



GREATER THINGS

The Work of the New Creation

Len Wilson

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bombshell of a book..."*
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GREATER
THINGS





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LEN WILSON



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Plano, Texas

GREATER THINGS: THE WORK OF THE NEW CREATION

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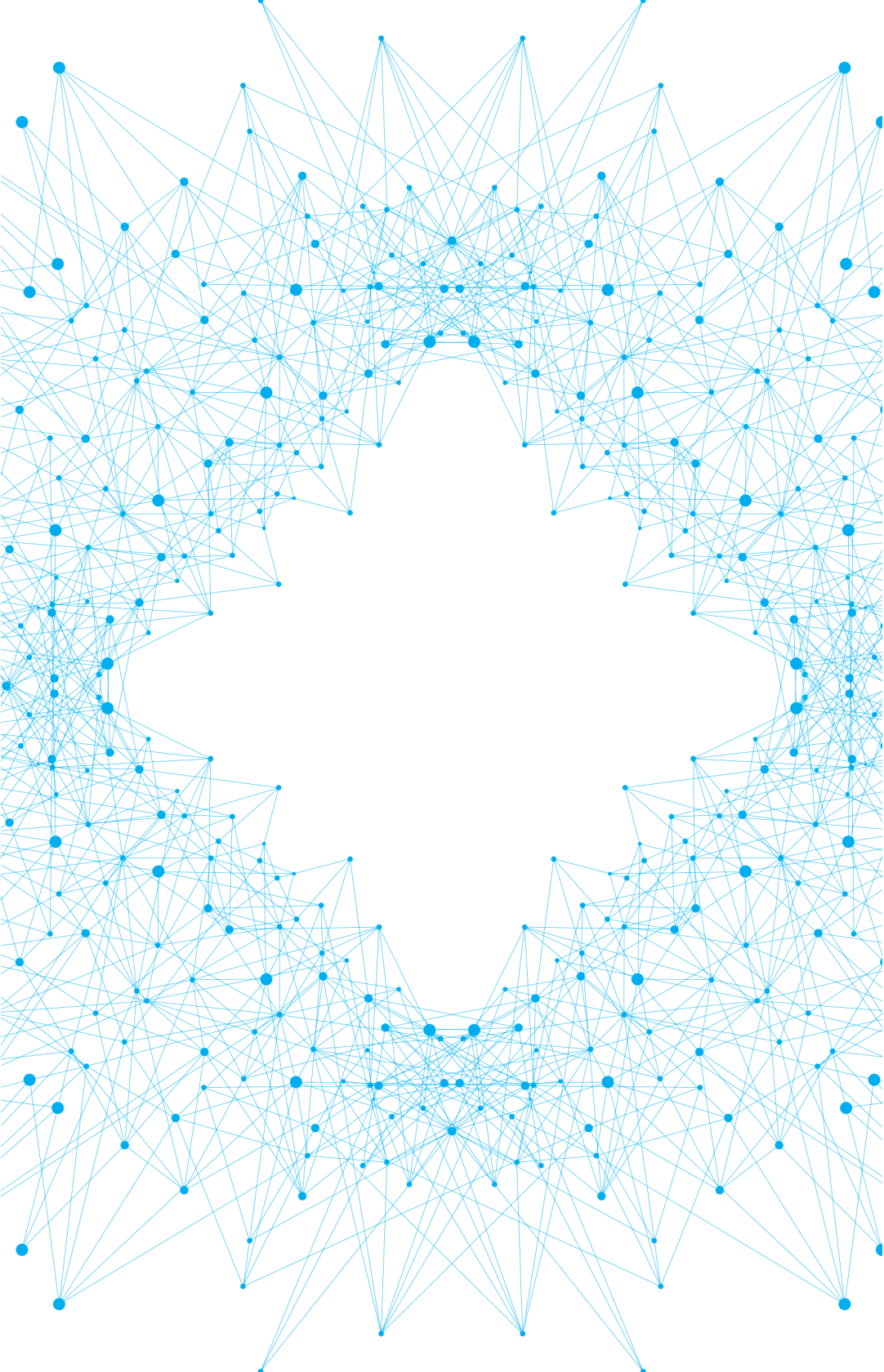
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*He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making all things new. Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."
—Revelation 21:5*





Introduction

How Do We Get Through the Current Cultural Crisis?

The coronavirus pandemic has been both a sudden stop to our daily lives and a catalyst for our long-developing sense of existentialist angst about the end of the world. If the world is truly ending, then all is moot. But we would be wise to explore the alternative: instead of the end of the world, perhaps we are merely living through the birth of a new era. The only way through our apocalyptic fervor is new thinking and innovative solutions to the major problems of our time. But not just any innovation will do. We need Christian innovation. As Christians, Jesus calls us to the work of God's New Creation with the seemingly absurd promise that we can do even greater things than he. This book is an exploration of the implications of this promise.

The Day the World Froze

Perhaps you remember what you were doing when the world froze on Friday the thirteenth of March 2020. The pandemic had begun months prior. Rumbblings of personal impact had been brewing in local and national media for weeks, and then—suddenly—we were at home, “sheltering in place.” Seemingly overnight, 87 percent of Americans quit traveling and 92 percent stopped gathering in public spaces.

The social and economic impact was immediate. Public life shut down; unemployment shot up. Century-old businesses collapsed, and new ones sprang up. An NBA player got sick and live sports abruptly ceased. The Olympics were postponed. Students were sent home from school with laptops. Live gatherings of people for worship stopped. Everyone learned how to video conference.

