that his homilies were not moving people to repentance. So he turned to the Alpha course, first developed in the Anglican parish of Holy Trinity Brompton, as a means of evangelizing his own people. Alpha inspired him to see, as he put it, that "The Lord is faithful, and the product, Jesus, is perfect and faithful" (248). Alpha has helped him bring the perfect and faithful "product" to his own parish of St. Benedict in Halifax. In that way he changed the old culture of maintenance to a culture of mission.

William Simon's *Great Catholic Parishes*, our third example of entrepreneurial Christianity, explains the theory underlying parish entrepreneurship. The "great" parish is one that manages itself by objectives. In such a parish, leaders define greater discipleship as a goal that can be achieved, objective by objective. In order to measure the achievement, the parish assesses its members, using a product like Gallup's Member Engagement Survey. That establishes the parish's spirituality quotient. Then the parish can take advantage of 14 or more ready-made programs to nurture discipleship, including Simon's own Parish Catalyst as well as the Alpha Course. After that, the parish can again measure the spirituality quotient. Achieving greater discipleship and a larger



congregation are goals. The parish practitioner of management by objectives charts the stages by which the goals are met.

We need to ask, by way of a conclusion, about the meaning of new evangelization. Each of our authors identifies the concept of “new evangelization,” at least in part, with increasing the size of the congregation. The *National Catholic Reporter*’s John Allen described the danger of this oversimplified approach in 2013. “In a nutshell,” reflected Allen ironically, “The ‘New Evangelization’ is about salesmanship. The idea is to move the Catholic product in the crowded lifestyle marketplace of the post-modern world.”<sup>6</sup> But this characterization – the identity of new evangelization with “salesmanship” and the gospel with a “product” – is deeply offensive. Allen was right to criticize it. Christianity is more than one among many products in the crowded lifestyle marketplace. There is a difference between the new evangelization and salesmanship, and we have to see what the difference is.

The genius of entrepreneurial Christianity is its practical and empirical approach. Entrepreneurial Christians are right in many respects. They argue that praise for the new evangelization is mere lip service unless it is followed by activities that do in fact increase the size of congregations. Entrepreneurs want to know whether they are gaining or losing market share. This is important, and honesty demands that we look at it.

The danger of a practical and empirical approach, however, is that it focuses on the things that can be measured, such as the size of a congregation or responses to a questionnaire. It is indeed a comfort to find empirical evidence that we are achieving what we desire. And the sight of more people at Mass, not to mention a larger collection, may persuade us that evangelization is truly happening.

What we desire at the deepest level, however, is an encounter with God. That is a metaphysical reality that resists empirical measurement. The connection between a genuine encounter with God and the empirical evidence of member surveys and collection totals is at best indirect. Father Michael White and James Corcoran, Father James Mallon, and William Simon all emphasize practices that have empirical results. Tonight, during the season of lent, it is good to recall that deepest truths cannot be measured empirically.

Archbishop Gomez has called for a “stronger ecclesial commitment to new evangelization.” But he does not explicitly link evangelization to empirical markers, such as larger congregations and higher collections. Instead, he speaks of evangelization in traditional terms that reflect the metaphysical nature of faith. We are, the archbishop says, “to renew the love we had at first for Jesus Christ” (5). We have to grow, he adds, “in our knowledge of the gift of God we have been given” (8). We must “play our part,” he concludes, “in the great story of salvation that God is writing in the history of the nations” (15). Evangelization is hearing the word of God and taking it into our hearts. That is primary. External signs (such as higher attendance and income) may express the reality. Very true. But the reality of God’s word comes first.

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<sup>6</sup> John Allen, “What’s this ‘new evangelization’ thing, anyway?” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 7, 2013.