

## 1 Breaking With The Past

**One afternoon, late in the summer**, I was sitting at my desk at home. The window was opened wide onto the garden and the neighborhood beyond. Above the shouts and laughter of children playing, I caught the beginnings of a conversation between several of my neighbors, all in their mid-thirties. The word that caught my attention was a single declarative announcement: "Christianity!" A long pause followed. What was this? A discussion of Christianity?

The discussion was not at all what I had expected. The person went on, speaking with an air of finality and authority: "Yes, Christianity is on the way out. It's a little like the Jewish religion. Once, a long time ago, Judaism was a fairly strong religion, but it had its day and now is just a small religious group. Well, Christianity is in the same situation. It has been strong, but all that's over. It's on the way out."

**On hearing that**, you and I may want to rush out onto the lawn, shouting, "No, you're wrong!"

We could point out the faulty logic or provide statistics that show otherwise. But one aspect of the conversation can't be avoided. We can't ignore that, today, in many parts of North America, this perspective is not unusual. Increasing numbers of people out there think that Christianity is a thing of the past, a religious relic irrelevant for today and tomorrow.

**Clearly, something has changed**. We may feel it in a thousand different ways, and we clearly see it in people's attitudes toward the church and the Gospel. Statistics show how dramatically our world has shifted over this past century. But the changes that have happened and continue to happen and the pace at which change is occurring are not the only issues at hand. We need to realize that our society is right in the middle of what can only be described as the shifting of tectonic plates, a huge change in the ways we see and understand the world.

**To say that Christianity** in North America is undergoing a massive transition is an understatement.

According to some, we are witnessing and in fact experiencing the winding down of something that began as far back as the fourth century. It is as if we can stand back and see two bookends on a long shelf. At one end, seemingly far down the shelf, is the beginning of Christendom under Constantine, a point in history shining with hope and promise that, finally, the kingdom of God had overcome the kingdoms of this world. At the other end, however, stands a relatively new bookend. We hesitate to even put it on the shelf. It feels too much like placing a gravestone at the tomb of an old and much-loved friend.

**But the bookend is unavoidable** and even necessary. It marks the end of any pretension that Christendom exists today. The Christianity that literally turned the world upside down and spread like wildfire across Europe and into North America has been, in the space of only a half a century, reduced to a flickering candle on our continent. Lesslie Newbigin described it this way: "The Christian vision has been relegated to the status of a permitted option for the private sector." This fact is hard for us to grasp. What happened? And what will Christian life in the modern world look like as we move past this bookend and into terra incognita?

**Those unanswered questions** touch on just half the story. Not only is the Christianity we have known in crisis, but the modern world itself is in a crisis of immense proportions. The world is undergoing a metamorphosis, a literal change in form, as we shift from being the modern to being in the postmodern era. Something is over, but we don't yet know even what to call the future that is emerging. This change is already well advanced in Europe, but we in North America are in the

early days.

**Whatever we will eventually call this** soon-to-be-present future, there is no getting past the fact that our world is becoming radically different. Stephen Toulman, author of, *Cosmopolis : The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, says, "We must reconcile ourselves to a paradoxical-sounding thought: namely, the thought that we no longer live in the 'modern' world. The 'modern' world is now a thing of the past... it is rapidly engaged in becoming 'postmodern'... The world has not yet discovered how to define itself in terms of what is, but only in terms of what has just-now ceased to be."

**The importance of Mr. Toulman's observation** was underscored for me during a recent visit with the leader of a national evangelical organization. He had listened to me describe some of the characteristics of this shift from a modern to a postmodern world. He was coming to terms with the reality that the church and the Gospel are quickly being sidelined in our culture. His comment to me was significant and accurate. He said that, unless church leaders are keenly aware of these twin crises—these huge shifts in the church as well as the culture—we Christians in North America will miss the critical moment to which God has brought us. Only if we can grasp what is going on can we begin to become God's missional people in our culture. The most important task for the leaders of our churches is to understand what has happened to us in these twin crises. This is the crucial starting point of our journey into the future.