The 2020 triple whammy of the pandemic, economic recession, and racial reckoning will be remembered and studied beyond our lifetimes, as a year later, the consequences continue to ripple out in every sector of global culture. We are witnessing disruption to long-stable sectors of society such as business, government, education, and religion, in some cases for the first time in generations. In the United States, problems unleashed by this “big three” loom as large as those the country faced during a prior historic triple whammy—the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and World War II—in the 1930s and early 1940s.

Despite the very real struggles we face, the news is not all grim. For those who dare to think creatively, times like these are a rush of opportunity. Across the board, sectors of society engaged in innova-

tive thinking and alternative solutions during the initial wake of the shut down in April and May of 2020:

- Teachers created new curricula for students to engage in eLearning while teaching other students in person, and some wondered whether standardized testing might finally be on the outs.
- Car manufacturers converted factories into ventilator assemblies to keep COVID19 patients alive. Longtime retailers such as Brooks Brothers repurposed their factories from producing luxury men’s suits to front-line health workers’ equipment, although this didn’t prevent Brooks Brothers from filing for bankruptcy.
- Retail stores fully embraced digital point-of-sale systems, invented new supply chains, and installed solutions to increase sanitation and protect workers.
- Epidemiologists began researching how to use cellphones to help track the spread of the coronavirus.
- The film industry overhauled its theatrical release model by partnering with digital streaming providers to focus on immediate release.
- One city changed its bus service from cheap to free to help low-income residents.
- Symphonies began mixing instruments as they would in a studio to perform virtual concerts.

Sometimes, the innovation didn’t go well. One doctor got magnets stuck in his nose while trying to invent a way to keep us from touching our faces. But despite the occasional misstep, real creative change began to happen—the kind of change that, post–coronavirus, may light up the next twenty to forty years the way new technologies in the 1930s and 1940s drove economic and cultural resurgence in the 1950s and 1960s.

Of course, none of us could have predicted this at the end of 2019. The events of 2020 may be cumulatively, to use the phrase

coined by cultural theorist Nassim Nicholas Taleb, the biggest “black swan” disruptor to our culture since the end of World War II. It is tempting to attach cosmic significance to the events of the year, as some rushed to do in the wake of the initial shutdown. While some claim these changes are era-defining, this remains to be seen and will not be understood for years. Are changes happening right now confined to the specific problems they address? Will we solve coronavirus and go back to the way things were in 2019? Or have we left the past behind, and are we now crossing a liminal Rubicon to a new, unknown future? Are we witnessing a cultural revolution?

Hook Me Up a New Revolution

It may be difficult to assess the magnitude of a moment as it happens. Some consider the pandemic a problem to be solved, after which we will return to “normal” life. Yet societies have weathered other, similarly lethal, pandemics with much less hoopla, which suggests that the pandemic zeitgeist is a signifier of larger cultural trends.

A common response has been to describe the events of 2020 in apocalyptic terms. Indeed, a defining theme of the millennial generation has been the imminent demise of Western civilization. The public polling firm Rasmussen has monitored weekly the question of whether America is “headed in the right direction” since 2009. In no single week of ten years of polling have a majority of Americans answered this question in the affirmative. Before the 2016 presidential election, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks commented that pessimism was “just en vogue.” While “Obama ran on a traditional message that America is progressing,” by electing Trump, American voters seemed to repudiate “progress,” or at least Obama’s vision of it. The threat of climate change, the rise in global population, ongoing frustrations about equality, and other seemingly intractable problems have stymied Western society. One commenter noted that the data on the state of our culture is grim, with “two diverging trend lines: one upward-sloping, for people, and one sloping downward, for everything else.”

Philosophical narratives have likewise provided few signs of optimism. While the Enlightenment offered a positive framework for the world based on values of science, reason, humanism, and progress, the controlling theme of postmodernism has been deconstruction and the dismantling of shared stories and belief systems. For a while, belief in science remained a shared Western cultural narrative, but now this too has come under attack. As a result, the public today finds it hard to believe in anything.

Nihilism and even anti-natalism have emerged. A *New York Times* editorial suggested that human extinction might not be such a bad thing. A curator at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art suggested that the "human species is hurtling toward extinction," and the best we can do at this point is "design an elegant ending." A movement called "Birthstrike" advocated that women do not have children because of the dangers of climate change. Others suggested that, not only is it preferable not to bring new humans into the world, but it is also better not even to be alive. Such death wishes may seem like ravings, yet they came from United States congressional representatives. When American politicians trade championing great societies to inferring the end of society within a half-century, it would seem we have removed the proverbial finger from the dike keeping culture from existential collapse.

Given the mood of the century, 2020 is a Hollywood sequel: same story, more explosions. We have a unique stagnation today of material problems and philosophical dead ends. The events of 2020 are best understood in the context of a larger cultural spirit of existential angst that has been growing for the last generation. The state of culture during the entire twenty-first century has seemed a harbinger of the apocalypse. If the world is truly ending, then all is moot. But we would be wise to explore the alternative: instead of the end of the world, perhaps we are living through the birth of a new era.

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Eras have mile markers, but the events that lead to them come over time. The guns of August that started World War I were a defining moment of the twentieth century. Yet the cultural develop-

ments that led to it went off like a series of underground bombs. For example, Virginia Woolf wrote, “on or around December 1910, human character changed.” In her observation, there was nothing particularly spectacular about that month, just the shifting ice flows and drifts of new thinking, which had gradually taken over old, frozen foundations, subsuming habits like a rising ice tide. New thinking was on the move, overtaking the romanticism of late modern life. We reached the “tipping point,” as journalist Malcolm Gladwell says, which launched the start of the modern age. Soon the world was at war.

