

CITIZEN



# CITIZEN

Your role in the alternative kingdom

ROB PEABODY

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To Medea,  
Whom I love with a passion that time only  
strengthens.  
You are my beloved bride and best friend,  
and there is no one I would rather be on this  
journey with than you.



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## **Preface**

# A Citizen's Awakening

### **Jerusalem – March 2008**

Sitting out on the balcony of our hotel overlooking the Temple Mount and the Old City of Jerusalem, I experienced a moment of clarity that, unbeknown to me at the time, would change the course of my life.

This vision, calling, supernatural moment of God-given clarity – whatever you are comfortable calling it – was very clear that night, and it was so fitting that it occurred in the “Holy City.” For centuries this special city was drawn on maps as the very center of the world. This was the place where the presence of the Lord resided in the Temple within the city gates, the city that for the people of Israel was their prize and possession, and the city where the King of the universe was murdered ... and on this night, it was a place of breakthrough for me.

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My friend and mentor, Robert, had brought me to Jerusalem for a guys' sightseeing adventure, and we had definitely enjoyed ourselves in Israel. A few days in Galilee, an afternoon floating on the Dead Sea, and a bit more time spent exploring the centuries of history in the ancient city were all coming to an end. And here we were on our last night in the country taking some time to reflect, share, and open our hearts in a way that never quite seems possible amidst the routine and demands of "normal" life at home.

Back home in Dallas, Texas, I was a twenty-six-year-old pastor at a mega-church who was newly married and had just graduated with my Master's degree from seminary. Put simply, I was in way over my head. I had left university with an undergraduate degree in business and had felt a leading (through a number of different circumstances) into full-time vocational ministry. So, with a diploma in my hand, I moved back home to Dallas and took a job as a summer youth intern in one of the nation's largest churches. I realized two things that summer: one – there is no way that I could survive more than a summer as a youth pastor, and two (a little more edifying) – I was falling in love with the local church.

The next autumn found me enrolled as a Master's student at our local seminary and serving at that same church as the university minister, working predominately with young people aged eighteen to twenty-five. For the next three years I walked the tightrope of balancing classes and

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ministry, found the best friends whom I still cherish to this day, married my beloved wife, and started to learn what it looks like to serve others and point people to Jesus amidst the brokenness and baggage that we all inevitably end up carrying. It was amazing. I still look back at those years and consider them the best of my young life.

Upon graduating from seminary, I was pulled into our senior pastor's office and given an opportunity that completely blindsided me. The offer was this: move to the church's newest community campus (think church plant on steroids) and lead the efforts there as pastor of a new church full of young families, and be mentored in the process.

"Are you serious? You want *me* to lead this new church? I'm so young; are you sure?" After some heavy reassurance and confidence bestowed by our pastor, I was off to serve all the generations at this new church – not just university students.

It was weird at first. I was twenty-six, the youngest on the staff team, yet the supervisor of them all. I still consider it a heavy dose of grace that God placed me with such a humble and honoring team on this campus, who overlooked my youth and lack of experience and believed in me and the mission God was calling us to as a church. Our first Sunday brought in close to 2,000 people. So many showed up that we had to place them in "overflow" seats in the hallways while they watched what happened in the worship center

via video. I quickly learned how to manage the crowds and work the systems so that we could accommodate such a large number of people in worship each week and maximize our staff and worship space. We were off to an amazing start. It was incredible that so many people were encountering Jesus each week and being changed by His power and gospel... and then it got messy.

I lasted for about a year.

The exhilaration of seeing so many people encounter and worship God each week, the numerous small-group Bible studies that we were starting, and the adrenaline rush of Sunday-morning worship made it all seem more than worthwhile. But no matter how many people encountered God each weekend, how much affirmation our team received, how many people walked through the doors of our church during the week, and how much life change was reported, I felt this nagging uneasiness that I was selling out.

This all came out during our conversation on the rooftop in Jerusalem.

As Robert and I discussed, dissected, and analyzed what was going on and where I was at, it became clear that I was not satisfied with what I was inevitably devoting my life to. I was essentially getting paid to manage a staff, run executive management for a church campus, and be the up-front face of a mega-church system in the buckle of the Bible Belt. Don't get me wrong – there is nothing wrong with the

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seeker-sensitive, attractional model of church. Indeed, God is using it to accomplish amazing things for His glory. But, for me, there was something missing that my soul craved. And as we talked that night, overlooking the Dome of the Rock and the eerie golden tint that it projects onto the night sky, I knew that something had to change. I couldn't carry on in this way.

