A Theology of

the office

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Introduction

by JOSH LARSEN

You know the look. Someone (usually Michael) says something cringeworthy and someone else (most often Jim) glances at the camera, slightly widens his eyes, and imperceptibly grimaces. *That was weird*, his face says, for all of us.

That look was the central gag of *The Office*, NBC's reimagining of a British television sitcom about life amidst corporate inanity. The joke never got old over nine seasons. Part of the show's conceit is that a documentary camera crew is on hand capturing all this footage, allowing the characters to break the fourth wall with a running, reaction-shot commentary. A textbook example can be found in "Koi Pond," from Season 6, when Jim (John Krasinski) finds the camera after Michael (Steve Carell) makes yet another inappropriate analogy during corporate sensitivity training. Don't even try to count the number of times throughout *The Office* that eyebrows are alarmingly raised.

There is, as the title of this ebook claims, theology at play here. The camera in *The Office* isn't the eye of God (a crew member is revealed in Season 9's "Customer Loyalty"). Yet the technique reminds me of the way God's presence is always breaking the fourth wall of our lives. He is always with us, he hears our innermost thoughts, he sees our cringeworthiness, and he loves us anyway. In our most honest moments—of discomfort, of uncertainty, of shame—we can look him directly in the eye.

The omnipresent camera of *The Office* isn't solely condemning, simply there to capture reactions to a wrong that has occurred. It's also confessional. This is especially true of the talking-head sequences where a character directly addresses the camera behind closed doors. In "Classy Christmas," sequestered in his office after realizing that his romantic plans for Holly (Amy Ryan) are once again likely to be thwarted, Michael offers one of the series' more meme-able moments: "I am dead inside." And then there is Michael's rare confession in Season 5's "Casual Friday," after he has betrayed his sales team: "No matter how I look at this, I am in the wrong. And I have looked at this thing, like, 100 different ways. From my point of view … from their point of view … 98 others. Bottom line: I'm in the wrong. I'm the bad guy."

On a happier note, *The Office*'s ubiquitous camera also captures instances of joy—say, when Jim or Pam (Jenna Fischer) glance at the camera after flirting with each other. Every once in awhile, someone in the office looks into the lens and shares a shy little smile, communicating something less like condemnation and more like grace.

Here at *Think Christian*, we're always on the lookout for signs of grace, even—perhaps especially—when we're laughing along with a show like *The Office*. And so we've gathered

a talented group of writers and *Office* fans to reflect on the ways the series might resonate with our faith. How does the show's inherent awkwardness give us an opportunity to exercise kindness, a fruit of the Spirit? Might the irrepressible joy of Kelly Kapoor be reflective of our joy in Christ? Is there a way for average spaces like mundane cubicle farms and Chili's restaurants to be redeemed?

We dig into all of these questions and more. Read on to revisit some of your favorite moments from *The Office*, and to consider other ways in which, while watching the series, you might catch God looking back.

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The Awkward Promise of *The Office*

by JR. FORASTEROS

On paper, there's no reason *The Office* should be one of the most beloved sitcoms of all time. It's an American remake of a British show, about a cubical farm in small-town Pennsylvania. And it's awkward. Really awkward. Nevertheless, *The Office* ran for 201 episodes and won almost 30 awards, including Emmys and Golden Globes. Despite having been off the air since 2013, it remains popular on streaming services and has recently enjoyed unexpected appreciation among high-school students.

Why does such an awkward show have so much appeal? Perhaps because *The Office* employs awkwardness as an invitation for viewers to choose compassion rather than contempt, even for its most embarrassing characters.

In the pilot episode, we meet Michael Scott (Steve Carell), a regional manager for Dunder Mifflin, a failing paper company. A film crew documents the work life of Dunder Mifflin employees in the Scranton branch, where Michael presides. In his office, he displays for the camera a coffee mug that reads "World's Best Boss." His eyes gleam as he shares the pride he feels when he considers the title this mug bestows upon him. Then he says, "I found it at Spencer's." *Awkward*.

Melissa Dahl, author of *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness*, describes awkwardness as "an unpleasant kind of self-recognition where you suddenly see yourself through someone else's eyes. It's a forced moment of self-awareness, and it usually makes you cognizant of the disappointing fact that you aren't measuring up to your own self-concept."

> The office employs awkwardness as an invitation for viewers to choose compassion rather than contempt.

He even bought himself a mug to celebrate that fact. Yet we don't have to watch the whole pilot to see that Michael is (self-)delusional. We know those mugs are designed as gifts. We know that anyone who would buy themselves such an item is likely pretty far from the World's Best anything. So we see the gap between Michael's self-concept and the reality of how Michael is experienced by his employees: as selfish, self-absorbed, and tone-deaf.