Circumstances build to obvious moments that propel us forward into new eras. In one of the famous books of the twentieth century, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn claimed that epochal change doesn’t happen in small, incremental doses; it comes as a result of significant crises that force us to acknowledge the inadequacies of old theories and to go about the work of forming new theories. Such work is painful and disorienting and not something we enter willingly. It happens only due to circumstances that are forced upon us. As I write in August of 2020, social media memes joke about the “2020 Bingo Card.” While the pandemic, racial turmoil, and economic recession take up three large squares, all sorts of other anomalies, from killer hornets to alien spaceship sightings, add unusual color to the board. Some call it a *revolution*, suggesting that old ways are gone, and the new have come.

The word revolution, however, is clichéd. For the past fifty years, advertising executives have used the rhetoric of revolution to sell everything from automobiles to laundry detergent, and, in the process, have melted down the idea. As the Foo Fighters sing, “Hook me up a new revolution, / ’cause this one is a lie.”

In its proper usage, revolution is specific. Kuhn defines the term as “non-cumulative developmental episodes in which an older paradigm is replaced in whole or in part by an incompatible new one.” It may also include significant political or economic change. It is often violent. Like the boy who cried wolf, our culture is finally experiencing a true revolutionary moment, but after generations of linguistic

poaching in service to the acquisition of goods, we may be missing the rollout.

To consider the coronavirus as a revolutionary moment does not mean that there is no connection between the old and the new, as some innovation scholars suggest. If anything, crises such as the coronavirus are accelerators for emerging cultural trends that leap forward in importance as the value of existing structures fade.

In this moment of significant cultural change, it is critical to observe culture through a spirit of innovation. Those who are already considering or implementing new ideas benefit from crises, while those traditionally resistant to new ideas find themselves at even greater odds with change.

Many continue to act as though we can just wait for a vaccine and return to life as normal, but there is no going back. Incompatibility is a key term in Kuhn's definition of revolution. The game changes, to use the idiom. Various sectors are realizing this shift. For example, the rise of video conferencing is predicted to have a permanent impact on the airline industry, as the painful but necessary corporate \$1,400 next-day airfare ticket will not return.

The world froze in 2020, and it is impossible to go back in time and space to where we were before the pandemic began. The longer the pandemic stretches on, the more evident this becomes. You don't often see the damage from a freeze as soon as it happens. It is only later, when things thaw out again, that cracks become visible. As the events of 2020 thaw, we will together survey the damage it did to our comfortable, late modern existence. Return will be impossible. We are crossing an ice flow. The ground on which we once stood is shattered, and we must step over into a new world. The alternative is to float away on an old, broken piece of ice. The freeze and thaw have created a crack in our foundation, which we must cross—a Rubicon from which there is no turning back.

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shattered, and we must step over
into a new world.

In other words, every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end. The future is beginning now. We have work to do. Is it possible to ride the trajectory of culture?

Going on a Bear Hunt

When my children were little, one of our favorite bedtime stories was *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*. The book's cover shows a babysitter and three kids crossing the frame, leaning into an unseen future, seeking new adventures. At each turn in the story, the group faces challenges, which grow increasingly difficult: tall grass, raging river, deep mud, dark forest, and blinding snowstorm. At each obstacle, their onward journey thwarted, they face the question: How do we proceed?

With each challenge, the group responds (and this is where my kids and I would shout for joy while reading at bedtime):

We can't go under it!

We can't go over it!

We've got to go through it!

Childlike enthusiasm for what comes next is key to how to respond to periods of significant cultural change such as the one we are experiencing. It is a joyful shout for adventure; let's go through it!

To change the trajectory of our stagnant culture, we need new thinking and constructive solutions. In the next several years, we will see a significant shift in our culture from a focus on the inner life (self-help and passion pursuit) to outer life (social-help and public policy). We will experience rejuvenated civic energy. The time to tear down is done; now it is time to rebuild.

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:

.....

a time to tear down and a time to build. (Eccl 3:1,3)

As with the children's story, emerging fresh and excited from the roadblocks—in our lives, in our culture, and in the church—requires that we forge new paths, which suggests we need innovation. Through his gift of salvation and resurrection life, Jesus makes all things new. With his inspiration, we too can experience newness not

only inwardly but in ways that change the way we look at life, our options, and our future. Following Jesus doesn't lead to just innovation but something more specific: *Christian* innovation.

Yet Christians do not have a sterling reputation in contemporary culture for new ideas, noteworthy solutions, and needle-moving systems. Instead, we are known for denial and resistance. Some of us pretend technology and culture are static and immutable and act as if vision is unnecessary. Others of us stick our heads in the sand. Some tend to be controlling, wanting to use new instruments and ideas to achieve theocratic visions of the future. Others rush into cultural change, blindly syncretizing every new idea. Still others of us attempt to remove ourselves from culture altogether, becoming ascetic, monastically waiting on a faraway hill.

Despite these stances, in various cultures and settings for the last two thousand years, real change that creates flourishing societies has often come through the work of Christians. Over and over, followers of Jesus have demonstrated a supernatural ability to build culture and create opportunities for human flourishing. This book will tell several stories of such flourishing. There is something about being a follower of Jesus that has empowered some groups of people to enact significant, positive social change and cultural transformation. What the world needs today is not just new ideas but Christian innovators. Christian innovation is what happens when Christ's people leverage their creative gifts and allow themselves to be used by the Holy Spirit through the work of Christ's community for the inauguration of God's future.