Robert continued to ask thought-provoking questions that felt like blades aimed directly at my heart. Not blades that were intended to cause harm, but the more gentle sculpting kind that we all need to have directed our way from time to time. As we cut our way down to the core of who God had uniquely created me to be – the skills, passions, giftings, desires, hopes, and dreams – it finally all came together for the first time.

God was giving me a vision for His church, a vision that later came to be known as the Awaken Movement.

Upon returning to Dallas and re-engaging in my normal routine, I found myself one day in our worship leader's office, sharing this newly discovered vision. Joel and his twin brother, Mark, had started a band that had toured much of the U.S. in the early 2000s as a Christian worship band, but had reduced the amount of traveling and playing to focus on their families and serve the local church. Joel and I were becoming great friends, and shared many passions, burdens, and views on life and the church. This specific day

in Joel's office, he began to tell me about his most recent trip to South Africa. Joel explained to me that, somewhere amidst serving the poor in Port Shepstone and worshipping with local believers from a thriving church in the city, he had had a revelation that he had known about for a long time, but which had never been shown to him in this way before. He described the disparity between the "Haves" in the city and this specific church, and the "Have Nots" just across town.

I remember him recounting how the people across town had nothing: they lived in an impoverished box (shanty) town that was racially and socioeconomically segregated from the "Haves" across the way. Joel's heart was broken by this injustice and he was racking his brain trying to figure out what he could do to make a difference in the lives of these people, to be a part of the solution. As he poured out his heart in divulging the details of this most recent experience in South Africa, his longing to be used in our church context in the suburbs of Dallas for something greater than his current position, and his God-given experiences with music in the past, something clicked.

God was awakening not just one heart, but two...

So here we were, two young guys leading a mega-church community campus in a middle-upper-class suburb, with a new multi-million-dollar building, a mass of people, and an uneasiness that there was more to be learned and taught about what it looks like to follow Jesus on our patch. We

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decided then and there in Joel's office that God was granting vision and clarity to both of us, and it was high time that we moved on from mulling over our joint frustrations to action. This newfound passion and insight into the gospel of Jesus was transforming us so that we were no longer satisfied with the status quo. The Spirit was laying out the pieces of the puzzle and fitting them together in a way we had never seen or experienced before. We were ready to shake things up both in our lives and in the lives of the people in the church. God was instilling in us a holy discontent and calling us to live for more, to be part of seeing change in our community, to get caught up in something so much greater than our individual lives, and to lead people to see Jesus honored from Monday to Saturday and not just for an hour on Sunday in our worship services. It was time to get uncomfortable.

We scheduled a meeting with the mayor of our community and told him about our new local church, explaining who we were and then asking him a pointed question: "What do *you* see as the greatest needs in our community?" We further explained that, as followers of Jesus, we were meant to be passionate about what He is passionate about, and that we were learning as a church that we should be disadvantaging ourselves for the benefit of others. We expressed our hope of beginning to play a part in righting the wrongs of sin and injustice in our community, but admitted that, in our current state, we were fairly closed-

mind and oblivious to the needs around us.

You could tell that we had caught him off guard. He looked briefly around the room and then, in a very matter-of-fact way, said, “Do you realize there is a Title 1 school two miles from your church?”

“No,” we replied, quickly followed up by, “What is a Title 1 school?” He went on to explain that a Title 1 school in the State of Texas is one in which at least eighty percent of the student population is on government assistance. Owing to the poverty levels of the families it caters for, a Title 1 school is provided with federal funding as a means of preventing “at-risk” children from falling behind academically. We ended our time with the mayor by offering our help and support to the community and adding that we would try to develop a relationship with this nearby school. We told him of our desire as followers of Jesus to begin meeting these needs, and that the church should (and now would) be actively involved in addressing the concerns that came across his desk.

As Joel and I left our meeting with the mayor, we discussed the fact that, as individuals and as a church, we felt we had become blinded to the issues and needs right in front of us in an effort to win the world. In effect, we had “missed our Jerusalem.” You see, as a church, we were doing a lot of great things. People were attending worship services by the thousand, many were “being saved,” and people were taking a step forward in their relationship with God through

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baptism; discipleship programs were being led, Bible studies formed, and youth activities attended, and prayer ministry was taking place. We had a strong presence in China, South Africa, Russia, and other faraway countries, giving financial support, sending mission teams, and coaching people. But it now dawned on us that, despite all of this busy ministry within the church, when we looked across the street or two miles down the road, we were overlooking the needs and injustices in our own area. We had very little contact with anyone in our community who did not look, act, or behave the way we did. God was opening our eyes to the sobering reality that we had missed our “Jerusalem.”

