

Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times by Os Guinness, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL: 2014. (38 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. The Gospel Can Change Today's World

These questions come together with a sharp question for Christians in the global era: Can the Christian church in the advanced modern world be renewed and restored even now and be sufficiently changed to have a hope of again changing the world through the power of the gospel? Or is all such talk merely whistling in the dark—pointless, naïve, and irresponsible?

Let there be no wavering in our answer. Such is the truth and the power of the gospel that the church can be revived, reformed, and restored to be a renewing power in the world again. There is no question that the good news of Jesus has effected powerful personal and cultural changes in the past. There is no question too that it is still doing so in many parts of the world today. By God's grace it will do so again even here in the heart of the advanced modern world where the Christian church is presently in sorry disarray. [page 14]

2. Trusting God During the Dark Times

Any solid response must be considered as it is confident, so that in what is genuinely a dark time for the church, our trust in God and in the gospel may be a warranted trust **and not whistling in the dark.** [page 14]

3. The West Seems Weak and Unsure Today

The West has beaten back the totalitarian pretensions of both Hitler's would be master race in Germany and Stalin's would-be master class in the Soviet Union. But it now stands weak and unsure of itself before its three current menaces: first, the equally totalitarian, would-be master faith of Islamism from the Middle East; second, the increasing totalitarian philosophy and zero-sum strategies of illiberal liberalism; and third, the self-destructive cultural chaos of the West's own chosen ideas and lifestyles that are destroying its identity and sapping its former strength. [pages 18-19]

4. Chaos Beyond Recovery

Soon, as the legalization and then normalization of polyamory, polygamy, pedophilia, and incest follow the same logic as that of abortion and homosexuality, the socially destructive consequences of these trends will reverberate throughout society until the social chaos is beyond recovery. We can only pray there will be a return to God and sanity before the terrible sentence is pronounced: "God has given them over" to the consequences of their own settled choices. [page 20]

5. God's Work Done God's Way

But that transforming power is precisely what must be understood all over again, re-experienced and demonstrated once more in our time. The dynamism of the gospel and its relationship to culture must be understood and lived out on its own terms, whatever the challenges today. If the critics and the cynics are to be proven wrong, God's work must always be done in God's way to see results that are worthy of God's reality and greatness. The present moment is urgent, and there is little time to lose. [pages 21-22]

6. West Dominance Is Dying

With the newly awaked ancient powers of China and India on the rise, the Middle East in convulsions, and the long slumbering continent of Africa stirring with new promise, the days of unquestioned Western dominance are numbered. In a universe billions of years old, and compared with civilizations that lasted for thousands of years, five hundred years of dominance is a small achievement anyway. But even on our smaller human scale, we can recognize the old age that is dying, but not the new one that is being born. [pages 22-23]

7. The Christian Church in a Sorry State

After half a millennium of dominance, the West is being eclipsed in the global era, the United States as the lead society in the West stands on the verge of relative if not absolute decline, and much of the Christian church in both Europe and North America is in a sorry state of weakness, confusion, unfaithfulness and cultural captivity. [page 24]

8. Dishonoring God and Truth

As Daniel was warned centuries ago, such times breed self-appointed hotheads who attempt to fulfill self-generated visions, but only succeed in falling on their faces and dishonoring the cause of God and truth. Let us not make that mistake again.

Faithfulness and orthodoxy need never be frantic. Christian extremism is little better than secularist or Muslim extremism. [page 25]

9. The Christian Faith Will Be Influential

The world to come will be shaped by the fact that it is truly global, as the many global trends and challenges converge and interact as never before. No serious Christian can ignore the realities and challenges of globalization.

The second factor is less obvious. The world to come will be shaped by whether the worldwide Christian church recovers its integrity and effectiveness and demonstrates a faith that can escape cultural captivity and prevail under the conditions of advanced modernity—or does not. After all, religion will always be decisive in culture, just as

culture is in politics, and as the most numerous and diverse faith on earth, the Christian faith is bound to be influential in the future one way or the other—either through its faithfulness or its failure. [pages 25-26]

10. God Is the Source of All Power

God is sovereign over the course of history and the rise and fall of powers. As the book of Daniel reminds us again and again, “It is Heaven that rules.” (Daniel 4:26) God is the ultimate source of all power. All human power is therefore derived, limited, unstable, and transient. There is always an “after you” that marks the terminus of every great power and the transition to the next. That is true not only of Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, but of every modern empire, superpower and great power too—the United States included. God gives power and God takes away power, especially from the arrogant. We have nothing that we did not receive, and even over the highest, strongest and most enduring that we humans ever achieve, the ancient wisdom still holds true: “This too shall pass.” [pages 26-27]