Jesus has a simple name for such work: *greater things*.

Greater Things

A few days before his crucifixion, Jesus gave a last lesson to his core group of disciples. During that session, he said something remarkable, as recorded in John's Gospel:

Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own author-

ity. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. (John 14:10-12)

Jesus promised his disciples that they would somehow have the ability to do even greater things than he. How can this be? Jesus healed people, raised the dead, tore down the temple, and came back from the dead. Can we do more than this? The promise seems absurd, and yet Jesus said it.

Jesus promised his disciples that they would somehow have the ability to do even greater things than he. The promise seems absurd, and yet Jesus said it.

Such a promise presupposes that we have amazing potential in us. In my book, *Think Like a Five Year Old*, I explore a theology of creativity: each of us, having been made in the image of our Creator God, has in us a creative genius, which is obvious and clear to anyone who hangs out with a five-year-old. Tragically, as we age, this creative energy becomes marred by our sin and lost to our sight. Whereas God designed humans to create and care for one another and for the earth, we often lose our perspective on how to do this. Instead, we cast our eyes downward toward dynamics of approval, power, and control. In Christ, our eyes are bathed clean and our vision is restored. With our eyes opened, our ability to create and to care becomes visible to us.

“If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.” (Matt 6:22-23)

What happens after this transformation? There are two, intertwined “next acts” for a human life that has rediscovered its innate creativity: one inner, one outer. The inner act reveals how we are made more whole through a creative, collaborative relationship with

God. The outer act is about the results of this spirit “skunkworks”: Christian innovation, or the in-breaking of God’s New Creation over the declining, decaying spirit of the world. This book is about the latter, which is tied to the former. As we create, we are recreated.

This book is an exploration of the implications of Jesus’ promise that we can do greater things. Its goal is to define and make simple the idea and process of Christian innovation. I hope to offer a means by which anyone can create positive change. Throughout the book, you will find stories of innovation and innovators in medicine, business, the church, and more. As you may or may not know, if you work in the world of the church, you already have innovation superpowers, in both the uplifting and the weary connotations of the word. The church is both an environment of superhuman strength and herculean problems. If you can innovate in church, you can probably innovate anywhere. These stories are designed not to elevate innovation as a lofty ideal but to lower it to the place of accessible process. My big dream for this book is that it will help equip Christians to move to the forefront of positive social change. Thus, this is both a big-idea book and a how-to book.

This book has two parts. Part 1 is an exploration of Christian innovation, its value, and definition; and part 2 is a practical application for making Christian innovation work. Much of the secular literature on innovation emphasizes discontinuity, or the newness of the work, which contrasts with what has come before and presupposes an improvement on the past. When we as believers talk about the New Creation, we get wrapped up in an ideology of progress, as I outline in chapter 1. As chapters 2–4 describe, this ideology is problematic. In the church, we have adopted the tacit belief that we are the ones building the kingdom. But our work does not bring about the kingdom. Instead, as I outline in chapter 5, the kingdom is an entirely new and qualitatively different creation we receive from God by grace alone. But the insufficiency of our effort does not negate our need to work in the New Creation. In chapter 6, I outline a new definition of Christian innovation as something separate from the ingrained mantra of “new and improved.”