In Acts 1:8, after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, He is with His disciples for forty days, teaching and showing them signs of the resurrection life, before He ascends to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. His last words on earth are: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>1</sup>

With this new God-given realization, we sat down with the principal of this nearby underprivileged school, who turned out to be a friend of a friend and a fellow follower of Jesus. God had definitely set this up. Chris had been serving as a small-group leader at our central church location. He welcomed us in, loved the idea, and facilitated a relationship between our campus and his elementary school. We were off

1 Acts 1:8 (NIV).

and running. A year later, as a church we were supporting the families connected to the school by running financial counseling seminars, mentoring initiatives, school clean-up days, and family fun days, donating school supplies, Christmas gifts and meals, coaching soccer teams for boys whose dads were not involved in their lives, undertaking landscaping projects, and offering encouragement to the teachers and other staff – anything we could do to play a part in alleviating the brokenness that this school represented for this cross section of the community. What made this different from the humanitarian efforts or government involvement that the school had seen in the past is that we did it because of the love of Jesus, in the power of Jesus, and for the name of Jesus, with no expectation of any form of payoff or credit because of the work.

We tried to play an active part in the lives of the families of this school and what ensued was the reclaiming of our “Jerusalem” for our church. We were engaged in an awakening (on a small suburban level) of the people of our church, and we were learning that when Jesus steps into our lives and begins to transform who we are through the power of the gospel, we in turn are released and sent out to engage with and transform the community around us. It was so life-giving.

Joel and I continued to envision an awakening of people’s hearts and lives to the greater story of what Jesus

was up to in the Gospels. Somewhere along the road that is evangelicalism in the Western world, we have either heard or been taught a gospel of individualism, or what I like to refer to as “Golden Ticket Theology” (think *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*).<sup>2</sup> There are many different variations and streams of this gospel, but it generally goes something like this:

You were born into a sinful and broken world, which is bad, and you are a sinner. God is good and has a wonderful plan for your life. You need to trust Jesus so that you can go to heaven when you die.

– *Person trusts Jesus and receives salvation* –

Now that you are saved from hell you need to learn to start sinning less while you wait either to die or for Jesus to come back (whichever comes first), so that you can escape this bad, sinful world. Go to church, be a good person like Jesus, and if it comes up and you are comfortable with it, tell the other poor people who don't know what you do how they can escape hell too.

Of course it was never spelled out this way and I am somewhat oversimplifying, but this was the essence of the

<sup>2</sup> *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, Warner Bros (USA), 30 June 1971.

functional gospel that I had learned about while growing up, and which countless others still believe today. When we mix the egocentrism that is a cultural staple in the Western world, in which the individual “I” functions as the center of the universe, with a gospel of “If I died today, where would I go?”, this is the most logical and probable theology that develops.

Let’s set out a hypothetical scenario with a man named Frank, using this pervasive theology that we find in the West.

Frank is a great guy. He married his university sweetheart right after graduation and has two young kids. He has a good job in the city and a nice house in the suburbs, goes to church every week, and is involved in a home group with his wife and other young married couples, where the kids go along and play while the adults have a Bible study. In his spare time, he coaches his son’s football team, works on the house, and plans family holidays, all the while watching his financial portfolio in order to provide in the best possible way for his family. Outsiders would look at Frank’s life and say that he was a great family man, a good neighbor, and a moral person. Squeaky clean – not very much you could get mad at him about.

Frank goes to church, tithes to the church, is involved in a small group in the church, and even talks to people about his church when asked. But when you start digging deeper, below the surface, most of the things Frank does are

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either cultural norms, or what he would be doing anyway. His unspoken priorities are being comfortable, pursuing security for himself and his loved ones, and raising his family properly. Frank mostly hangs out with people like himself, people whom he understands and can relate to, and is somewhat uneasy (even fearful) when forced to be in new situations or to mix with others outside his “world.” At the end of the day, as long as he and the people he cares deeply for are taken care of and happy, he is content. He knows where he is going when he dies, is raising his children in the church, and along the way is trying to be the best Frank he can be.

Frank is an amazing guy, but there is a problem with Frank.

Frank doesn't get it. He has not allowed Jesus' gospel to permeate his being. Instead, Jesus has become an add-on when Frank has run out of options on his own, a go-to in times of trouble. Frank is trying to live the “Western dream” and bring Jesus along for the ride as well. His unspoken mantra is “Be a good moral person, sin less, take care of your family, and you will be taken care of by God.” According to Frank, God is a moral, white, middle-upper-class guy who lives in the suburbs, doesn't drink, and votes Republican.

