
New Reality Number One

The Collapse of the Church Culture

The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out (80 percent of money given to congregations comes from people aged fifty-five and older) or when the remaining three-fourths of a generation who are institutional loyalists die off or both.

Please don't hear what I am not saying. The death of the church culture as we know it will not be the death of the church. The church Jesus founded is good; it is right. The church established by Jesus will survive until he returns. The imminent demise under discussion is the collapse of the unique culture in North America that has come to be called "church." This church culture has become confused with biblical Christianity, both inside the church and out. In reality, the church culture in North America is a vestige of the original movement, an institutional expression of religion that is in part a civil religion and in part a club where religious people can hang out with other people whose politics, worldview, and lifestyle match theirs. As he hung on the cross Jesus probably never thought the impact of his sacrifice would be reduced to an invitation for people to join and to support an institution.

We are witnessing the emergence of a new world. The church of Jesus is moving into the postmodern world. Its expression is going to be more different than most people realize or may want to imagine. The scale of the shift will rank along with the epochal transitions of ancient church to medieval, from medieval to modern.

This phenomenon has been noted by many who tag the emerging culture as post-Christian, pre-Christian, or postmodern. The point is, **the world is profoundly different than it was at the middle of the last century**, and everybody knows it. Even the church culture. But knowing it and acting on it are two very different things. **So far the North American church largely has responded with heavy infusions of denial**, believing the culture will come to its senses and come back around to the church. This denial shows up in many ways. Many churches have withdrawn from the community. An alternate form of denial has been the attempt to fix the culture by flexing political and economic muscle. Still another form of denial shows up in the church's obsession with internal theological-methodological debates designed to determine who the true believers are while the world is headed to hell in a handbasket.

All Is Not Well

If you don't need much convincing that the church ain't cuttin' it in terms of missional effectiveness, then you might want to skip this section. **This next stuff is for those of you who need convincing or who need ammunition for making the case to others.**

The collapse of the church culture can be demonstrated in several ways. One is through demographics. The percentage of Americans who claim to go to church each week has hung in the 40 to 43 percent range for thirty years. But I ask you, do you really believe those numbers? I recently asked a group of pastors in a conference setting whether any of them live in a community where 40 percent of the population shows up at church on Sunday. Only one raised

his hand. A study conducted in the late 1990s suggested Americans might be lying about their churchgoing habits to pollsters. It pegged church attendance at only 26 percent of Americans. (The study was conducted by sociologist Stanley Presser of the University of Maryland and research assistant Linda Stinson of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, who assessed church attendance by actual diary entries as opposed to responses to pollsters.) Quite a difference! Think about it. Does your town even have room in all the churches for 40 percent of the population? A friend of mine in a Southern Bible Belt town called every church in his town after Easter in 2001 and reported that only about 25 percent of the town attended church—on Easter!

Let's say you do believe the church attendance that people report. There is still cause for alarm. **The further down you go in the generational food chain, the lower the percentage each succeeding generation reports going to church.** The drop is from the 52 percent of builders (those born before 1946) and seniors to only 36 percent of gen Xers. What does this spell for the church in the future? Armed with this information, of course, churches are launching an all-out effort to reach gen Xers. I wish! Most churches have actually just written them off, waiting for them to grow up and learn to like what the church has to offer.

Or let's take a look at the unchurched population. A 2001 survey reported in the *Christian Science Monitor* reveals that the number of Americans who have "no religious preference" has doubled from 1990 to 2001, reaching 14 percent of the population. (These are not skeptics—only 1 percent identified themselves as atheists. This group doesn't see the church as vital to their spiritual life.) George Barna reports (*State of the Church 2002*, p. 17) that the unchurched population has grown from 24 to 34 percent in just one decade! (Barna defines people as unchurched "if they have not attended a Christian church service during the past six months, other than for special events such as weddings or funerals.") Among some subgroups the increase is even more substantial. Since 1991, the number of unchurched women has risen

from 18 to 30 percent; the number of unchurched Hispanics has jumped from 19 percent to 33 percent; the number of unchurched in the Northeast is up from 26 to 38 percent; and the unchurched population on the West Coast has risen from 29 to 40 percent. (If you've been in California on Sunday you may be suspicious that the reported numbers of unchurched are so low!)