The show's documentary format is essential to making the awkwardness work because the characters are always conscious that they're being watched. Later in the pilot, when Dwight (Rainn Wilson) insists Michael punish Jim (John Krasinski) for putting Dwight's stapler in Jell-O, Michael is unable to suppress his giggles and tells Dwight he has to eat the gelatin "because

there are starving kids in the world." Then, as he glances at the camera and remembers he's being recorded, he clears his throat and intones in a deeper, performative voice, "Which I take very seriously." In the space of seconds, we watch Michael shift from his authentic self—a man who makes jokes about world hunger—to his performative self: a man virtue signaling to appear compassionate and admirable.

While Michael seems unaware of the gap between his two selves, we viewers cannot escape it. Faced with the stark difference between who Michael imagines himself to be and how Michael is experienced in the world, we cringe. It's awkward.

We cringe when others make things awkward because of what psychologists call "empathy." Empathy is the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. Generally, we think of empathy as a good thing. But in her book, Dahl suggests that empathy is not *automatically* good. One group of people who score high in empathy are, surprisingly, Internet trolls. In order to "troll" effectively—to comment in such a way as to insult or hurt a person—you have to understand them.

How do we make sense of this? Some psychologists split the concept of empathy into two kinds: cognitive empathy and compassionate empathy. With cognitive empathy, we can understand what the other person is thinking and feeling, but we keep them at arm's length. This lets us manipulate or laugh at them. Compassionate empathy, on the other hand, is when we let ourselves identify with the other person; to really feel what they're feeling and to stand in solidarity with them.

Empathy and awkwardness are also at play in one of the stories involving King David in the Bible: Nathan's confrontation with David. David was king of Israel, and by the time of the events recounted in 2 Samuel 11, it's safe to say no one was buying him a World's Best King mug. After his predatory sexual pursuit of Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers, she became pregnant. In his quest to cover up his sin, David demonstrated significant cognitive empathy. He called the soldier home from the front lines, wined and dined him, and sent him to his home to sleep with his wife. David, a former mercenary himself, understood the peaks and valleys of a soldier's marriage. But when the man refused—out of loyalty to his brothers in arms still on the battlefield—David dropped all pretense and arranged to have him killed.

David was king, so no one could hold him accountable—except for God's prophet, Nathan. God instructed Nathan to confront David, which he did by way of a story. He described a wealthy man who stole a poor man's prize lamb rather than use one from his own flock. The story activated David's compassionate empathy; he became furious at the injustice done to the poor man and demanded retribution. It was only then that Nathan sprang his awkward trap, revealing, "You are the man!"

In that moment, David's self-image was shattered. His delusion of being a godly, just king was laid bare before the reality that he was an abuser.

This is the power of the awkward moment: we have the choice, when faced with the vulnerability of another, to respond with either compassion or contempt. The genius of *The Office* is that, over its 201 episodes, it shows us the vulnerability of even clueless buffoons like Michael Scott. It's easy to (rightly) condemn Michael's antics. But from the beginning, Michael was meant to be sympathetic, too. Writing about this intentional decision on the part of the show's creators (which is a major distinction from the original British version), Corey Chichizola observes, "As *The Office* continued to unravel Scott's

personality, we saw how terribly he wanted friendship, love, and a family. He went from being the frustrating character on the show to the one who could make us cry at the drop of a hat."

It's no surprise that this kindness toward frustrating characters became a centerpiece of the storytelling of Michael Schur, a writer on *The Office* who has gone on to create other hit sitcoms like *Parks and Recreation*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, and *The Good Place*—all shows renowned for their optimistic, bright core despite featuring often incredibly cringeworthy characters.

In our increasingly polarized world, contempt is becoming a reflex. We see an instance of awkwardness and we pounce. But kindness is a much-needed fruit of the Spirit, one that people of faith are called to cultivate. Perhaps watching *The Office* can be a spiritual practice, then; one that reminds us to compassionately choose kindness, whether in our cubicles or in our churches.

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Can Anything Good Come Out of Scranton?

by BETHANY KEELEY-JONKER

When I think about my favorite romantic moment of *The Office*, I don't think first about the central couple of the show, Jim (John Krasinski) and Pam (Jenna Fischer). I think instead about when Michael (Steve Carell) proposes to Holly (Amy Ryan) in the office with the help of his coworkers. He takes her on a tour of the space and ends up in the HR office, which is transformed with candles on every surface—so many that the culminating moment is punctuated by fire sprinklers going off and soaking the happy couple, as everyone else peers through the window blinds.