## 2 Leading Through Transition

**Have you heard** the consulting world's term "blue-skying"? In that process, people are invited to dream big about the possibilities for their organizations; to imagine new futures given the current challenges; to, put simply, embrace change. But the scope of the change now sweeping over the church in North America is overwhelming. The natural instinct of leaders is to do the equivalent of blue-skying-to-plan and organize the big picture of change; to engage this new situation with the Gospel. But before too quickly imagining the next church world, we must pause and recognize that it is the people in our churches who will make the missional\* difference in our culture. How each of them responds to change is what counts right now.

**So, aware of the changes** ready to roll over the church, how do we leaders tell our people that the world they have known is over? When congregations are already struggling with the shift from hymns by Fanny Crosby to songs by Graham Kendrick, from hymn books in the hand to overheads on a screen, how will they deal with the tornado outside that is about to sweep them into its path? "No, Toto! We're not in Kansas anymore!"

**As denominational executives struggle** over the nature of loyalty, identity, and the future of their own positions, how do you in the local church address the more fundamental change issues that will influence the very future of your denomination? Many church leaders can identify with the experience of one pastor who had a 40-something member stand up at a meeting. With tears in her eyes, she sobbed out that Beethoven would roll over in his grave if he saw drums in the church accompanying his music. That pastor is encountering the problem of transitions, and you may be facing that same challenge.

**As church leaders**, we are just beginning to understand the changes re-shaping the church. We ourselves are struggling with what the change will mean for us and our flocks. As leaders, we quickly ask questions about the impact of change on our mission, our organization, and our structure. Leaders naturally ask such questions. They think down the road; mentally, they are already in the new world. But that's not where most people in our churches live.

**The people sitting in our pews or folding chairs** are hardly thinking about new outcomes. Instead, they are just beginning to deal with the transitions inside them. They are confused and grieving the loss of a world—the loss of a way of life, a way of being in the church that has met their needs for a long time and that now seems to be slipping away from them. Most people are not struggling with questions of how to move into the new church world. They are struggling emotionally with the issues of why they have to leave behind the church they have cherished so long and how to do that. The members of our congregations are dealing with endings, not beginnings. Our failure to first recognize that fact and then lead people through this process of transition will undermine the church's ability to be God's missional people in the days ahead.

**Leaders need to recognize** that, in both the culture at large and in the church today, the patterns and arrangements that have consciously and unconsciously shaped our world, giving people identity and meaning, are being torn down. Many Christians are aware that, as a group, their status in society, their role in their world, and their understanding of themselves as believers are being radically changed.

**In Canada, for example**, the change in status, role, and identity has been so profound and so fast that the Christian presence now ranges from marginal, at best, to almost invisible. On a recent national radio program, the topic was whether or not it is appropriate to "keep Christ in Christmas." This conversation represents a massive shift of perspective in a very brief period of time. It reminds us that the people we minister to and with every day are losing much that they have cherished and assumed to be normal. Clearly, this is a time of transition. It is vitally important to understand that transition is a place we have to live for a time; it's not merely a quick stop on the way to something else. In light of that fact we realize that we the church have moved into a no-man's land of in-between living.

**This in-between living** can be a very confusing experience due to at least three elements we cannot ignore, each of which is crucial to understand. In-between living means, first, experiencing the loss of a way of life that has been seen as normal. It also means, second, feeling displaced and marginalized to a place where little from the past seems to work any more. In this stage—which takes time to work through—people's strongest desire is to find a way back to Kansas so they can restore their old way of living. Feeling vulnerable, they look for something or someone to blame. But then the third element of in-between living comes: the emergence of a new identity within the culture. Obviously, we want to lead our churches toward a new missional identity in North America. We leaders, however, will not be able to help our people assume this new identity without first acquiring some of the important skills needed to help them move through the transitions and live expectantly in these in-between times. And for everyone this is a journey in an uncharted world.