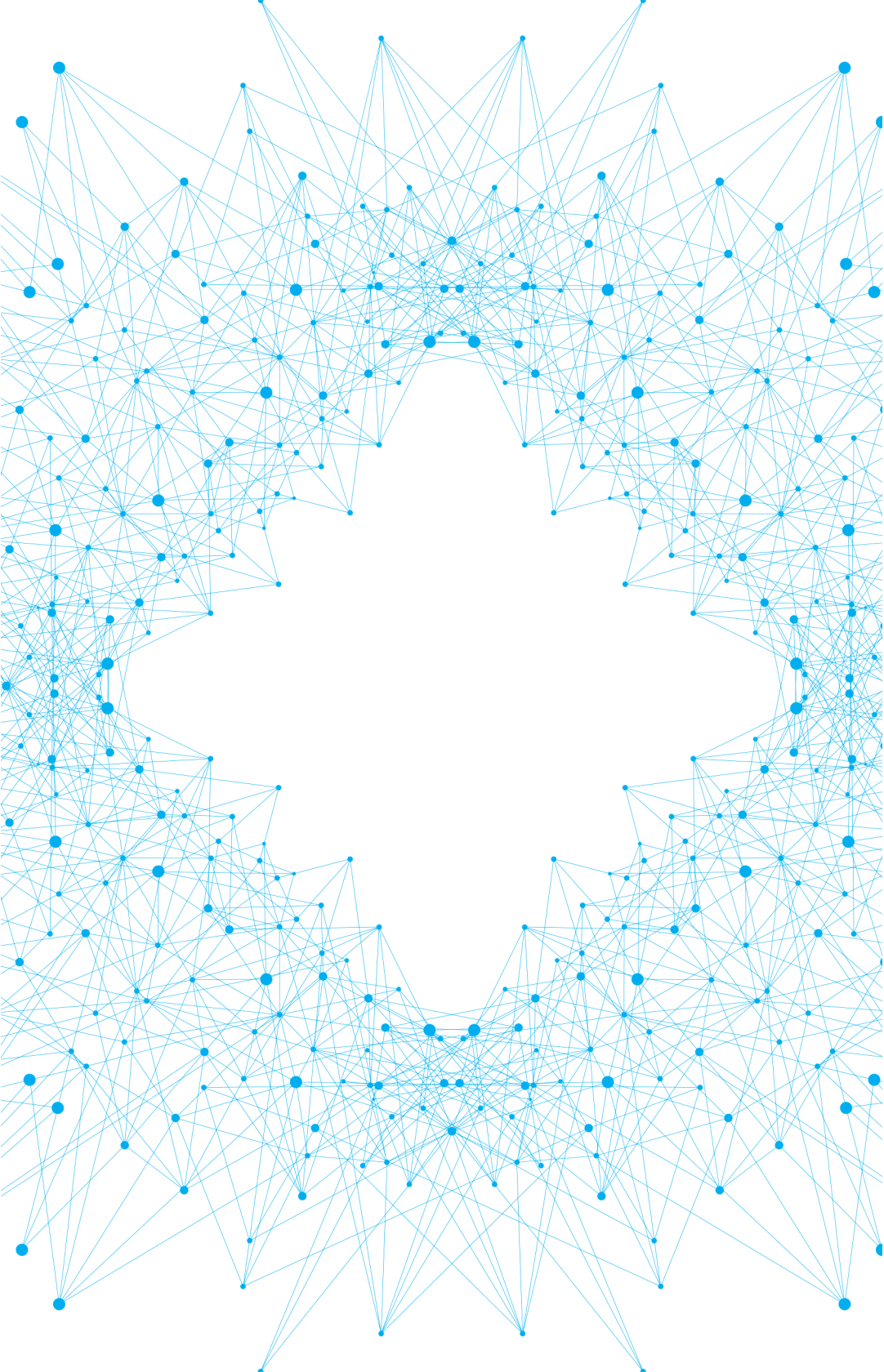
Part 2 offers a practical model for Christian innovation. Like any university course, Christian innovation needs prerequisites. Christian innovation favors passion over pleasure, which I address in chapter 7; vision over maintenance (chap 8); risk over safety (chap 9); creativity over criticism (chap 10); and community over isolation (chap 11). Without these conditions, innovation cannot occur. If a community (which means its leadership and culture) responds to problems with a bias for the status quo, it cannot innovate. If a church chooses to ignore technologies emerging outside its walls, that church cannot innovate. If a community of faith is overly concerned with maintaining a specific culture or set of customs, it cannot innovate. If a community is overly concerned with failure prevention, it cannot innovate. If any community is overly concerned with ensuring everything is perfect, it cannot innovate.


In chapter 12, I look at the life cycle of innovation and offer some suggestions about how to keep it moving forward. Of course, no human effort is perfect, which is why we rarely “change the world.” But that doesn’t mean we can’t make significant contributions to positive change. The epilogue looks at the difference between our vision and reality.

If you are without faith in Christ, this book will still be helpful. There are processes, techniques, and tips here that you can apply. But the goal of this book is bigger: to provide you with a new way of looking at the world that will fundamentally reorient your activity forward, toward the work of the New Creation. If you miss Christian innovation, you miss the opportunity to do things above and beyond your imagination.

The time to tear down is done; now it is time to rebuild.
Let’s get started.

Len Wilson
Frisco, TX
December 2020





P A R T O N E

What Is Christian Innovation?

The work of the New Creation depends on innovation. Both culture and church have been talking about innovation for decades; however, increasing evidence of the New Creation is debatable at best. That's because not just any innovation will do; we need something different: Christian innovation. Part 1 explores the concept of Christian innovation. I look at several stories of attempts to bring about the New Creation, including both positive aspects and problems in past approaches. I conclude with a proper theology of *new* and an understanding of our relationship to the Holy Spirit in any movement of flourishing and growth.





1 New and Improved

What Do We Mean by Innovation?

The first step on a journey to greater things is to understand what we mean by innovation. Innovation has four defining characteristics: it is an instrument; it is an invention; it is intuitive; it is influential. Each of these characteristics shares a common value: new. In American culture, though, new isn't just a method or a strategy; it is a belief system. We believe in an ideology of progress. We assume that with new comes improved. We have developed faith in innovation and technology as the means by which we inaugurate a better future.

Perhaps no image symbolizes the rise of computer technology in American culture as well as Steven Spielberg's T-Rex in *Jurassic Park*, released in 1994. More than twenty-five years after its debut, our first glimpse of the hungry, angry dinosaur still feels realistic enough to make us fear for the kids stuck in the sport utility vehicle.

In the early 1990s—pre-*Jurassic Park* days—I was a graduate student at the Annenberg School of Communication, the University of Pennsylvania, I rendered digital tanks on Silicon Graphics machines for the U.S. Department of Defense. These graphics were no T-Rex; they were quite crude. No one at that time considered computer graphics an endeavor worthy of the emotional drama of a world-class feature film.

The rise of computer technology is exhibit number one for any study of innovation, and no example served better to demonstrate the advancements in computing than the big machine that sat idle down the hall from where I worked. As I toyed on Silicon Graphics machines, a dusty 10'x20' room housed one of the paeans of twentieth-century American innovation: the first modern computer.

Although it was a museum piece by the time I was a student, it was still impressive. Engineers John Mauchly and Presper Eckert started construction on it in June 1943. They called it the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer, or ENIAC. (Their creativity was in engineering, not branding.) It was operational in November 1945 and employed the processing power of a small alarm clock.