One reason that this episode, "Garage Sale," stands out for me is because it captures what's special about the whole show: the way it is honest about the mundanity of everyday life and spaces, while also able to highlight how the sublime can occasionally break through even in the blandest of surroundings.

> In The Office, everyday spaces are made special by what happens there.

Consider the main set for the series—the office itself—which is perfectly, beautifully mundane. It's a symphony of neutral colors, ceiling tiles, nondescript furniture, and fake plants. To create the feeling of a real workplace, cast members regularly served as background actors in scenes where they didn't have any lines. They used the time to do exactly the kind of things actual office workers do when they have downtime at their desk: pay bills, shop online, read, and write emails. This authentic behavior contributes to the familiar, everyday feel of the show.

A lot of the moments of joy from the show's early seasons are drawn from the delight of everyday environments becoming exceptional. One of my favorites comes from "Office Olympics," when Michael and his Assistant [to the] Regional Manager Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson) leave midday and the remaining employees play improvised games using office supplies. When Michael returns, rather than hiding their Olympic fun from him, they award him the gold medal. Even though the whole thing is silly and irreverent, the moment of celebration is real.

It's hard to choose a favorite from the dozens of perfectly performed cold opens, but one of mine is from "Gossip." Michael, Dwight, and Andy (Ed Helms) attempt to film a parkour video, jumping over chairs, somersaulting onto couches, and leaping from desk to desk. The silliness of the bit rests substantially on the three of them constantly shouting "Parkour!" while clumsily attempting unimpressive tricks. Despite their clumsiness, it's also delightful to see the familiar set navigated in new (and ridiculous) ways.

Some of the other transcendent moments in the show take place offsite, but in equally mundane spaces. Jim proposes to Pam at a gas station. On an outing at the mall food court, Pam, Phyllis (Phyllis Smith) and the other women of the office offer Michael sincere relationship advice. The Dundie awards take place at a Chili's. These are everyday places that look similar all across America. Yet what makes these scenes remarkable is the everyday beauty of the actions we witness.

The Office is full of examples of the most everyday of spaces made special by what happens there—friendship, goofiness, romantic love. It reminds me of how the Bible is full of stories of spots that are made special because of what took place in that location—because of what God did there. In the Old Testament, places are even marked with stones and given special names to remember encounters with God.

While *The Office* shows surprising examples of the everyday made sublime by human creativity and emotion, the Bible shows everyday places made special by God's creativity and love. A river crossing is remembered with 12 stones. A city is renamed because of a vision from God. The Sea of Galilee figures greatly in the gospel's redemptive narratives, yet my friends who have visited it were surprised it was so small and … normal.

This is the beauty of the incarnation. Jesus didn't arrive in a place that was notable, as an all-powerful, otherworldly being. He came as a human, sharing in all of our humanness. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" people asked of him. The beauty of that question is that the answer is, "Yes!" Something good can come out of anywhere! Goodness comes from God and God is everywhere, from the depths to the heavens. His Spirit is ever about the work of redemption, even at a small paper company in a small town in Pennsylvania.

What a comfort for us, who spend so much of our lives in mundane, familiar spaces. It's good for me to remember that God shows up in my kid's room in the middle of the night, on my short walk to the park, on a video chat with my parents, and in my college classrooms. God shows up in the church sanctuary, when the sermon speaks to my heart, when the worship band plays my favorite song, when I'm moved by a thoughtful and sincere prayer. But he's also there on those Sundays when it feels like an obligation or sometimes it's just too hard to go at all.

Sometimes I want to ask, can anything good come out of me? Because much of my life feels like an episode of *The Office*: full of difficult people, like me, being difficult and self-involved and toiling away at nothing particularly important. But God shows us over and over again that regular people in everyday places are exactly the ones he works through. We just have to listen for God's voice, even if we're in the mall food court.

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St. Bernard and the God of Second Chances

by AARIK DANIELSEN

In the sitcom universe, where characters are often reduced to a catchphrase, Andy Bernard feels like a revelation.

Played by the nimble Ed Helms, Andy arrives in season three of *The Office*, as the show's world has tilted off its axis. Jim and Pam's will-they, won't-they romance seems to have settled on won't-they, with Jim's transfer to Dunder Mifflin's Stamford, Conn., branch. There he encounters his new foil, Andy, a salesman with an Ivy League education and overactive ambition gland.

