

NEW JERSEYIANS

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1. Robert, a common man, more familiarly known as Bobby.

To the people of God that is in New Jersey.

I would love to share with you some of my thoughts and learnings over the past five years. To those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, I hope this letter can be an inspiration for your relationship with the magnificent, Creator God.

2. One of the greatest lessons I learned is Sabbath. In the past, Sabbath was equivalent to Sunday. Sabbath meant going to church, singing songs of praise, listening to a sermon, and then going to the fellowship hall to eat a delicious Korean stew made by some amazing grandmas and ahjoomas.¹ There was no need to learn about Sabbath because Sabbath was a day filled with activities. However, Sabbath is so much more.

In the beginning, God created. God created the mysterious expanse of the universe stretching beyond the lens of our most advanced technology. God created nature—the breathtaking, majestic mountains of Jasper, the far-stretching seas from the Jersey

shore, the soothing bustle of the flowing Athabasca river. God is the creator, designer, painter, organizer, architect, and musician. God worked to create a beautiful, wild, and living creation—not a million-piece Lego set. After God created, after the work, God ceased.²

God stopped. Put the pencil down. Stopped typing. Stopped planning. Stopped organizing. God ceased the daily work of creating. Creating good. And looking at the work that God created, God said, it was very good. Then, God rested. God enjoyed creation. God enjoyed the work. Because of the special moment, God blessed the ceasing and resting and made it a special day. God anointed Sabbath.

God ceased. God rested. God blessed. God anointed.

My friends, this is Sabbath. It is observing and mimicking what our Creator is like in nature, essence, and behavior. Just like children observing and mimicking their parents. Observing Sabbath later became law with many traditions. It mutated. Jesus corrects the people of God reminding them that Sabbath is not for God, but Sabbath is for man.³ Sabbath is for you!

²Gen 2:2-3 The Hebrew verb can mean to cease and to rest.

³Mark 2:27.

It's not about what you do on a Sunday (or any other day for that matter) to worship God with modern-day burnt offerings. Sabbath is ceasing our daily work, the good that we create in all facets of life. Sabbath is resting. Resting because life is not just about work and creating. Sabbath is participating in a blessed and anointed moment. It is being like our Creator.

Sabbath is worship. It is worship because it is an act declaring the character of our Creator. It is worship because you let go of all the imaginary control you believe you have over your life and the responsibilities you claim. It is worship because Sabbath replenishes and fuels our whole being to continue work the next day. Sabbath is the power of our being. Sabbath liberates our bodies and souls. Sabbath is the greatest shalom God has given man.

To think it just meant going to church. It's a shame, no?

3. The second biggest lesson I am learning is about participation. Participation is a humbling act. It may be difficult for many of you—not to understand, but to accept and live out. Many of us have been taught that we are the center of the universe. We are the main

¹Korean lady, usually older mom.

author of our stories. We are the main character in the dramatic plot of life.

The individualism that blankets Western culture creates an extreme self-centered view. Then, the subtle first-generation Asian culture whispers in our ears that everything is up to us because our parents have sacrificed so much coming to a foreign country to find a more rewarding life. Dare I say, that the cultural milieu has seeped into our Christianity.

What is Christianity to you? My prior understanding consisted of something along the lines of the following. I am a horrible sinner. Jesus loves me and he died for my sins. Now I am forgiven. Because of Jesus' love and amazing grace, I ought to live my life reflective of God's grace and share this amazing story with others and bring them to church, so they too can be saved. This then becomes our personal and communal mission.

Friends, do you think something is missing from your life? Has being a Christian become boring? Do you feel unsatisfied about going to church on Sunday and the rest of the week is a battlefield until you step back into your safe sanctuary? Or perhaps you feel an uneasy weight, a burden of being a Christian. You feel pressure to be holy. You feel pressure to evangelize. You feel that your work is meaningless compared to the worship that takes place around the church.

This is because you have been living your Christian life with a truncated view of the gospel.⁴ You are living a hyper second-generation, Asian-American take on Christianity. So, what's the full story? Well, the Bible. But the particular lens to adopt is the question, what is the mission of God?

4. Have you ever wondered, what is the mission of God? The closest I came was wondering what was God's purpose for me. I never stopped to ask, what is God's purpose? Why did God create?⁵ When God is the main author and character, then it's pretty simple. God's purpose is to create a very good creation. Did you know that the creation of humankind was not the climax of creation? In fact, the creation of humankind was part of the good day of creating all the wild beasts!⁶ It was only when God completed creating that God declared all of creation very good.