Sadly, Frank represents the majority of people I have met in the church in the West.

Would Jesus and Frank be friends? My assumption

is that Jesus would befriend Frank at first, but, in time, He would ask more of Frank than he was comfortable with giving, and soon enough Frank would go back to managing his 401k.

When we first hear about the good news of Jesus and how we, in our sinful brokenness, can be reconciled to the righteous God of the universe by faith in the work of Christ on the cross, we encounter the most incredible news in the history of existence. By God's grace, we become partakers in eternal life with Him. This gospel brings life, restoration, relationship with God, and heaven. The mystery of God that has been revealed to us gives us a future and a hope, and in this we find joy and peace. But, all too often, salvation can become the Golden Ticket in our lives. It can be reduced to a "Get out of hell free card" (think Monopoly), which, once received, gives us eternal life, and then we end up in a holding pattern, waiting to die or for Jesus to return so that we can redeem our free ticket to heaven. Sure, we may do some nice things in our seventy to eighty years (God willing) on this planet, but what we are really banking on, what we are really looking forward to, is the moment when we get to escape this godless society full of pain and suffering, to share eternity with our Maker. Not a bad thing to look forward to at all. However, this kind of thinking is only half the story.

If the Christian life is only about escaping this world when we die, then I have an idea. Here's what we should do.

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When people come forward for baptism, we should do them a favor. The minister should ask the new believer if it is their testimony that they have placed their faith and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, and then he or she should gently put them under the water – and hold them there – till the bubbles stop! The way I see it, if life with Jesus is all about escaping the world, then the most loving thing we can do for people is to send them straight out of it and on to heaven.

Yes, Jesus died to save you *from* something (hell and eternal separation from Him), but He also died to save you *for* something.

And it is in the *for* something that Jesus invites us to add action to our faith. A quick glance through much of the New Testament and all of Paul's letters reinforces this point. We find that these writings not only speak of our future life with God in eternity, but also speak very practically and realistically about the resurrection life that we are now invited into through our salvation. In Colossians 3:3, Paul reminds us that we have died, and our lives are "now hidden with Christ in God."<sup>3</sup> Paul is being very clear here: you, follower of Jesus, are no longer the old you. You have been fundamentally changed, endowed with Christ's righteousness, restored, brought from death to life, and made new, and are in the process of being transformed into the image of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> And it is in this process of transformation,

3 Colossians 3:3 (NIV).

4 Ephesians 2:4–5; Romans 6:5–10.

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in which you grow and become more and more like Jesus, that you take on His resurrection life and live as resurrected people in a world that is far from Him. Practically speaking, transformed people transform things. I fully believe that the Enemy would delight in nothing more than congregation upon congregation of professed Christians going through the motions, ticking the boxes of attending church, singing the songs, talking the talk, and then going home Sunday after Sunday with a pat on the back and little to no change in the way that they live during the rest of the week. This is not what Jesus died for! God did not subject Himself to humiliation, torture, and crucifixion so that His bride could meet in His name, and then leave impotent with regard to impact on the world.

The Jesus of the Gospels is calling us to so much more.

I now find myself living with my family in London, England. It's been five years since my Jerusalem rooftop experience. We have left our beloved family and friends, our community, our church, in a sense our identity, our comforts, and our thorough understanding of a culture as insiders back in the United States. We made the move to the UK in January 2011 to follow the call that Jesus has on our lives. He is worth it. I don't want to be like Frank – I know I easily could be. But the greater joy, I am finding, lies in complete abandonment to Jesus and His Spirit's leading.

We moved to London to lead Awaken in a post-

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Christian missional context. That basically means that we are seeking to follow and live out Jesus' way of life among people who are far from God and who would never set foot in a traditional church, and invite them into a community that "does life" together as the people of God. It is within this community that we debunk and deconstruct their preconceptions of a church and a religion that they don't really know much about (other than the fact that they reject it), and then reconstruct a biblical view of Jesus and His bride.

We lead different missional communities throughout the week in London, and the rest of our time is devoted to spearheading the efforts of the Awaken Movement. What started with a local church congregation opening their eyes and waking up to the needs in the community around them in the suburbs of Dallas led to a few more churches with a heart to move beyond their walls and do the same. Pretty soon, we realized that the Spirit was moving and had been bubbling up and creating this tension in countless others. As I write, I am overwhelmed by what God is piecing together – from Dallas to Nashville to New York to London to mainland Europe, a collective of compelled and talented musicians, pastors, photographers, designers, filmmakers, songwriters, authors, students, businessmen and -women, and missionaries, all with a passion to be part of a new creative approach to bringing together the needs of our broken cities

and the change that bursts forth from a renewed community – the church. Out of all these people’s efforts, the Awaken Movement was born with a desire to come alongside the local church and provide it with resources for action.<sup>5</sup> Our hope and desire is to see a generation of churchgoers inspired by the gospel to live as agents of change right where they are in their communities and cities.