In its original form, not everyone saw the need for a room-sized machine that could compute a fraction of the work of a single human. There's an apocryphal quotation attributed to IBM chairman Thomas J. Watson, who, on hearing of the ENIAC, declined the opportunity to invest, saying that there was a world market for maybe five computers. Many people miss opportunities because they see what something is, not what it may become.

The ENIAC functioned for ten years. Motley and Eckert were not the only inventors of the computer, though. Before the ENIAC, a *computer* was a person, usually a woman—à la butcher, baker, or candlestick maker—a data-entry employee who punched keys and cranked handles on desktop adding machines. As humans are prone to error and fatigue, many had seen the need for a more consistent and efficient way to compute mathematical equations. The first sketches for mechanizing mathematical operations date to 1820. But nothing stuck. What made Motley and Eckert’s machine the original computer?

In his study of the history of computing, biographer Walter Isaacson suggests three defining reasons, which also serve as characteristics of innovation:

- Fully functioning and in constant use.
- Working for a long period of time. (The ENIAC worked for ten years.)
- The basis for subsequent innovations (a.k.a. the alpha dog).

Our first step on a journey to greater things is to understand what we mean by innovation. Isaacson’s example offers a good starting point.

A Definition of Innovation

Instrument

Innovation is, first, a working *instrument* that serves as an agent for “significant, positive change.” It is a solution to a problem. In his classic, *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, Harvard business scholar Clayton Christensen defines innovation as a change in technology, with technology as the process by which organizations transform “capital, materials, and information into products and services of greater value.”

Christensen’s word value is important here. A more common Christian synonym for value is worth. But innovation is not just

a material change in technology in which “greater value” is nearly synonymous with more capital. It may also be understood as a new, working idea in service to social good. Ideas can be social, political, or even theological: new processes or forms of organizational management, new ways of social organization, or even new forms of meaning. For example, before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. introduced nonviolent resistance, African Americans in the Jim Crow South had two options: violence or painful acquiescence. King modeled a third way, beginning with a specific action in response to a specific social problem: the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955.

Innovation is an instrument that solves a problem and leads to positive change through the introduction of greater value.

In either case, whether material or conceptual, innovation is, first, an instrument that solves a problem and leads to positive change through the introduction of greater value.

Invention

Whether material (like a physical product) or conceptual (like a service or a mobilized idea), to innovate is to activate new, creative solutions. This is our second definition of innovation: the instrument in question must be an *invention*.

King had a creative idea. This is where innovation begins. Education advocate Sir Ken Robinson says that creativity is the process of having original ideas with value. My preferred definition for creativity is one offered by my youngest son at five years old: having fun and making stuff. As innovation precedes entrepreneurship, creativity precedes innovation.

Creativity is more than an instrument; creativity is an ontological reality. As people made in the image of a Creator God, we are made as creative beings. Innovation flows out of this universal human trait, but creativity and innovation are distinct: we all are creative, and some of us innovate. This is because creativity calls for context. Innovation is applied creativity that helps people. It is community-

centered and outcomes-based. We may celebrate creativity as its own intrinsic good while also recognizing that innovation is the work of turning creative ideas into solutions that work, help others, scale up, and influence subsequent thinking. Innovation is creativity that does something specific. It meets a need. As Steve Jobs supposedly said to his original Macintosh team after another delay, real artists ship. Applied creativity that impacts the work and leisure of others for good becomes innovation.

Intuitive

Third, innovation is *intuitive*. It is often simple, shockingly ordinary, light on design, and more concerned with function than form, at least initially. It does a job; it just works. It is less concerned with reaching for greatness than with fixing the problem at hand. This is crucial. Greatness comes later. This one is hard for the visionary and the aesthete. We want the working solution to be as fully formed as the initial vision in our mind, but our perfectionist tendency only slows us down. Working beats perfect every time. The goal isn't perfection or even changing the world. That is what the 2.0 version is for.

Influential

Last, innovation is *influential*. Isaacson notes that, of his three definitions for innovation, the basis for subsequent innovation is the distinguishing factor. We celebrate the story of Walt Disney, not just because he made a neat theme park and some great cartoon characters, but because his vision has been the basis for cartoon characters and theme parks to come. Innovations are trendsetters. Your idea doesn't have to affect an entire industry, but it can't be a one-off. It has to be something on which others build. In other words, while creativity is an essential part of life, sometimes we need more than just a good idea. We need an idea that delivers new ways of thinking and acting.

Thus, innovation is specific, not mystical or even necessarily grand. Whether material or immaterial, all innovations begin as

ideas, and there's a life cycle to them. As ideas lead to innovations, they build and combine with other ideas, and this web of activity creates positive change in culture over time. Culture may be understood as the layering of innovations, material and immaterial, leveraged by a group of people in shared time and space. The computing industry, which originated in East Coast labs and migrated to northern California, is perhaps the most prominent example of innovation in culture today and is a fitting place for Isaacson's exploration of innovation. Some even claim it is the only true example of sustained innovation in American culture today.

Each of these four characteristics of innovation (instrument, invention, intuitive, influential) shares a common value: the creation of something new. Many innovation scholars name new as the essential trait of innovative activity. To understand innovation, we need to look at this word new in more detail.

An Ideology of Progress

The other day, my teenagers and I were listening to the radio and an announcer described her station as “the new Air One.” One of my kids laughed and said, “How long are they going to be new?”