At first, Andy doesn't even register as a character you love to hate. The show has fun at his expense, but never sketches in the humanity that makes the rest of *The Office*'s motley crew sympathetic. By the time Jim (John Krasinski) places his personal effects in Jell-O, Andy entrenches himself as an even more humorless version of Dwight (Rainn Wilson). Yet much to the viewers' surprise, over the next six seasons Andy carves a path not unlike the road a new Christian walks. Going "the whole nine 'Nards," he stops living for himself and dying for approval, and learns to depend on grace.

When the Scranton and Stamford offices merge, Andy can't help but jockey for position. It's what he does. The secrets to the success he hopes for are "name repetition, personality mirroring, and never breaking off a handshake." An early bond with Michael (Steve Carell) is built on sand when, to the viewers' delight, the king of oblivion eventually (and ironically) wearies of Andy's lack of self-awareness. "Who's that sportscaster that bit that lady? Marv Something?" Michael says in "The Return." "Andy is like Marv Something—great sportscaster. Big weirdo creep."

Spiraling as his plans come undone, Andy punches a hole in a wall and finds himself shipped off to anger management. That he initially spins his exile as "management training" shows his failure to reckon with the depth of his sin. Anger is the worm-eaten fruit of his condition, but his lust for approval and need to save face reminds us that even when our behaviors are in order, our hearts betray us. Redemption is the only remedy for our soul-sickness, the only force powerful enough to heal us from the inside out.

When Andy returns to Dunder Mifflin, he receives no prodigal's welcome; rather, he wears a pariah's hairshirt. At first a newborn deer slipping with every footfall, he settles into his fresh start and finds Scranton the site of daily second chances. Eventually, Andy encounters something resembling the rebirth Christians experience.

Our salvation comes all at once, yet little by little. Anyone in Christ is a new creation. Still, personalities remain, waiting to be transformed into their truest version. Andy remains a little needy and overeager, something of a preppy people-pleaser. Yet rather than use these traits to suit himself, he increasingly spends himself for the common good. Rather than

waste every waking moment plotting to make himself look good, he gradually seeks to exalt his co-workers and make their lives better.

Through the refining fire of trial and experience comes gold. The pain of being cheated on spurs Andy to confront Michael and urge him to end an affair with a married woman. He rejects the ways of his blue-blood brood—who own a history of silencing whistleblowers—to cry foul when the company's printers pose a safety risk.

Andy's mettle passes the test when Michael leaves *The Office* and the manager's chair is up for grabs. When it appears Will Ferrell's Deangelo will step into the role, Andy goes to humiliating lengths to please him, yet seems to understand there's something wrong with the way the new boss treats him. Mistreatment wouldn't even register to the old Andy Bernard, the one who just moved from Stamford to Scranton; it simply would be the price of doing business.

Andy stops dying for approval and learns to depend on grace.

When the job opens again and Andy puts himself in contention, he exhibits something resembling humility, calling himself "a safe, if not slightly unexciting choice." The old Andy would've talked up his credentials and made unsavory maneuvers. The new, improved Andy makes his case on his rapport with his co-workers and his willingness to support the status quo they all appreciate.

Landing the gig, Andy struggles to shed his approval-seeking skin, fishing for compliments and looking for "attaboys" from new CEO Robert California (James Spader). But when California divides the office into winners and losers, Andy—who once saw winning as the only thing—extols the virtues of his co-workers and amplifies the need for a ragtag, interdependent workplace, coloring with shades of Paul's commendation of the body of Christ.

Andy, like the rest of us, remains a work in progress. He strings Erin (Ellie Kemper) along, sometimes neglecting her. His interest in fame and drama overshadows his good judgement. But he nearly always comes around to the right side of the situation and, embracing a new default mode, exhibits consistent concern for his fellow employees. Once competitors, they become his friends—and a more functional family than the Bernards ever have been to him.

Near the end of Season 8, in "Angry Andy," his job is stolen out from underneath him by the scheming Nellie (Catherine Tate) and sinfully ambivalent Robert. Andy lands another punch in the same spot, once again busting up innocent drywall. What might seem like a failure of character, or a sign the man never changed at all, takes on new resonance. This time, Andy's anger is much closer to the righteous side of the spectrum. These bookend experiences become like biblical Ebenezers—markers to where he's been and how far he's come.

Late in the series' run, Andy's co-workers extend special moments of grace. Recognizing the damage done by an emotionally withholding father, they transform a disastrous "Garden Party" into a moment of solidarity. Watching Andy trip over his two left feet for business at "Gettysburg," Jim and Darryl (Craig Robinson) remind him that the Dunder Mifflin crew is on his side and will follow him just because he's Andy.