You might be thinking, “That’s all well and good, but that’s not for me right now... that’s not where I am.” And if that is where you find yourself at this moment, I can relate to it. I’ve been there myself. Over the past five years, I have met countless believers who feel stuck in their attempt to live the Christian life. The life that Jesus has called them to and the life that they are currently living don’t match up. Don’t get me wrong: they want it to. They want the abundant life that the Gospels speak of, but in the church they currently attend, with the friends they surround themselves with, with the lifestyle they are pursuing, it doesn’t come easily. And after a few failed attempts they settle for mediocrity in their relationship with Jesus.

After all, we have heaven in the bag. Anything else that could come from this relationship is just a bonus, right? At times we will feel guilt, frustration, uneasiness, dissatisfaction, and lack of fulfillment. These emotions subside, but we can’t ever get rid of them completely. They are always lurking in the depths of our souls, because God

5 More info at: <http://awakenmovement.com>

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won't give up on us. We know deep down that there has got to be more. We may not know how to find it, but we have hope that it is possible.

Have *you* ever felt this way?

You are not alone.

It is time to reclaim *your* "Jerusalem." I know that you may not know how to, and that's OK. It's not by accident that you are holding this book, and my prayer is that God will use it to take you on a journey that will begin to put some of the pieces together. There is an awakening happening in the church in the West. From the United States to the United Kingdom and into mainland Europe, God's Spirit is moving hearts to never again be satisfied with status-quo Christianity. This movement is not led by a personality or a strategy, but by the God of the universe Himself.

It will take a reimagining of your life, a repositioning of what you value, a re-identifying of who you are, and a recentering on the true King of the world. It will be hard at times, then sweetly exhilarating and right at others. In the end, you will find the life that you were created to live: a life so extraordinary and full of joy that you cannot even fully comprehend it right now; a life not wasted, a life that goes beyond just you, and a life that gives worship and glory to the One who is worthy. The Father is standing with open arms, inviting you in to experience all that He has created and called you to be. You have been saved for this, and now

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it is time to claim it.

“I came so they can have real and eternal life,  
more and better life than they ever dreamed of.”

**Jesus<sup>6</sup>**

**Rob Peabody**

London

<sup>6</sup> John 10:10 (*The Message*).

# 1

## A Citizen's Identity

"We know what we are, but not what we may be."

**William Shakespeare**<sup>7</sup>

"If you'd asked anybody in the Roman Empire, from Germany to Egypt, from Spain to Syria, who the 'son of god' might be, the obvious answer, the politically correct answer, would have been 'Octavian'."

**Tom Wright**<sup>8</sup>

I have been living as a foreigner in a different kingdom for the past three years. On January 2, 2011, my wife, Medea, and I, along with our son, Liam, drove to the airport escorted by our family with a one-way ticket to the United Kingdom.

<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Wright, *Simply Jesus: Who He Was, What He Did, Why It Matters*, p. 29.

We had sold every material thing we owned except for the belongings that would fit into suitcases and some large containers that could go in the baggage compartment of the plane. We had left behind our home, our cars, the dogs, furniture, our jobs, and, most importantly, the relationships that had formed a large part of who we were and still are to this day. As we stepped through security and into the terminal, we reminded ourselves that these loved ones were not gone, but just further away. As I looked over at my wife, I could sense that she was feeling the same as me: excited, nervous, unsure yet confident that this was what we were supposed to be doing; adventurous, hopeful, and alone.

We had been preparing for this moment for the past year, but it didn't change the fact that when we finally stepped out and acted on our decision a certain degree of anxiety came with it. Add to all those emotions the fact that a week earlier we had found out that we were expecting our second child (Tate), just as we were finalizing all our arrangements amidst the craziness of packing to move 4,759 miles across the pond. Needless to say, it was a bit of a hectic week.