The unique element of the creation of humankind is that we were made in the image of God. The special trait that humankind inherited from the DNA of our parent-Creator is a piece of the triune God's DNA. We were created in the likeness of God! Like every wonderful, well-behaved child, humankind

⁴I owe this refreshing perspective to Christopher Wrights, *The Mission of God's People* and *The Mission of God*.

⁵I have asked this question as an agnostic. It is easy to become an atheist with a self-centered questioning of God.

⁶Gen 1:24-27.

sure does a good job of listening and obeying. The rest of the story is a long history of the personal relationship God chooses to have with creation. Through God's incarnation as Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Man, we have the utmost personal connection and relationship with the Almighty. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are good news to the world because God loves the world. God loves all of creation. God continues the mission to redeem all of humanity, animals, birds, oceans, skies, stars, and light. God is creating a new, good creation.

Creation is wild. Especially these days. There are wars, rumors of wars, famine, drought, receding glaciers, extreme temperatures, undocumented weather patterns, pandemics, and shootings to name a few. I am glad that I am not the one responsible for taming this wild creation. I look forward to the new creation. No more tears, no more pain, no more death.⁷ I'm sure it will still be wild, but how amazing would it be to ride the waves of hurricanes and swing around in tornadoes! I am glad that God is the Creator. God is in control. God is on the mission of creating a good creation. Life is not my story. Life is God's story. My responsibility by the grace of God is to participate in the mission of God with the triune God. It is an honor and privilege to be able to participate. Imagine being asked to

⁷Rev 21:4.

brainstorm with Elon Musk to create the next big invention. Imagine your CEO asks you to come and plan for the next fiscal year. Imagine Andy Warhol allowing you to participate in creating his next NFT. Imagine the Creator of all creation, asking you to be in relation and participate in creating a new, good creation.

How do we participate? Well, as a by-product of the individualistic culture I was brought up in, I have only found the answer for myself. I participate by responding to the greatest commandment—to love God with body, heart, mind, and soul.⁸ In other words, how can I love God physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually? I choose to worship God holistically. I worship God by exercising and eating healthily. I worship God by providing hospitality to family, friends, and neighbors. I worship God through projects I undertake and books I read. I worship God through practicing Sabbath, singing songs of praise, and studying Scripture. The beauty of participating in this manner is that our responses will all look different. However, it is an equal challenge to obey the greatest commandment from Jesus.

As I first mentioned, I am still learning about participation. Currently, I am wondering what does this look like as a community? Though I believe we are in a post-Christendom,

exilic time in the West, there ought to be some form for the gathered people of God.⁹

5. The current predominant form of the gathered people of God is what many of you are familiar with the term, church. What is the church to you? Perhaps most would say the church is a community. But is it? How is the term church used most frequently?

“Let’s get ready for church. I need to go to church on Sundays. What church do you go to? Do you go to church?” And perhaps an increasing trend, *“I am leaving the church.”*

If the language we use shapes our imagination, then I would say that church seems like a place, event, and or a social club. I’m sure church leaders would argue otherwise. Their desire is for an organic, genuine community of followers and disciples of Jesus Christ. Yet, I think we get at best an open-invitation social club to increase membership and create false proxies of success and health measured through finance and attendance.

Let me be clear here. This form of the church can provide opportunities for growth and transformation. I have been fortunate to experience spiritual formation with and through the church I attended.¹⁰ I am grateful for the leaders and

community members that have and continue to live genuine, worshipful lives. My exhortation is two-fold. First and foremost, pursue a life of worship that encompasses the whole narrative of God. This would entail maturing from the two hours of milk-fed nurturing. The second is to be open and flexible to the changing times and know that while forms can change, nature and essence cannot.

What I mean by the form of the current church could be characterized as the institutional church. However, if we understand the church to first be an organism and then an organization, then it may be easier to identify with the church as being church rather than going or doing. Maybe even that is too heady. Church is an identity. In Greek, it meant called out ones. Today, I would suggest church means those in relation with the triune God. A caveat, I am still learning about this dynamic relationship and the mysterious nature of God. Yet, the small samples I have had are richer and more tantalizing than the watered-down grace stories of Jesus is my homeboy theology. Being the church means being in relation, in communion with God. As our relationship deepens and matures, our essence, nature, and character are shaped by this relationship. And then our actions and behaviors follow.