For evangelicals, the situation looks even bleaker. Thom Rainer of the Billy Graham School of Evangelism at Southern Baptist Seminary reports some disturbing responses to the two frequently asked Evangelism Explosion questions (“Do you know for certain that if you died today you would go to heaven?” and “If you were to die today, what would you say to God if he asked you why he should let you into his heaven?”). The interview included about 1,300 persons of each of four generational groups that Rainer identified and investigated (5,200 in all). Analyzing the responses for evidence that the respondents were born-again (the evangelical definition of one's being a Christian) yielded the following results: builders (born before 1946)—65 percent; boomers (born between 1946 and 1964)—35 percent; busters (born between 1965 and 1976)—15 percent; bridgers (born between 1976 and 1994)—4 percent. Those interviewed in the bridger category were at least seventeen years old.

What about retention rates? Dawson McAlister, national youth ministry specialist, says that 90 percent of kids active in high school youth groups do not go to church by the time they are sophomores in college. One-third of these will never return. This rate of disconnection indicates a dilemma far more serious than mere youthful rebellion.

A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost faith. **They are leaving the church to preserve their faith.** They contend that the church no longer contributes to their spiritual development. In fact, they say, quite the opposite is true. The number of “post-congregational” Christians is growing. David Barrett, author of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, estimates that

there are about 112 million “churchless Christians” worldwide, about 5 percent of all adherents, but he projects that number will double in the next twenty years!

The bottom line is that the bottom line is not looking too good, no matter how you cut it. Underneath the semblance of an American culture influenced by Christianity, the tectonic plates have shifted.

It’s more than numbers. The American culture no longer props up the church the way it did, no longer automatically accepts the church as a player at the table in public life, and can be downright hostile to the church’s presence. The collapse I am detailing also involves the realization that values of classic Christianity no longer dominate the way Americans believe or behave.

Sure, when there’s a community disaster or a national calamity such as 9/11, people scurry to church. This is not because they have a sudden interest in church but because they have a huge need for God, and they still seek sacred spaces to pray. Some argue that these church attendance spikes reflect more peoples’ need for community in times of shared grief than anything else. At any rate, within a few weeks of these disasters things are back to normal in terms of church attendance. The prognosticators who view these spikes as a renewal or beginning of a spiritual awakening remain frustrated. Most significant, a vast number of churches squander the window of opportunity by failing to connect with new people in these moments in meaningful ways that will bring them back.

The World Has Ended

We can place the enormous changes taking place against the larger landscape. We are entering a new epoch of human history called the postmodern age. The postmodern world will demand a new church expression, just as did the rise of the modern world. The church took years to accommodate itself to the modern world that adopted Galileo’s and Copernicus’s view of the universe

(deposing God from his fixed, top-of-heap position) and embraced Cartesian logic (pushing God to a diminishing domain of what could not be explained away by reasoning).

The modern world assaulted God, shoving him further and further into the corner with its determination to drain all the mystery out of life and the universe. Everything that could be explained scientifically further diminished the realm of the spiritual.

Having retreated into a diminishing corner for several hundreds of years, the North American church culture unfortunately now reflects the materialism and secularism of the modern era. Not only do we not need God to explain the universe, **we don't need God to operate the church.** Many operate like giant machines, with church leaders serving as mechanics. God doesn't have to show up to get done what's being done. **The culture does not want the powerless God of the modern church.**

We need to take courage. Though secularism and nihilism have taken their best shot to kill God, they have lost. The post-modern world, governed by quantum physics and its emphasis on relationships, is God's end run around the modern world. A quantum world stands ready to accept divine design and divine interaction. God himself is stirring the pot. If we can pay attention we will eventually discover that not only will we not lose God in this emerging postmodern world, we will find him again!

Although the next church's shape is not yet obvious, the forces that will give it shape are. They are futures that are already present. The first of these present futures is shocking and dramatic, because it declares that much of what we call church is not going to survive.

This first new reality is in many ways foundational to the other five that follow. As with all emerging futures it presents us with a choice. It is a choice between seeking answers in pursuit of the wrong question or noodling on the tough question posed by the arrival of the new world. Its creation has made obsolete much of our goals and activities in the church world. These no-longer-relevant pursuits are reflected in the wrong question.