London was cold, gray, and dreary when we arrived at Heathrow that morning... imagine that! Luckily we had bought our first proper winter coats, something I had never had a reason to own in the previous twenty-nine years of my life, before leaving Texas. After having had little to no sleep during the night on the plane (try telling a two-year-old that

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he is supposed to go night-night sitting upright surrounded by strangers), and with our new coats on, all our earthly belongings strewn across multiple luggage trolleys, and a jittery excitement at all that was new, we were on our way to our new home. We arrived, tried to figure out how to work a radiator, and immediately passed out from exhaustion after the previous day's ordeals.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and the promise of some sort of spring was all we could hang on to when we hadn't seen the sun in what felt like forever. Note to those reading: if you live in a sunny climate and plan on moving to a cold, northern climate, don't do it in the dead of winter. Trust me. Vitamin D deficiency and seasonal depression are very real things. Actually, it wasn't quite as bad as it sounds. Once we learned how to layer our clothes, drink tea, and bought rainproof boots, everything was much more pleasant.

When I look back now, my first year of living in a new city, among new people, in a country that was not my own, was a time of processing and dealing with stated and unstated expectations. I didn't realize how many unspoken expectations had traveled with us on that plane. This first year in London was a time of searching and re-understanding... everything. I've explained it this way before: imagine waking up one morning in a new home in a new community, with no friends and no understanding of how things work in this new

world in which you find yourself. You would probably begin to operate and order your new life based on what worked and didn't work in your previous one, but when you figure out that your new land is similar, but at the same time very different, it can leave you curious and excited for a while, but once that subsides, you can easily find yourself feeling frustrated and misunderstood.

This is what happened to me.

Many people graciously sat down with me and tried to help me make sense of what it means to live on the other side of "two nations divided by a common language," for which I am very thankful. But no one could really help me explain to Londoners who I am or what I do. Let me explain. In the "Bible Belt" of America, it is still an honorable and somewhat prestigious position to be an ordained minister in the church. People want to meet with you and value time spent with you; they feel as if you help them learn and understand more about God, and in turn, they love and take care of you. In fact, I'm ashamed to say I have played the "pastor" card on more than one occasion back home to get out of sticky situations or to ask for special favors, and it always worked. Being a pastor in Texas was a good thing, an honorable thing, and in many circles could even become a celebrity cult-of-personality thing. In Western Europe, not so much.

I tried identifying myself as a minister in England,

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but quickly realized that being seen as the first American government minister in the UK, although humorous, didn't actually explain correctly who I was or what I did. Next I tried "pastor," which doesn't really translate in a post-Christian society. "Like a vicar" sort of explained my role, but no one could get past my not being sixty-five, wearing a collar, and dressing "trendy" (their words, not mine). After many other failed attempts, the best of which was international spy, I settled on being the director of a Christian charity called Awaken. And by the end of year one, I loved the city, appreciated her people, and realized I was having an identity crisis.

Something happened when we set up our lives in a new country. Our perspective changed. The bubble I had lived and played in for my entire life in a single city in Texas had been popped, and now, for the first time, I was able to look with fresh eyes not only at my new city, but also at the one from which I had come. Leaning into this new perspective and then analyzing what it required of my life raised a number of questions that I had not really dealt with before. Do I think the things I think, believe the way I believe, and act the way I do because:

- A) I am an American?
- B) I am an American Christian?
- C) I am a Christian (regardless of my citizenship)?

As I began to work through these different scenarios, it became very clear to me that the way I thought, believed, and acted was a big mix of all three categories. My worldview had been shaped by living in Texas, being raised and attending church in the “Bible Belt,” and learning and trying to implement the life and teachings of Jesus as one of His followers. Back home, all this was normal. I just went about my day making decisions, having conversations, and living life in a way that was sociably acceptable and encouraged by others who looked, thought, and acted pretty much as I did – people whose lives were somewhat similar to mine. As a serious follower of Jesus, a seminary graduate, and a “professional Christian,” I sincerely hoped that my worldview was continually being shaped by Jesus – that it was the foundation upon which other facets of my life and the lenses through which I viewed the world rested.

But, as I began having conversations in London with those far from the church who had no understanding of my faith – and effectively *could not* understand because they had never been in my previous world – I realized that my worldview and identity were being seen through each one of the above-mentioned lenses. No matter how hard we try to see things only from the perspective of “What would Jesus do?”, our historical and personal context helps to interpret and answer that question for us. Therefore, simply asking what Jesus would do is a relative question that will be

answered on the basis of the perspective these lenses bring.

These issues of worldview really come into play when we begin to examine Jesus in the Gospels. What did Jesus really mean when He said that the “Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve?”<sup>9</sup> What did He want the people to hear when He prayed, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven?”<sup>10</sup> Why did the Jews think the way they did when Jesus showed up healing on the Sabbath, rebuking their esteemed officials, and seemingly disregarding the rules and customs of the Jewish faith that had been followed for thousands of years? Why was it that the Romans eventually executed Him in the same manner that they would use to rid themselves of a status-seeking slave or an attention-hungry rebel leader?