These episodes stand out, yet they are the rule rather than the exception. Reflecting on the

years with the employees of Dunder Mifflin, we recognize a steadfast dynamic. Show up every day for work trying to be yourself and a simple 9-to-5 love emerges to cover a multitude of sins.

Watching Andy stop holding his breath for some skewed version of the American Dream, bearing witness as he relaxes into this environment, delivers its own sense of sweetness and self-assurance. His character arc reminds us that, no matter how much we lost in the Garden of Eden, the chance to be known and loved is still possible and worth seizing.

When Andy sees this, he finally fulfills his destiny, spoken as a humorous aside by Michael on the day the two branches merged: "Andy Bernard. St. Bernard." The God who gives second chances makes saints of us. With heaven and a halo reserved, we stumble our way through becoming who we are. But we never run the risk of imposing on God's goodness or draining his reservoir of redemption dry. With our ultimate restoration paid in full, he continues to give out modest reminders, everyday second chances—until the day when second chances are no longer necessary.

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The Irrepressible Joy of Kelly Kapoor

by KATHRYN FREEMAN

Among the many zany characters trapped together as Dunder-Mifflin employees in *The Office*, Kelly Kapoor (Mindy Kaling) stands out.

Kelly is the only woman of color until Karen Filippelli (Rashida Jones) makes her first of several guest appearances in Season 3. Yet Kelly also stands out for another reason: her joyful attitude in the midst of her often dour coworkers. Maintaining joy in the midst of challenging circumstances, incompetent bosses, bad boyfriends, and dismissive colleagues is difficult, but Kelly never lets her circumstances change the essential nature of her character.

Given how often television writers employ racist tropes about women of color being "angry," or "sassy," or "fiery," it feels revolutionary that Kaling (who is also a writer and producer on the series) made Kelly funny, celebrity-obsessed, strong, and slightly ridiculous. Kelly is a constant source of laughter. In her we see a woman of color who contains multitudes beyond brassy best friend. Kelly is good at her job, but her work is not what makes her interesting. It is not who she is as a person. In fact, her role as employee is actually the least interesting thing about her character.

Many of us spend a good deal of our lives in offices and it can be easy to allow our work to consume us. But Kelly is not frustrated by the ups and downs of the paper industry because her identity is not first and foremost in her work. In "E-Mail Surveillance," when Kelly asks Stanley (Leslie David Baker) and Oscar (Oscar Nuñez) not to talk about paper while they are hanging out at Jim's barbeque, an awkward silence ensues because they do not, in fact, have anything else to talk to each other about. By contrast, Kelly's hobbies are the source of her joy and constant gabbing.

Sebastian Traeger and Greg Gilbert, in their book *The Gospel at Work*, say that when work is *not* an idol, "you are free from growing frustrated and bitter in difficulties and drudgery your job brings. …Your happiness is secured elsewhere, you do not have be discouraged that your job is not providing it." No character at *The Office* models this truth quite as well as Kelly.

> Kelly never lets her circumstances change the essential nature of her character.

Work, of course, is an integral part of our lives. In *A Woman's Place*, Katelyn Beaty writes that God calls us to work in order "to take our time, talent, resources and community and create something good… that will glorify God." Kelly is an excellent customer-service representative. In "Product Recall," when everyone is enlisted to answer complaint calls after defective paper is delivered,

Kelly trains the others on proper responses. She is the model of hospitality and it's clear her work is important. One might even say customer service is Kelly's calling—but it is not her ultimate identity. As Christians, we are all meant to work as if for the Lord, but not out of a hope that our work will be the source of meaning in life.

Kelly keeps her work at Dunder Mifflin in its proper place, and it makes her a better coworker and friend. Kelly's love of seemingly frivolous things outside of the office always made her the perfect person to turn to when the others were struggling. When Pam (Jenna Fischer) is sad about breaking up with Roy (David Denman) in "The Coup," Kelly encourages her to buy new clothes online and put on a "fashion show at lunch!" When work is the thing of utmost importance in our lives, we miss opportunities to encourage our coworkers, celebrate our families, and love our friends—all in hopes of getting the sale, hitting our number, or closing the deal. Kelly shows us how to keep work in its proper place: to take it seriously, but not so seriously that we do not have time to console a struggling coworker or encourage our boss to search out the blood-drive donor with whom he had a brief, but meaningful, connection.