### 3 Hearing The Gospel Again

**We are being catapulted** into a wild and woolly transitional period of profound cultural change, a period that will not go away for some time to come. Not only do we need to understand this transition, but we must also discover how Christian life in North America has lost the meaning of the Gospel. Listen to the observations of these leaders:

"Conventional historical understanding has it that religious belief passively collapsed under the pressure of science or social change... (but) religious leaders actively struggled for centuries to fit God comfortably into the modern world... In trying to adapt religious beliefs to socioeconomic change, to new moral challenges, to novel problems of knowledge, to the tightening standards of science, the defenders of God slowly strangled Him."

**James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed***

"In fact, I want to argue that America has so eagerly and thoroughly been Constantinian that it does have a true "old time" and civil religion, but this religion is not Christianity. It is instead that eminently interiorized and individualized faith called gnosticism."

### ***Rodney Clapp, A Peculiar People***

**These strong words** point out in no uncertain terms that, during the 300 years of the modern period, Christians lost the meaning of Gospel: we have reduced God to a mirror image of our culture. This hard truth explains something about our struggle to understand the end of Christendom and the passing of the modern experiment. It also challenges us to hear the Gospel all over again-but what exactly does that mean? Let me offer a word picture.

**People love Starbucks coffee.** Starbucks coffee shops are proliferating along the West Coast and spreading across the continent, but coffee shops have been around a long, long time. What's behind the chain's phenomenal success? The answer to that question comes when you stand in a Starbucks' line for a few minutes and listen to people order their particular style of drink. Each person wants to order an individualized style of coffee, ranging from a double shot americano to a decaf-skim milk latte and including everything in between. Starbucks caters to the human need to be individualized.

**That very need to be a unique person** was key to shaping the modern period: the autonomous individual sought to have his or her needs met. This focus on the self was a primary factor in our "losing" the Gospel: we read the Gospel as a personalized message. Long after I could read Greek and understand its grammar, whenever I saw the pronoun you in the English or Greek Bible, I assumed it was second-person singular and referred to an individual. That is how our modern cultural eye reads the Gospel and therefore transforms it. Reading the New Testament with the understanding that you is second-person plural and refers to a community, to a corporate or social group, radically changes the message. This simple change from singular to plural profoundly changes the meaning of the Gospel. But because the culture's way of reading you in the singular, of reading the Gospel individualistically, is so deeply imbedded within us we rarely, if ever, consider or work with the implications of this corrected message.

**We've reduced the meaning and impact of the Gospel** by reading it as a personal letter to an individual. Likewise, we have reduced the meaning of the Gospel by our inaccurate understanding of the word believe. When we see this word in the Bible, we tend to assume that it refers to accepting a set of propositions about what is true, such as "Jesus is God's Son who died for our sin." We understand the word to mean that I, as an individual, acknowledge something to be true. Much of our evangelism and apologetics are shaped by attempts to prove the truth of certain Gospel propositions. What we have missed is the fact that this approach to belief is a modern way of constructing the world, not a biblical way of seeing the world. In the Bible, believing means responding to God's call and following Jesus as Lord by embracing a way of life that, through certain practices, binds one to others in a social community distinct from that of the surrounding culture. Hearing the Gospel in this way would radically change our Christian identity.

**We could give other examples** of how the Gospel has been reduced by the mind-set and thought processes of the modern culture. But these two examples alone make it clear that we face a huge challenge in understanding our captivity to our culture and how we've reduced the Gospel message so that it fits with our world. But this understanding is essential to hearing the Gospel afresh, and this re-hearing is critical to discovering the future shape and mission of the church in North America.