To begin to understand the intricacies of Jesus' life – what He believed, and the way He moved about among the people, spoke out, and acted – which give us insight into how we should live our own lives as His followers, we must look at Rome.

As Richard Horsley so eloquently put it in his book, *Jesus and Empire*, “Trying to understand Jesus' speech and action without knowing how Roman imperialism determined the conditions of life in Galilee and Jerusalem would be like trying to understand Martin Luther King without knowing how slavery, reconstruction, and segregation determined

9 Mark 10:45 (NIV).

10 Matthew 6:10 (NIV).

the lives of African Americans in the United States.”<sup>11</sup> It was the Roman empire that single-handedly determined the conditions of life in Israel when Jesus lived and inaugurated His mission. He lived in and under the rule of this society. And without knowledge of what life was like under the rule of the empire, we cannot see and interpret clearly what the God-man was really up to during His earthly time in Israel.

Rome was the capital city of a vast empire, and is regarded as one of the birthplaces of Western civilization. People have inhabited Rome since the year 753 BC and it was the Roman empire that had risen to become the most powerful civilization in Jesus’ day. Not only did Rome wield supreme power, but its ruler – the emperor – was viewed as God on earth.

Rome expanded its territories and its rule by the sword, burning villages, enslaving any able-bodied people who opposed it, and killing the infirm ones.<sup>12</sup> The Romans were the ones to be reckoned with by the time Jesus stepped onto the scene, and as part of their quest for world domination it was not uncommon to hear stories of the complete annihilation (in the most extreme case) of cities under their rule.<sup>13</sup> Polybius, the Greek historian who lived around

11 Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Kindle Locations, 188–189), Kindle Edition.

12 Richard. A Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Kindle Locations, 206), Kindle Edition.

13 Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Kindle Locations, 239), Kindle Edition.

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200–118 BC, is recorded as saying, “It seems to me that they do this for the sake of terror” when commenting on the methods used by the Romans to achieve their destructive dominance.<sup>14</sup> By the first century AD, Rome had enslaved millions, killed countless souls, and terrorized and oppressed so much land that the boundaries of its empire matched those of the known world. Rome was a true superpower.

Caesar Augustus is credited with finally bringing peace to the empire, by means of the *Pax Romana* (Latin for Roman Peace) in 27 BC, which lasted for about 200 years. Augustus ruled at the time of Christ's birth, and this is where we find the backdrop to the nativity story.

Augustus, originally called Octavian and adopted by Julius Caesar, was the one who rose to prominence at this time. He put an end to large-scale military conflict and the empire experienced relative peace for two centuries. With this came great pomp and power. Horsley comments, “Acclaimed throughout the empire as the ‘Savior’ who had brought ‘Peace’ to the whole world, Octavian took the name ‘Augustus’ (‘Revered/Highly Honored’) and ‘restored the Republic.’ In the process he also established his own effective rule as emperor.”<sup>15</sup> In 42 BC, Julius Caesar was deified as “Divus Iulius” and Octavian (his adopted son) added the title “Divi Filius” to his name, which means “son

14 *The Histories of Polybius*, Book 10.

15 Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Kindle Locations, 276–277), Kindle Edition.

of the deified one/god.”<sup>16</sup> This title implied religious status but was used as a propaganda tool to increase his political authority.

There is an inscription from the Provincial Assembly of Asia, dated 9 BC, that tells of the emperor and the creed that accompanied his “divine” honor and glory. It reads as follows:

The most divine Caesar... we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things... for when everything was falling [into disorder] and tending toward dissolution, he restored it once more and gave to the whole world a new aura; Caesar... the common good Fortune of all... The beginning of life and vitality... All the cities unanimously adopt the birthday of the divine Caesar as the new beginning of the year... Whereas Providence, which has regulated our whole existence... has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving to us [the emperor] Augustus, whom it [Providence] filled with strength for the welfare of men, and who being sent to us and our descendants as Savior, has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and [whereas,] having become [god] manifest

16 Henry Furneaux, *Tacitus: Cornelii Taciti Annalium Ab Excessu Divi Augusti Libri Introduction*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1884. I: 63–66.

(phaneis), Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times ... in surpassing all the benefactors who preceded him ... and whereas, finally, the birthday of the god [Augustus] has been for the whole world the beginning of good news (euangelion) concerning him [therefore let a new era begin from his birth].<sup>17</sup>

Did you get that?