To be clear, being joyful does not require ignoring the bad things happening in our lives. Joy does not preclude sadness or even anger. When Michael (Steve Carell) persists in making racist comments about Indian-Americans on "Diversity Day," Kelly slaps him out of his ignorance. She does not ignore the harm of the offensive comments by laughing them away. Having joy in Christ does not mean putting on a fake smile and accepting others' harmful actions. We can possess joyful spirits and still call out sin where we see it. But the joy of the Lord allows us to see even those who hurt us as created in the image of God. It allows us to maintain relationships and to forgive those who have wronged us because we celebrate the forgiveness freely given to us.

Hebrews 12:2 encourages believers to fix their eyes on Jesus, who for the joy set before him endured the cross. Choosing to be joyful, in hope, even under difficult circumstances takes discipline. Kelly is always hopeful, even when she's entitled to be upset. When Angela (Angela Kinsey) struggles to be kind and apologize to complaining customers in "Product Recall," Kelly does not belittle her, but instead chooses to praise her good qualities and encourage her to work on her apologies.

People will disappoint us. They will overlook us and they will hurt our feelings. But Nehemiah 8:10 tells us that the joy of the Lord is our strength. In Christ, we have the strength to forgive, love, and laugh with those who hurt us. Kelly Kapoor isn't perfect. Take for example when she and Ryan (B.J. Novak) comically run off together into the sunset at the end of the series and irresponsibly leave behind Ryan's baby! But Kelly is a reminder that even in the dysfunctional workplace of *The Office*, joy can be found, cherished, and passed on. While Kelly's sources of joy are far from perfect, our joy is complete in Christ. We can endure hard things, not by our own strength, but through a strength and joy found in knowing that even in a world full of trivialities and distractions, Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith.

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Let Scott's Tots Come Unto Me

by JOE GEORGE

Last year for Christmas, my 13-year-old daughter bought my 17-year-old son a Dunder Mifflin t-shirt. Although she wouldn't admit it, the shirt represented a bond between them, built on laughing together at *The Office*.

They aren't the only members of the show's young fan club. Every week, students file into my 100- and 200-level college courses wearing the same Dunder Mifflin shirt. They've also been known to work bemused Jim memes into their presentations or use "Kevin from the *The Office*" as a comparison to help them unpack characters in a Gish Jen novel.

Why are so many teens and young adults interested in a show that aired its finale when they were in grade school? Even more intriguing, why are so many who have never worked in an office, had to raise sales numbers, or had to attend an HR meeting enjoying a show that spoofs middle-management mores? What exactly are they laughing at? The answer, of course, is Michael Scott (Steve Carell). "I know what a good boss is supposed to be," my son explained to me, "and Michael's not it."

That actually makes a lot of sense. We constantly tell young people to think about the future, placing often undue importance on mundane tasks. For them, it feels like any small mistake will land them in the poor house. Miss this class, lose this game, flunk this exam, and you'll spend your life in debt.

But while post-millennials (hopefully) won't have to deal with a Great Recession, they will inherit the uncertainty of the gig economy, the ballooning cost of a devalued college degree, the shifts of climate change, and a still-broken healthcare system. Their futures are precarious, no matter what they do, and that's cause for worry. It's easy to see how young people in this position might find catharsis in watching the vaunted "real world" fall apart in a show that finds humor in failure.

We constantly tell young people to think about the future, placing often undue importance on mundane tasks.

Take one of the series' most famous episodes, "Scott's Tots," from Season 6. The episode's main plot follows Michael dealing with a promise he made to pay the college tuition of a third-grade class. Ten years later, the third-graders are about to graduate from high school, but Michael's not the millionaire he thought he'd be. He cannot make good on his word.

Although nearly everyone immediately calls out his egregious error, it takes Michael

some time to admit his mistake. For him, the idea of wanting to do good is just as valuable as actually doing good. When Pam (Jenna Fischer) asks with incredulity why he would promise something so outlandish, Michael boldly answers, "To change lives."

Like the series' best episodes, "Scott's Tots" locates its jokes in the disconnect between Michael's perception of himself and reality. Steve Carell gives perhaps his all-time best line reading in a talking-head segment about the promise, in which he leans back in his chair and says, with a warm and self-satisfied grin, "I've made some empty promises in my life, but hands down, this was the most generous."

Carell plays Michael as someone who sees the problem and wants to be part of the solution, but lacks the conviction and knowledge to actually do it. He's defensive when Pam forces him to face the kids; his guilty grimace morphs too quickly into a smile of relief when he thinks that some of them at least appreciate his noble intentions. When Michael describes himself as "not a bad person," but someone who "bring[s] good news, like when I promised those kids I'd pay for college," he thoroughly believes that he's benefited the students. He feels as if he's motivated them to stay in school and live out their dreams, even if they did so for a lie.