## 4 Shaping A New Identity

**I was in San Francisco** to discuss with some seminary leaders what a missional engagement with western culture would mean for the church in North America. Most of us sitting in the room were well dressed and middle aged, so it was no surprise that the topic of conversation kept reverting back to congregational and denominational life as we have known it since at least the midpoint of the century. Over and over again, our discussion returned to familiar systems, to the church as we have known it. All of us were drawn back-except for one person. He was very bright and very articulate-and he was in his late twenties.

**After sitting silently** through our spirited discussions of what exists, he spoke to those of us who had invested 20 and 30 years in leading congregations, denominational systems, and educational institutions. His words-not intended to be critical-revealed what had been stirring inside him during our conversation. He said that he, like a growing number of leaders his age who shared his deep passion for the Gospel, could no longer connect with such conversations about the church as we currently see it. He described an emerging movement, albeit diffuse, that was "flying under the radar" of these conversations and seeking a new form of church.

**Most people in the room** tried to temper his youthful enthusiasm by telling him that no matter what you start, you still have to deal with structures and systems. Interestingly, it was a well-published, internationally-known New Testament scholar who looked with anguish at this young friend and expressed his great longing that this new form of Christian life would emerge, for we sorely need its reality.

**David Bosch, who has written** extensively about our need to rethink mission to the West, said that vital mission work requires communities that are "countercultural, though not escapist." As we come to the end of modernity and the end of Christendom, it is time to address the various forms of Christian witness in North America. The temptation is to look for ways to tune up what we have, but at a time when the known world is disappearing around us, mere tune-ups will not enable the church to have a missional encounter with our culture. History teaches us that lesson.

**When, for instance, God took Israel** from the triumph and security of Jerusalem to the waters of Babylon (Psalm 137) in 587 BC, it was a catastrophic event. We cannot overestimate the emotional effects of this loss and exile upon Israel. All the support for her faith and all the foundational symbols of her religion were removed. But, as a result of the exile, a radically new social structure emerged that not only enabled Israel to survive as a people, but also became the highway along which the young church would spread the flame of the Gospel after Pentecost. This new social institution was the synagogue. It did not exist before the exile; it was born out of the pain of loss. Like uprooted Israel thousands of years ago, we are now looking toward the new social forms of Christian life that God will bring forth and through which we might witness again to His kingdom.

**And the need for such new social forms** of the Christian faith is urgent! Congregational life has lost its power to transform or enable us to live as God's counter community. The forms of congregational life currently found across North America were given their social shape in the postwar era, a time of great optimism, a time of identifying American culture with the world's future. Capitalism-expanding in an unprecedented way-was linked to an increased technological efficiency and production, newly turned to meeting the needs of the postwar baby boom generation.

**This powerful economic and technological juggernaut**, linked with the fright-and-flight exodus of middle-class people from city centers, meant the explosion of suburban life across the continent. The church followed swiftly with an unprecedented building boom from one coast to the other. A new social form of church life was born: the bourgeois utopia of the suburban congregation. These congregations are not so much expressions of the alternative, countercultural life Bosch writes about as they are the very apex of individualism, consumerism, and the shrinkage of personal life into private need. Here at the turn of the century, as we swim into the incredibly turbulent waters of transition and change, we are left with social organizations and institutions that express more deeply than anything else the church's captivity to the culture.

**Writing toward the end of his life** about how the Gospel must now encounter the pluralist culture of the West, Lesslie Newbigin caught the essence of the missional challenge that confronts Christian witness when he declared that it is the local community of God's people that is the hermeneutic of the Gospel. He meant that God's people are to be a distinct people, who live out the alternative values of the kingdom and whose corporate life functions as a witness and a sign of God's life. Only through the emergence of something radically different from our current congregational forms will that prophetic insight come to birth. What is needed at this point are leaders who will commit their lives to discerning and living into this new form of life as God's people. I met one in San Francisco. God has many others.