11. The Future Lies in God’s Hands

The final factor in the future is unknown but sure: It lies in God’s good, strong hands. [page 27]

12. Christians Having Courage to Confront

What we also need is a constructive overarching vision of Christian engagement in today’s advanced modern world, one that is shaped by faith in God and a Christian perspective rather than by current wisdom, and one that can inspire Christians to move out with courage to confront the best and worst that we may encounter. [page 27]

13. Having No Fear

What we do know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, is that we are called to “have no fear,” and therefore not to indulge in what is currently the world’s dominant emotion, fear. Nor are we to respond to the specter of crisis and decline with either nostalgia or despair. [page 28]

14. Trusting in God and His Gospel

We therefore face a common challenge as followers of Jesus in the advanced modern world. *It is, I believe, that we trust in God and his gospel and move out confidently into the world, living and working for a new Christian renaissance, and thus challenge the darkness with the hope of Christian faith, believing in an outcome that lies beyond the horizon of all we can see and accomplish today.* [page 28]

15. Returning to the Ways of God

What matters is that it is a movement that is led by the Spirit of God, which involves the people of God returning to the ways of God and so demonstrating in our time the kingdom of God, and not in word only but in power and with the plausibility of community expression. William Wilberforce captured the heart of such a Christian renaissance when –long before Mao Zedong—he said, “Let a thousand flowers bloom!” [page 29]

16. Modernity Done More Damage than Persecutors

The challenge lies in the equally simple fact that modernity—the spirit, system and structures of the world that have risen since the Industrial Revolution—has done more damage to the Christian faith than all the persecutors in Christian history, from Nero and Diocletian to Hitler, Stalin, Mao and the assorted tyrants of today. The seductions and distortions of modernity are in fact the central reason for the sorry disarray of the church in the Western world. [page 31]

17. Christianity Is the First Global Religion

To claim that the Christian faith is the world’s first truly global religion is not a matter of cheap triumphalism but of hard facts. There are other truly global religions, such as Buddhism and Islam. But Jesus of Nazareth has the greatest number of followers of any religion on planet Earth, the bible is the most translated and translatable book in human history, church are the most numerous social service agencies across the world, and in many parts of the world the Christian faith is the fastest growing (and most persecuted) faith—and growing through conversion rather than simply through birth rate. And again, all this at a time of momentous significance for the future of humanity. [page 33]

18. The Church’s Tasks for the 21st Century

For anyone who weighs the momentous significance of this situation, it highlights three major tasks the global church must undertake over the course of the twenty-first century: to prepare the Global South, to win back the Western world, and to contribute to the human future. These tasks go far wider than the immediate issue of a Christian renaissance in the Western world, but it is an inescapable feature of the global era that no task anywhere in the world can afford to ignore the wider challenges elsewhere in the world. These three global tasks must therefore form the horizon of our thinking about the more local issues and challenges we face in the West. [page 35]

19. More Christians than Communists in China

The growth of the churches radiating out of the Henan Province in north central China is said to be the fastest growth of the Christian church in two thousand years, and it is

now widely reported that there are more Christians in China than there are members of the Communist Party itself. [page 35]

20. The Global South Needs Discipleship

By the admission of their own leaders, much of the growth of the Christian faith in the Global South is (in the words of an African archbishop) “a mile wide and an inch deep.” Evangelism is exploding, but it has not been followed up with adequate teaching and discipleship. The result, as another African bishop said to me, is that “when my people hit a problem, they revert to their pre-Christian practices. A husband finds his wife cannot bear children, so he resorts to the witch doctor, or takes a second or third wife.” [page 36]

21. The Western Church Captive to the World

The overall challenge of modernity is summarized in the gravedigger thesis—the idea that the Western church was the single strongest source of the ideas that shaped the rise of the modern world, yet the Western church has become culturally captive to the world to which it gave rise. In so doing, it has become its own gravedigger³. [page 37]

³See Os Guinness, *The Last Christian on Earth: Discover the Enemy’s Plot to Undermine the Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2010).