To its credit, *The Office* never lets Michael off the hook. As much as the camera captures Michael's pouting and gloating, it also shows us the elation the kids feel when Michael enters the room—demonstrating their appreciation with an elaborate song and dance routine—and the utter devastation cascading down their faces when they hear his news.

When I showed "Scott's Tot's" to my 17-year-old, the one who liked *The Office* because he enjoyed Michael's bad-boss antics, he watched from under the covers, like a child hiding from Freddy Krueger's on-screen advances. Because for him, "Scott's Tots" isn't just the epitome of the show's cringe-humor aesthetic. It's an actual horror show, a depiction of the existential threat faced by people his age: what if the promises they've been told about working hard and preparing for the future were all in bad faith? What if the "real world" is just a lie created to make an adult feel good about himself?

Against these questions, Jesus' teaching at the end of Matthew 6 feels almost insultingly counterintuitive. Don't worry about tomorrow? Just because sparrows get fat and lilies are pretty? But when put into the context of the entire Sermon on the Mount, the teaching gains more power. Throughout the entire message, Jesus has turned conventional wisdom on its head, blessing the mourning and the meek and declaring that no one can serve God and money.

The Kingdom of Heaven Jesus describes is a different way of living, one that does not respect the powerful or the successful, but values the human life created and nurtured by God. This kingdom runs contrary to the one adults too often foist upon the young—the one that tells them that they matter only to the extent that they get good grades, impressive degrees, and well-paying jobs. The Sermon on the Mount calls that world meaningless and the worry it engenders worthless, as worthless as the empty promises a paper-company executive makes out of his own inflated sense of generosity. That's a hard lesson to take, but it goes down much easier with a few awkward jokes.

The Office provides more than just rueful laughter, however. There's also grace operating behind the show's many mistakes and petty squabbles, offering hope to overburdened young viewers.

It's no mistake that we see this graceful quality

in one of the first episodes where the American *Office* distinguished itself from its misanthropic British counterpart: "The Dundies," the Season 2 premiere, in which corporate headquarters cuts funding to Michael's annual awards ceremony. Where Michael sees the Dundies as a manifestation of his vision for the company ("The Dundies are about the best in every one of us," he shouts), everyone else considers the ceremony a chore to endure. As exasperated accountant Oscar (Oscar Nuñez) puts it, "The Dundies are kind of like a kid's birthday party. And you go, and there's really nothing for you to do there, but the kid's having a really good time, so you're kinda there." Even worse, the budget cuts drive the celebration from a private conference room to a local Chili's, where restaurant patrons serve as de facto audience members, equally unamused by Michael's jokes.

But when Michael finally cuts short the show to sulk away in disappointment, an inebriated Pam turns things around. She laughs out loud at Michael's wisecracks and demands to win a Dundie, celebrating like a mad woman with her "Whitest Sneakers" trophy. The awards are still meaningless and the jokes often tasteless, but the team can't help but get caught up in Pam's wild applause when Kevin wins the "Do Not Go In There After Me" award. As the camera pans across the restaurant, we see every employee giving in to Pam's insistent and earnest chant, "Dundies, Dundies!"

By the end of the evening, Michael actually succeeds through his failures; his employees visibly had a good time, so much so that even office curmudgeon Stanley (Leslie David Baker) cracks a joke and accepts his trophy with a smile. They may not have made millions or secured their future, but they actually made the most of their time and enjoyed one another's company.

For young viewers, "The Dundies" showcases not workplace excellence, but a celebration of shortcomings, of the things that they've been warned will ruin their life. When Pam ends her tipsy acceptance speech with the suddenly somber declaration, "I feel God in this Chili's tonight," teens and young adults laugh. They laugh because it's a funny joke, perfectly delivered by Fischer, but also because it's a relief.

In those episodes, young viewers see what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount: that they shouldn't worry about failing to earn money or gather power, because none of that matters, no matter what we adults say or model. They might even see that God's throne is in heaven, that God's footstool is the earth, and that God is even in that Chili's when people put their care for each other above everything else.

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The Office is Us

by JOSH HERRING

Why do we keep going back to *The Office*, a series that concluded in 2013? To relive the romance of Jim and Pam? To re-experience the *schadenfreude* of Michael Scott's mishaps? To watch Dwight get pranked? Perhaps we love *The Office* for deeper reasons. In watching these characters transform over the years, we recognize our own need for God's redemptive work in our lives. By drawing us into the real drama of mundane life, *The Office* presents us with people we recognize. We see ourselves in their redemption.