## 5 Practice Missional Community

**Writing in Harper's magazine**, Fenton Johnson reflects on North America's search for vessels to shape their spiritual hunger. He describes the "comfortable mediocrity" of congregations which feed on a diet of religious consumables that never touch the heart of their longings. The very congregations that pastors and denominational leaders strive so hard to shape become barriers to encountering God in transformative ways.

**In light of Mr. Johnson's insight**, it's no wonder that a palpable dissatisfaction characterizes North American mainstream Christianity. The impulse toward mystery and the desire to encounter the sacred are stirrings that churches seem unable to satisfy. People hunger for ways to resist the ubiquitous dominance of money, power, and sex as signs of a fulfilled life, aware at some level that, in reality, they leave our souls empty. So instead we search for a connection with something that can't be bought, packaged, or marketed as a product. We want a way of restoring-or discovering-order and values larger than the consumer market or self-actualization.

**This desire for genuine and meaningful connection** shapes the hunger of the people coming into our churches. But how do we feed it? Christian leaders are bereft of a way. People do not need more programs or propositions about the nature of the world. They need a new way of life, the way of community defined in God's Word.

**But welcoming people into a way of life** requires leadership that is radically different from simple competence in managing programs, caring for people's needs, or preaching sermons. Such skills are not unimportant, but they alone will not form a community that is an institutionalized contradiction to the wearing, tearing, fragmenting living that exists at the dawn of the twenty-first century. When we manage our congregational systems through care processes and programs designed for various age-and-stage points, we only lay a religious covering over fragmented lives. Leaders are needed who call people into a way of life. The comfortable mediocrity of congregational life and pastoral leadership cannot address the unarticulated stirring in the soul of North America.

**Something else is required**, and it must be both local and institutionalized. Missional communities must be people living a certain way of life in a particular place. Such missional communities will require something more than the voluntary associations which currently characterize congregational life, associations which only deepen the sense that Christian life is an individualized spiritual experience supported by local churches. What is required is the refounding of Christian life in North America, the metamorphosis of congregational identity. Fenton Johnson continues: "Life is like water: it takes the shape of the vessels into which it is poured; remove the vessel and it's lost. What we are seeking are vessels into which to pour the chaos of life, what we are seeking are models of discipline." The vessels formed by the shaping of middle-class, suburban life in North America since the middle of the century are increasingly incapable of shaping the emergent forms of social life that Christian identity must take in the decades ahead.

**What vessels point to this reforming** of Christian identity? Monastic Christianity offers hints of what contradictory living might become, but specific details will not be in our purview for some time to come because ours is a period of gestation. We are seeing the unraveling of one world, but not yet the emergence of what might be woven from its threads. We are reaching for images, stretching tentatively toward an unformed future that lies ahead. Nevertheless, some general outlines of this gestation can be described, and we know that the church now requires leaders who will commit their passions and lifelong habits to developing and living into those contours.

**Now the idea of monastic communities** may be misleading. We are not calling for a Christian identity removed from life hidden in cloisters. We are instead reaching toward a form of secular orders in which a Christian identity, as a distinct and contradictory option, is lived out within this culture, not apart from it. The church can only be a sign of hope if it once again offers an alternative way of living that is in sharp contrast to society at large. This kind of identity can only be shaped by commitments and practices that will result in an alternative way of life in neighborhoods and cities.

**In a society that extols** the power of personal choice and perpetual open-endedness, for instance, churches would become like orders that voluntarily place limits on choice due to its conviction that meaning and purpose greater than the accumulation of goods and the actualization of self prevail in this world. People would be invited to participate in a local order that witnesses to the alternative way of Christ through lives shaped by common practices and commitments.

**Critical to the formation of this witness** are leaders who can form such communities, and we have arrived at the point where this leadership is essential. If the church in North America is to have a meaningful role in the 21st century it will be discovered through the missional engagement of local church communities. This discovery will require a journey of faith on an untraveled road, with a horizon obscured by clouds. If we are to start strong in this new century, leaders must break from the familiar motions of the past and step onto this road.