22. Conforming to the World

At the heart of the crisis of the church in the advanced modern world, we need to recognize how modernity has had the effect of shifting the church from an integrated faith to a fragmented faith, from a stance under authority to a stance of preferences, and from a supernatural sense of reality to a purely secular perspective.

The effect is what matters. To use the famous words of St. Paul, much of the Western church today is “conformed” rather than “transformed”(Romans 12:2). [page 37]

23. The Health & Wealth Gospel

The vilest is the distortion of the gospel through American-style health-and-wealth theology, with its prosperity doctrines and their vicious exploitation of the unsuspecting poor. The logic and dynamics of this shameless twisting of the gospel run parallel to those of witchcraft and are equally as distressing and outrageous. [page 38]

24. God Overall

Again and again, prophets such as Elijah and Isaiah posed three essential questions to Israel: Who do you worship? (God or the gods?) In whom do you trust? (In God or in the superpowers and military might?) And how are you to serve God in your times?

(Through power or through trust in God despite weakness?) Wrong answers to these questions, such as a reliance on a census, spelled disaster for Israel. [page 39]

25. Occupied with Numbers

America as the lead society in the modern world is awash with numbers and metrics, and with statistics, opinion polls, surveys, targets, pie charts, scorecards, big data, game theory and measurable outcomes—all at the expense of the true, the good, the beautiful, the faithful and the significant—and at the expense of God too. Numbers and the mania for metrics are therefore a critical element of secularization. Crucially for Jews and Christians, the Bible shows the link between statistics and self-trust, and our founding commands include the Sinai admonition: You shall not follow the masses [the crowd, the many] in doing evil” (Exodus 23:2). Called to be a separate and distinct people, our call is to the “narrow” rather than the “broad way.” For followers of Jesus, the voice of the people must never be taken as the voice of God. [page 39-40]

26. Attuning to Popular Approval Rather than God’s Authority

Who can hear themselves think, let alone make sense of it all with genuine reflection and seasoned judgments?

No wonder it is tempting to give up and go with the flow, rushing along with the crowds and sweeping past the best as we chase after most. It is all too easy to get caught up in the sensational and forget the significant. Those who make this mistake miss the important for the urgent and become attuned to popular approval rather than divine authority. [pages 41-42]

27. Measurable Outcomes

And now, to make the idolatry of numbers worse, our earnest and scientifically rigorous Christian foundations lean on us heavily and require that we provide “measurable outcomes” for every project, plan, and possibility that dares to knock on their door, when often the desired outcomes are quite unquantifiable, at least in advance, and at other times we can only fill in the application forms with wild guesses, wishful thinking or down-right fabrications. In short, with their unfailing encouragement and blessing, we are invited either to deceive them or deceive ourselves and become so schooled in the art of lying and gaming their system to get their money. And what does the leadership of the Holy Spirit have to do with any of that? [page 42]

28. Looking Horizontally, Rather than Vertically

We therefore need to trace the overall damage of such worldly thinking. It develops Christians with an eye for the quantitative rather than the qualitative, for externals rather than inner reality, for performance rather than relationship, for the shallow rather than the deep, for evangelism in terms of the number of “decisions” rather than

discipleship and growth in character, for the bandwagon rather than the Bible, for popularity rather than principle, and with a greater sensitivity to horizontal pressure **than to vertical authority.** [pages 43-44]

29. Jerusalem, Samaria, and the Uttermost Parts of the Earth.

The simple reason why we in the West have a duty to seek to win back the West is that it is our “Jerusalem,” and every generation of Followers of Jesus must begin to obey the Great Commission in their own Jerusalem as well as going out to the “uttermost parts of the earth.” To Christians in the West countries such as Korea and Kenya are the uttermost parts of the earth, just as we are the uttermost parts of the earth to them. But the West is our Jerusalem, our home base, the center of the concentric circles that make up our wider world. We are therefore called to go to our Jerusalem as well as to the uttermost parts of the earth. [page 45]

30. The Gospel Changed the West

What those of us who are European Christians must acknowledge humbly is that when the Chinese and other peoples in the world had reached a high level of civilization, we were still barbarians and we might still be barbarians apart from the gospel. It took the gospel of Jesus Christ to tame our barbarian violence and unite our warring continent. For the intrepid missionaries who sailed forth from Ireland in flimsy coracles, or who journeyed up from Rome under the second St. Augustine, brought both the gospel and its fruits. Along with the gospel, they brought the Scriptures, then literacy, then education, and all the gifts of the gospel that later on were to lay the foundations from which Christendom was built.