Caesar Augustus was viewed throughout the empire as the savior who had brought peace and prosperity to the known world. The beginning of all things and the one who brought life and vitality had set all things in order, fulfilling the longings and hopes of all mankind. He surpassed all others in glory and was the beginning of the good news, and now it was time for a new era. He was the “son of the god,” and his birthday would be adopted as the new beginning of the year worldwide.

According to the Romans at this time, their savior and lord (Emperor Augustus) had announced his new world order and was inaugurating his empire across the lands. He was to be honored, he was to be worshiped, and to believe or trust in any other was treason and blasphemy. This message was “carved in stone, on monuments and in inscriptions, around the known world: ‘Good news! We have an Emperor!’

<sup>17</sup> Source: the inscription of the decree of the Provincial Assembly of Asia, OGIS 2, 458, quoted in Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Kindle Locations, 318–324), Kindle Edition.

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Justice, Peace, Security, and Prosperity are ours forever! The son of God has become King of the world!”<sup>18</sup>

For someone living in the first century when all of this was going on, it was of incredible value to be connected somehow to the emperor. If you could not rise to become one of his entourage of officials, then the next best thing was to be connected to him as a citizen of the empire.

In fact, in that period, class and status were the two most important factors governing society. If you were a citizen of the Roman empire, you belonged to the elite ruling class: you were connected to the emperor, the savior. And as a citizen of the empire you would receive protection, certain privileges, liberties, and a status that outsiders (i.e. everyone else in the world) did not have. You could make a will, sue people, marry, vote, travel, and enjoy numerous rights in an era when universal human rights did not exist.<sup>19</sup> Your citizenship of the empire guaranteed you many rights and privileges that all non-citizens – pilgrims, migrants, foreigners, slaves, and everyone else – did not and could not have. In fact, it was assumed by the empire that if you were a slave or an outsider (a non-citizen), you were a thief or a swindler, and that if asked a question you would not tell the

18 Tom Wright, *Simply Jesus: Who He Was, What He Did, Why It Matters*, p. 30.

19 Rowan Williams, “Outsiders and Insiders,” lecture podcast. Holy Week Lectures on St. Paul at Canterbury Cathedral, April 2–4, 2012.

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truth.<sup>20</sup> To obtain citizenship of the empire, either you had to be born into a family of citizens, or (for a very small minority of the extremely wealthy) you could buy your way in – and everyone else was out of luck. Therefore, there were only two types of people: citizens and everyone else.

Let's stop here and think about all this for a moment. If this short excursion into first-century Roman history has taught us anything, I would suggest it is this: to the people of that time, citizenship or the lack thereof was of extreme value and importance. And as it was so central to the way society operated, it was natural that citizenship should become a matter of security and identity. With all of the societal pressures surrounding this matter, if you were lucky enough to be a citizen of the empire, your identity and security would be completely bound up in that. If you were not, that would significantly influence how you and everyone else saw you. I know it is hard to think in these terms today, because our world operates primarily on equality and the acceptance of people with different nationalities, backgrounds, occupations, religions, and so forth, but if we can suspend our own reality and try to place ourselves in the shoes of those living during the time of the empire, what we would find is a society in which everything came down to citizenship. Are you or are you not a citizen? Who are you? Where do you come from? Whom do you worship?

<sup>20</sup> Rowan Williams, "Outsiders and Insiders," lecture podcast. Holy Week Lectures on St. Paul at Canterbury Cathedral, April 2–4, 2012.

I had a great uncle who was very much into genealogy. You know, ancient family-tree stuff. You probably have one too; every family seems to have someone in it that really enjoys digging into the lives of those who have gone before. I guess it gives them a sense of belonging or ties them to their roots. As the old saying goes, “You will never know where you are going until you know from where you have come.” In my family this is a big deal: well, more of a joke big deal than a for-real big deal, but nonetheless, our genealogy pops up as a topic of discussion quite often when we all get together for family holidays and trips. You see, there are two types of people in my immediate family: those who are descended from the passengers on the *Mayflower* and those who are not.

My parents discovered a while back that, on the Peabody side of their heritage, there was a man who left England (London, actually) aboard the *Mayflower* – the famous vessel that transported 102 English Pilgrims to New England in 1620.<sup>21</sup> This means that some of our family are members of a prestigious society in America, the General Society of Mayflower Descendants, or, more commonly, the Mayflower Society. You might be impressed by this, but, trust me, you shouldn't be. All it means is that you have the ability to pay dues to the society and then take a tour of their museum. But when our family gets together, this is one of the jokes that will inevitably come up.

21 Holmes, Abiel, *American Annals of A Chronological History of America*, Vol. 1, Cambridge: Hilliard, 1805, p. 199.