New is a powerful word, especially in America. We love new and its implicit promise of a better future. It has proven to be one of the most powerful words copywriters can use in advertising. It is part of our identity as a nation, a “new world,” which reflects an eschatological fervor among early American pilgrims that has never fully abated. New is part of the American origin story.

Part of the appeal of innovation in America is the ethos of new. Economist Joseph Schumpeter described innovation with the paradoxical phrase “creative destruction,” which he said is an ongoing process of destroying the old and creating the new. This, he said, is the essence of the free market. His association of destruction and creation has had a significant influence on thinking about market economics and creative entrepreneurship. From Christensen's focus on new technology to Sawhney, Wolcott, and Arroniz's description of innovation as “new value” to Birkinshaw's term “discontinuous,”

innovation scholars often assume that innovation signifies not just incremental change and improvement but a profound shift that can come only from disruptive change: the unexpected arrival of something completely new. Eric Schmidt of Google describes innovation as “the production and implementation of novel and useful ideas.” Much of the copious literature on innovation shares the assumption that innovation is a necessarily revolutionary overturning of the old to make way for the new.

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In the use of new in advertising copy, of course, the other word we often see is improved. New suggests, not just something different, but something better. There is a strong sense of material progress about innovation, in that what we are creating supersedes what has come before. This assumption of material progress as a common good, in which what is new is better than what already exists, reflects a larger ideology of progress. It is part of the modern experiment.

To understand our obsession with new things, we must consider the origins of the modern age. Consider the first president of the United States, who died because of bad medicine. Political scientist Philip Tetlock writes,

When George Washington fell ill in 1799, his esteemed physicians bled him relentlessly, dosed him with mercury to cause diarrhea, induced vomiting, and raised blood-filled blisters by applying hot cups to the old man’s skin. A physician in Aristotle’s Athens, or Nero’s Rome, or medieval Paris, or Elizabethan London would have nodded at much of that hideous regimen. Washington died.

We read of Washington’s treatment plan and shudder. Of course he died! But his treatment plan was quite normal for late-eighteenth-century physicians. Washington lived in an era in which knowledge was still largely artisanal: the practice of medicine was understood to

be an art, which meant that physicians relied on personal techniques over shared knowledge, which was fine in the arts, but often deadly in the sciences. For example, the use of leeches to bleed patients such as Washington dated to antiquity, despite its failure as a practice.

This is because, before the rise of Enlightenment thought, assumptions about authoritative knowledge lay in the past. Perhaps without understanding it, Washington's doctors were still heavily influenced by an ancient view of knowledge, which relied on an eternal balance of four fundamental "humors": earth, fire, water, and air. All knowledge was rooted in sensory experience, as art historian Jack Hartnell writes about medieval medicine:

[S]o revered were these texts that they often took precedence over observation of the actual medieval body itself. This goes some way toward explaining why anyone might have kept going with cow dung, boar's bile or bleeding. Consistency in implementing the medicine of their learned forebears was the paradigm of this medicinal movement, not innovation. Even if a particular method seemed questionable or ineffective—and at times they must have—to find a new route through medieval bodies would have required the overturning of centuries of thought.

Of course, this overturning eventually happened. An increased emphasis on empirical thinking, as well as other concurrent changes, provided the foundation for an intellectual revolution. Practical observation rather than tradition led to an enlightenment of the Western mind, which introduced a fundamental shift in the acquisition of knowledge from a past orientation toward a future orientation defined by "principles of experiment and trial and error." The Enlightenment replaced the four ancient pillars of earth, water, fire, and air with four new, modern pillars: science, reason, humanism, and progress. Oxford literary scholar Iain McGilchrist notes that, proponents of this Enlightenment believe "that all genuine questions can be answered, that if a question cannot be answered it is not a question, that all answers are knowable, and that all the answers must be compatible with one another." Discovery via the scientific method replaced tradition as the basis for shared, applied human knowledge.

The method of this new empiricism was inquiry and testing, through which scientists and scientific thinkers began to solve long-standing human problems in a variety of fields. Over time, people began to realize tangible change and improvement in problems that had once seemed intractable and unsolvable. These improvements, particularly in medicine and engineering, were measurable, widespread, and visible, leading to growth in social knowledge, standards of living, and longevity. Improvements were so rapid and ubiquitous that an entire philosophy of history began to emerge, which suggested that, because of science, improvement in the human condition itself was, over time, incremental and inexorable. What was happening in science seemed possible in society, politics, and even religion. Shared knowledge gained through inquiry incrementally improved many facets of society, and humans gradually avoided making the same mistakes over and over. Doctors (eventually) stopped sticking leeches on people to heal them.

The application of scientific thinking and subsequent improvements to the human condition made its value self-evident. To the eighteenth-century European citizen, improvements to society driven by Enlightenment values were obvious and life-changing, a proverbial cultural light being turned on after centuries of endless dusk. Industrial culture yielded massive improvements to standards of living, and people began to assume that history was on a linear march toward a progressively better future.

Science was so successful that it began to take on a philosophical dimension. Out of its success in the hard disciplines, the notion of incremental improvement began to permeate theology, the humanities, philosophy, and the realm of knowing and epistemology, eventually creating a meta-narrative of progress, the idea that things will continue to get better over time. To many Christians, the discovery of powerful new technologies offered a natural eschatological explanation, in which heaven will eventually arrive on earth via social improvement created by a scientific method. The romanticism of nineteenth-century literature, particularly in the wake of Marx, combined to create an image of history as rising or arching upward,

suggesting a steady move through time toward a utopian or perfect ending.