We have much to learn from both of these earlier mission to the West, but the point is that we stand in the dying light of the second mission whose great highlights over the centuries have included Christendom, the Reformation and the Great Awakenings. Our challenge is to shake ourselves free from the natural despondency of those who look only at circumstances and at the statistics of decline and gloom. (Like America itself, American Christians are slavish devotees of opinion polls and far too obsessed with statistics, when what matters are the “whys” and the “wherefores” rather than the “what.”) The West has been won twice before, and now it appears that the West has almost been lost a second time. So now, partly in response to the courageous faith of those who achieved it twice before, but more in response to the Great Commission itself, it is time to set our minds and hearts to win back the West to our Lord again. [page 47]

31. Winning Back Societies for the Lord

What matters here is that we Western Christians helped undoubtedly by our fellow Christians from across the world, must turn from the prevailing gloom and doom and

set about the glorious task of winning back our societies and nations for our Lord.
[page 48]

32. Unshakeable Trust in God

But the biggest global challenges of today and tomorrow may prove to be of an even greater magnitude. Tackling them will require an unshakable trust in God that can face any future without fear, a profound intellectual seriousness that is willing to wrestle with problems that are unprecedented in human experience, a constant reliance on God's spirit for fresh and creative imagination to conceive of what has never yet been, and an untiring perseverance that will be worthy of the heroism of the greatest reformers of the past. [page 49]

33. Those Christians Who Came Before

That is the formidable task to which the next generation of Christians must commit themselves. They will know that they are standing on the shoulders of the giants who have gone before—grateful for the prophet Amos and his stand on behalf of the poor, for Telemachus and his life given to the end the horror of the gladiatorial games, for Bartolomé de las Casas and his outrage against the conquistadores for their treatment of the Native Americans, for William Wilberforce and his lifelong struggle to abolish slavery in the British Empire, for Lord Shaftesbury whose tireless compassion and industrial reforms made him the “poor man’s Earl,” for Florence Nightingale and her revolutionary contributions to the rise of modern nursing, for Martin Luther King Jr and his costly triumph in the Civil Rights Movement, and for all the nameless host of Jewish and Christian social reformers whom they represent. [page 50]

34. Christianity Gives Humanity

It is certainly arguable that apart from Jesus, no culture and no civilization could have certain qualities that are unique to him and his teaching. In that sense, Emil Brunner in his Gifford Lectures stated his firm conviction that “only Christianity is capable of furnishing the basis of a civilization which can rightly be described as human.”¹ It is also arguable, as Friedrich Nietzsche among others has argued, that there will be inevitable consequences if a society rejects the Christian faith that has been its inspiration and foundation.

¹Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilisation*, vol.1, Foundations (London: Nisbet & Co., 1948) p. v.

35. All Humans Made in God’s Image

“All truth is God’s truth,” as St. Augustine and other early Christian writers taught, for even when and where God is acknowledged, the fabric of truth is one and indivisible, and its source is the God of truth. And whatever they believe, pagans and enemies of

God included, all humans are made in the image of God and are therefore capable of being good, discovering truth, creating beauty and achieving greatness—whether they acknowledge God or not. [page 57]

36. The American Way of Life Not Jesus' Way of Life

A striking symptom of the church's problems in the West today is the fact that in a country such as the United States, Christians are still the overwhelming majority of citizens, but the American way of life has moved far from the way of life of Jesus—which means simply that the Christians who are the majority are living a way of life closer to the world than to the way of Jesus. In a word, they are worldly and therefore incapable of shaping their culture. [page 60]

37. Culture Creation Requires Time

In short, we must foster a robust discipleship with a faith worthy of our Lord—with a reach as high as the awe and majesty of God, as deep as the depths of the Scriptures, as rich as the stories and lessons of history, and as wide as the infinite varieties of the worldwide church. Unquestionable, culture creation requires time and perseverance. It is not a matter of harvesting mushrooms but of growing oak trees. [page 62]

38. Advancing God's Kingdom

All Christian cultures will be flawed like the Christians who create them, and as we shall see, our aim should always be to advance the kingdom of God rather than create culture. But on the other hand, Christian faithfulness will always have cultural consequences, if only as a by-product of Christians following the call of Jesus and aiming for higher and other things. [page 63]