⁸Mark 12:30.

⁹I owe this perspective and language to Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile*.

¹⁰Do you see again how language shapes our relation to the terms we use?

I believe that personal growth and transformation will happen. And as we participate in the grand narrative of God with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, there will be new forms of the gathered church. Equally important to our identity is being the scattered church. We scatter to our homes and neighborhoods, our workplaces, and our places of leisure and fun. We can be salt and light in the world, not just in our gathered form.

In the Fall of 2019, my wife and I wanted to explore what it means to be the church. It was not just a mental exercise. While at first, it was a jarring experience, we have now found greater fruits of joy and peace. We have also experienced new challenges and trials. COVID-19 has accelerated the break from depending on centralized models of institutions. It is crazy to think it has been three years. We do miss certain elements of communal worship. But we find sustenance in other ways.

While I cannot say that our exploration is prescriptive, I would say it can be descriptive of a form of a holistic life of worship. To some, it may seem like we left the church. Can you really? That would be the equivalent of saying, I no longer have a relationship with the Almighty, Creator God! It is saying I am divorcing Jesus because I am no longer part of his bride. Friends, there will be many who will leave the church in this manner. I hope that you

will not. I hope the love and grace of God capture your hearts and imagination in new ways. Perhaps many more will leave the institutional church. I don't think that to be all that bad. I believe new forms that we haven't seen will emerge. Not just in grassroots, home-church movements that have all the same elements of an institution on a smaller scale. When home churches sprout and grow they simply turn into the same incumbent ship. I'm hoping that the Holy Spirit will gather the church, in the post-Christendom West, in ways that will mirror our King on a donkey, rather than rolling up in a Mercedes Benz.

6. One topic that I have a particular interest in that I found rarely talked about is money. Money touches every part of our lives. Every Christian has to interact with money on some level. Money is pursued religiously. Perhaps that is why Jesus warns you cannot serve both God and money. Yet, there is a scarcity in teaching about money. Perhaps at best, it is painted as the root of all evil, yet you ought to tithe it as a sacrifice unto God! I believe the lack of teaching stems from the lack of learning.

During my time at a graduate school of theology, there was a class on money. It was an elective, taught by a guest professor from Asia. The few students who attended were part-time and older. The class was in the late evening. Contrast

that with a core class like Old Testament Foundations. It is a mandatory class in the main auditorium packed full of students at prime time. Or a fairer comparison would be an elective on the study of Galatians, by a well-known professor. It was offered during the day time and many full-time students enrolled, eager to learn about the mystery of the written words of Apostle Paul. Are you getting the drift? Don't get me wrong again. Studying the Bible is a crucial task for Christians, especially leaders. My irk is that shouldn't these future teaching pastors and leaders have some training about money, the one topic that will influence all their congregants, including themselves?

To do a deep dive into the complexities of money would be too long here. I will briefly share a few things I have learned in praxis and in class. In short, I have been engaging with money more directly and intentionally since 2017. My learnings stem from an academic perspective and real-life practices.

First, money is not the root of all evil.¹¹ The way humans relate to it can be. It's an interesting concept that money exists. It has evolved in form over the years. It's an assumption that all primitive civilizations only used a barter system. Money has three main functions. It is a store of value, medium of exchange, and unit

¹¹1 Tim 6: 10 The *love* of money is the root.

of account. Many of you working pursue money to increase your store of value. This is primarily in the form of online bank accounts with little to no interaction with physical cash. Or perhaps some of you picked up old habits from your parents and store cash under your beds and kimchi jars!

This function of money interestingly evolved to not only be a store of value but a provider of it. So many of us hang our worth and identity based on how much money we make and how much money we have. We fall under the illusion that we control money by how we use it. Yet, money cunningly becomes our master dictating our lives. Perhaps this is a small glimpse into Jesus' warning. We ought to derive our identity and value from our Creator God, yet we fall victim to worshipping our own false gods of digital ones and zeroes on a computer screen.

Friends, money is important. My professor painted it best.¹² Money is like blood. We need money to survive, especially in our modern age. We must produce money like our hearts need to produce blood. How silly would it be if we tailored our lives to produce more and more blood? Is your purpose in life to make more blood? When our bodies are healthy and we produce enough, we aim our lives to greater pursuits and purposes. I warn you, don't fall victim and become a servant of

money. I encourage you to take stock of your life and evaluate what is enough. Be cautious of greed. Don't wait until you're too old to realize you have worked too hard to make more money only to be left empty and in despair.¹³ At the very least, go take a class on Coursera and learn the basics of personal money management.