The view of a perfect ending to history achieved through scientific discovery challenged and changed a centuries-old epistemology rooted in the Christian faith. Progress became, not just a result of empiricism or even an ideal, but an ideology, a belief in social, political, and economic improvement achieved through technological innovation by human—not divine—means, that is incremental, inexorable, and increasingly immediate.

Nowhere has progress become more embedded in culture than in the United States. Founded at the height of the Enlightenment, the United States is the ultimate manifestation of the modern experiment. American intellectual Stephen Pinker's four pillars of Enlightenment thought—reason, science, humanism, and progress—are evident in the founding constitutional papers of the American experiment, which not only wove progress into the fabric of the United States Constitution but imbued the culture with a mandate to make a better future.

The ideology of progress emerged in the Enlightenment, was articulated in the British empire, was made manifest in the early American pioneer spirit, and reached its peak in the technological innovations that achieved Allied victory in the Second World War. Political historian Matthew Slaboch observes, "There is no alternative tradition to optimism in America. It is a country founded at the height of the Enlightenment and imbued with a faith in progress." In American culture, new isn't just a method or a strategy, it is a belief system. We believe in an ideology of progress.

Tomorrowland

One of the foremost American prophets of progress was "Imaginer" Walt Disney. After a half-century, the number one family vacation destination in the United States remains Walt Disney World, a sanctuary of family-friendly Enlightenment ideals. One of its signature attractions, and one that Walt supposedly loved the most, is called The Carousel of Progress, which resides in the middle of a

themed area titled Tomorrowland. While Tomorrowland has been a staple of Walt Disney World since its opening in 1971, the ride itself premiered several years earlier in the 1964 New York World's Fair. By the early 1960s, Disney's work had become synonymous in culture to art and as an ode to technology and scientific progress. Over the previous century, a series of World's Fairs in Europe and the United States had been the commercial showcases for human scientific advancement. Thus Walt Disney and the World's Fair were a fitting marriage. Chief architect Robert Moses called the New York World's Fair the greatest single event in human history.

Mid-twentieth-century America was a time and space in which such exaggeration seemed reasonable, and 1964 was a highwater mark. The nation had survived the Great Depression and won the war, and the power of new technology was at its peak. Modern technology was the engine of Enlightenment progress, beginning with mechanization in the English textile industry in the eighteenth century. The seemingly inexorable Industrial Revolution was based on two simple, scientific concepts: every endeavor could be broken down into simple tasks, and those tasks could be accomplished on assembly lines. This practice gave rise to machines that could replace human labor. As people innovated new, more efficient machinery, productivity went up, and everyone benefited.

"Everyone", of course, excluded those whose livelihoods were wrapped up in ancient, artisan hand-weaving processes. If you have ever been called a "Luddite" for resisting new technology, you are in the company of Ned Ludd, the nineteenth-century English weaver who was put out of a job by a machine, then broke it in a fit of rage. Despite some resistance, though, use of the machines eventually took over. The vast majority of jobs available in the early 1800s no longer exist, a phenomenon that is now known as "technological unemployment."

But innovators have little time for those who don't get on board, and technology found a good fit in the new world. The forty-year period before World War I was a time of intense technological innovation and social disruption, much like the one American culture is experiencing now. Conventional references to the *modern* world

begin here, with such culturally disruptive advancements as home electrical power, indoor plumbing, the automobile, the telephone, and film and radio, to name a few.

These new technologies broadened people's view of the world, such as one young man in the first decade of the twentieth century who, while messing with his new radio, could not believe it when he picked up the signal from a doctor in a neighboring town, broadcasting, "Can anyone hear me west of Steubenville?" Reflecting on the power of radio, broadcaster Peter Jennings writes, "radio was to the air as the automobile was to the earth, an agent of transport to a world as wide open as the imagination."

In early- to mid-twentieth-century America, the human imagination seemed to be the only limit to what was possible. While critics such as Orwell and Huxley, among others, argued that not only does progress not happen, "it ought not to happen," the popular view tended toward optimism for a streamlined, leisurely future of convenience. Public fascination with futurology and the benefits of technological advancement outran literati pessimism. As Beatle Paul McCartney seemingly summarized for all of Western popular culture in the 1960s, "It's getting better all the time."

Indeed, there exists a mountain of evidence on the benefits to society that advancements in technology have provided, in areas such as food, sanitation, life expectancy, the reduction of violence, improvements in literacy, freedom, and equality. And while "large-scale narratives about how we supposedly came to be" have become uncoupled in recent historical reconstructions from "rosy evaluations of an onward-and-upward, progressive view of Western history," assurance of the potential of new technology, particularly American technology, to usher in a better future has never fully diminished in society. While we wait for flying Jetson cars, we still click articles about them, curious about the power of technology to inaugurate a better future.

Perhaps the reason we assume improved comes with new is because our love of innovation, like a belief in progress, has many of us assuming that innovation will solve our problems. We have developed a faith in technology and in the study and practice of innova-

tion as the means to accomplish our scientifically promised better future. An entire industry has formed around it. Just search the TED talk database to get a feel for our fascination with progress.

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The ideology of progress has had a profound influence on the American understanding of technological innovation (which due to Americanization, has, in turn, influenced the entire world) and on Christian theology and the practice of Christian faith. In the church, innovation has become the unspoken subtext of our understanding of the kingdom of God. It is to the correlation between innovation and our role in the kingdom of God that we will turn next.

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