This redemption is best demonstrated in the series finale, but to appreciate the episode the viewer must watch all nine seasons. We have to see Jim's pranks, Dwight's "mercy killing" of Angela's cat, Oscar's long-suffering practicality, Andy's longing for acceptance, and Pam's struggle to actualize her artistic inclinations. When we trace these threads throughout *The Office*, we are prepared to appreciate the ways in which the characters grow and mature.

"Finale" is set a year after the previous episode, and it concludes the major story arcs. Dwight (Rainn Wilson) has at long last achieved his goal of becoming manager of Dunder Mifflin Scranton. In contrast to his brief, gun-toting stint as interim manager, Dwight has matured into a capable, wise leader who looks out for his friends (as we see when Jim and Pam are "fired" so that Dwight can guarantee a generous severance package). This mature, stable leadership reveals itself in Dwight's marriage to Angela (Angela Kinsey). Far from the furtive, illicit encounters shown in previous episodes, Dwight's love for Angela has grown into a dedication that allows the viewer to hear Kevin's reading of a passage from the *Song of Solomon* as a sincere, authentic text, rather than ironic comedy. Dwight has become a character who both *can* and *does* love others (though he still has "subordinates," as he tells us in one of his final asides).

Jim (John Krasinski) changes from a single man entranced with possibilities of business success to a father and husband who chooses family over career. Pam (Jenna Fischer) experiences artistic growth, culminating in the unveiling of a mural that is a personal triumph while also a gift to her community, a way of marking their many years together. In their marriage, Jim and Pam also demonstrate a commitment to mutual service: Jim's dedication to Pam is the initial act of sacrifice, while Pam responds in gratitude by selling their house and preparing their family to move to Austin. Together, they are ready to close their years in Scranton and embrace a new life.

And then there is Michael Scott (Steve Carell). Michael too has a redemptive arc to his character. We meet him first as the office clown, but quickly learn there is a hidden purpose to his silliness. While Michael's management methods are often ridiculous ("Boom, roasted!"), at his core there is a leader who longs to help his people see the office as their family. He knows

In watching these characters transform over the years, we recognize our own need for God's redemptive work in our lives.

life is boring, but also that "laughter is good medicine for the soul." By Michael's departure episode, the viewer can sympathize with Pam when she almost misses saying goodbye to the annoying boss who became a friend.

Throughout the series, Michael's relationships offer a fascinating picture of maturing love. From his emotionally abusive time with Jan (Melora Hardin) to the string of short-lived affairs he embarks on in the wake of their break-up, Michael's idea of romantic love never progresses beyond the superficial. Then he meets Holly Flax (Amy Ryan). He initially wants to pursue Holly as he has pursued other women: rush to the physical as quickly as possible. Jim counsels him against this plan: friendship first; let that friendship grow into romance; don't ruin the relationship by skipping the slow ways of knowing another person. And indeed Michael and Holly have much in common, including a groan-inducing sense of humor. After a series of separations due to work and family obligations, Michael realizes that life without Holly will be a far emptier one. Instead of chasing bridesmaids (and Pam's mom) at weddings, Michael dedicates himself to Holly. In "Finale" we see the fruits of his commitment, as Michael shows Pam pictures of his children. He is still the man with a "That's what she said" always ready, but now he finds pride and joy in a stable life with his family.

I've watched all nine seasons of *The Office* at least five times, and every time I reach the finale I find my heart sad that the story has come to an end. We grow to love these characters; they become friends of a sort. We could, I suspect, each find echoes of our lives and personalities in *The Office*'s caricatures. In their transformation into men and women who have found happiness, we see our own hope.

It is in that sense of hope and the reality of personal transformation that *The Office* resembles the Christian faith. Through the death and sacrifice of Jesus, our natures can be changed. Our natural lives, Christianity declares, are flawed and incomplete without a connection to the Creator. In coming to faith in Christ, we begin a lifetime of transformation to fulfill the *imago dei*.

Transformation is the heart of the gospel, and the Bible uses many metaphors to describe it. Ezekiel speaks of exchanging a "heart of stone" for a "heart of flesh." The Apostle Paul writes of moving from "slaves to sin" to "slaves to righteousness." Once we were "God's enemies," but through Christ we become "sons and daughters," heirs to an eternal kingdom. Redemption begins in the moment of regeneration, and continues over a lifetime. Jesus uses events both rare and mundane to form us more fully into his image. In that sense, our Christian discipleship resembles the slow transformation that takes place within these characters in that most mundane of modern locales: the office.

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