7. Much more could be said on so much, but there are books and scholars for that or I guess these days there are tweets and vlogs. I do want to share one last reflection with you on technology. There is nothing new about technology. It is supposed to be a tool people use. There has been a lot of chatter about digital technology. I would love to share with you my papers, *Theological Reflection of a Vocational Dishwasher* and *Ideology of Technological Money*. But let's be real, who of you would want to read an academic paper.

TL;DR Technology (similar to money) is a tool humankind can use and master. If we are not careful, technology will master us.

My friends, I am not talking about artificial intelligence here. Technology already has mastery over us. We all know the perils of screen time. We yearn for the dopamine hits we get from our digital crack—mobile alerts and pings. Yet, smartphones aren't the issue. Perhaps these phones

are getting smarter because they are making better dumbhumans. Humans can use tools to their advantage. Or, humans are used to reinforce their existing habits and behaviors. When we blame technology for our shortcomings, we are no different than children who do not take responsibility for their decisions.

The cat is out of the bag. We let Pandora out of her box. No one is going to stop the advancements in technology. There are and will be a small handful who respond to these advancements in a monastic manner. But let's be real. They too are probably reading about the best monastic practices on their phones or laptops. Unfortunately, philosophers and theologians do not have a seat at the table. Mega companies will continue to thrive and create. I wish we could be part of the initial conversations and make an impact on the decision-making process. If there are people who understand and believe in the Christian meta-narrative and be a part of this elite, I encourage you to stay strong and lean in by adding wisdom from above in creative practices. Or perhaps influencing to the degree to ask, should we even create this or that?

For the rest of us, my plea is not to become reactionary people. The best response we have as followers of Jesus is no different than the crowds—nothing. Our behaviors and interaction with technology differ in no way. We

¹²Thank you, Professor Clive Lim.

¹³I encourage you to read *Top Five Regrets of the Dying* by Bonnie Ware.

simply react to the technological narrative unfolding. If we can harness a small portion of our energy and efforts to be more aware and intentional, I believe we can see beneficial differences. There are articles on a "new" movement on taking digital sabbaths. I'm not sure about the background of these authors, but let's not forget the original author of Sabbath. This one practical response to technology is something you can incorporate now.

The sea of innovation will pour torrents of developments—AI/ML, robotics, blockchain, and genetic editing are just a few of the big buckets. The reach of these disruptive technologies will be in every vertical and reach every crevice of your pockets. Be aware. If not for yourself, then most certainly for the next generation. I wonder what the gen-alphas will have to face in their time. Let's pray and hopefully participate in the unfolding narrative.

8. Beloved friends, I have left much to embark on this journey.

I have left work, house, cars, status, familiarity, comfort, community, family, and friends. Where I write now, people are puzzled about how I ended up in a small town after leaving New Jersey to Vancouver to here. I am occasionally entertained by the idea of where I am now, as well. People ask if I miss the big city and where I grew up. Every time, my answer is the same. I don't miss anything, but the people. I miss you.

Everything else was worth risking in light of what we gained on this journey. On the surface, our lives may not look that different. I ensure you, that our body, heart, mind, and soul have been and continue to change.

The biggest hurdle of being in one place, especially a place with such a strong-head, fast-paced culture, is that you don't have time to take a breath and take a look around. You also fall into the trap of a single-lens worldview. I assure you, the rest of the world does not think New York is the epicenter of it.

I know it is extremely difficult to change. My hope is not for change, but for one spark to ignite your imagination to picture a new, good creation. My hope is one spark will lead to another, creating organic desires to explore the infinite mystery of God and the beauty of creation. My hope is that you will find and taste the freedom of participation in and with God.

My friends, it seems so long since we last met. I am excited to be present with you again, to share stories, foods, and drinks. I cannot wait to embrace one another, something we ought not to take for granted especially after these times. Say hello to my brother, who may or may not read this letter. I wish for him to see and hear the love and freedom of our Almighty God. But even if he doesn't, please stop telling him "to come to church." Love him despite him doing so. My dearest brother, I love you no matter what.

Until we meet again, enjoy the process, for everything in life.