Wrong Question: How Do We Do Church Better?

Faced with diminishing returns on investment of money, time, and energy, church leaders have spent much of the last five decades trying to figure out how to do church better. Emphases have come and gone in rapid succession. Church and lay renewal has given way to church growth, which has given way to church health. The results beg the question.

An entire industry has been spawned to help churches do whatever it is they decide to do. Consultants, parachurch ministries, denominational headquarters, and publishing houses prod and push the church toward whatever the current fad is. A spate of program fixes have consistently overpromised and underdelivered. The suggestions are plentiful: offer small groups, contemporize your worship, market your services, focus on customer service, create a spiritual experience, become seeker-friendly, create a high-expectation member culture, purify the church from bad doctrine, return the church to the basics. After decades of this kind of environment no wonder church leaders are a little skeptical about the “next thing” and why many feel that just about the time they catch up they fall further behind. But the mailings keep coming, the seminars keep filling up, and the conference notebooks keep stacking up on the shelves.

All this activity anesthetizes the pain of loss. It offers a way to stay busy and preoccupied with methodological pursuits while not facing the hard truth: none of this seems to be making much of a difference. **Church activity is a poor substitute for genuine spiritual vitality.**

The fallout from this frenetic effort to run in place is staggering in every direction. Consider the burnout of many ministers who struggle with the increase of expectations on the part of church members. Many men and women who entered the ministry with a clear sense of call to make a difference feel overwhelmed, bewildered, defeated, and generally underprepared for the challenges they face. Having packed their bags for the journey of the church age,

they now have no idea what should be in their leadership backpack for the current excursion. The portfolio of skills that once gave them standing in the community of faith no longer distinguishes them, ensures their effectiveness, or guarantees their continued leadership position. The senior pastor of a multiple-hundred-member congregation now must be manager of the corporate culture, headhunter, personnel manager, strategic planner, fundraiser, expert communicator, chief vision developer and caster, ministry entrepreneur, spiritual guru, architectural consultant, plus whatever particular assistance or role the congregation needs at any given time.

Fallout is not limited to the clergy. **Many church members feel they have been sold a bill of goods.** They were promised that if they would be a good church member, if they would discover their gifts, or join a small group, sign up for a church ministry, give to the building program, learn to clap or dance in worship, or attend this or that, they would experience a full and meaningful life. Trouble is, we don't have much evidence to support the assumption that all this church activity has produced more mature followers of Jesus. It has produced many tired, burned-out members who find that their lives mimic the lives and dilemmas of people in the culture who don't pay all the church rent.

The faithful, maybe silently or not so silently, wonder when their ticket is going to be punched, when they are going to experience the changed life they've been promised and expected to experience at church. In North America, these people have been led to believe that their Christian life is all about the church, so this failure of the church not only creates doubt about the church, it also leads them to all kinds of doubt about God and their relationship with him.

Wrong Responses

Many congregations and church leaders, faced with the collapse of the church culture, have responded by adopting a refuge mentality. This is the perspective reflected in the approach to

ministry that withdraws from the culture, that builds the walls higher and thicker, that tries to hang on to what we've got, that hunkers down to wait for the storm to blow over and for things to get back to "normal" so the church can resume its previous place in the culture. Those who hold this perspective frequently lament the loss of cultural support for church values and adopt an "us-them" dichotomous view of the world. Those with a refuge mentality view the world outside the church as the enemy. Their answer is to live inside the bubble in a Christian subculture complete with its own entertainment industry. Evangelism in this world-view is about churching the unchurched, not connecting people to Jesus. It focuses on cleaning people up, changing their behavior so Christians (translation: church people) can be more comfortable around them. Refuge churches evidence enormous self-preoccupation. They deceive themselves into believing they are a potent force.

Occasionally when I do consulting for congregations I insist that the church leaders meet off-campus in a restaurant during Sunday church time. I ask the group to look around and then pose the question to them: "Do you think these people struggled with a decision this morning of whether to attend church or to go out for a sausage biscuit?" Are you kidding? The church is not even on their screen.

Some churches go to the opposite extreme. Instead of choosing refuge, their response to the collapse of the church culture is to sell out to the culture. Just today someone told me of a church billboard that promised a ten thousand dollar winner for some person who would attend and sit in the right seat! This marketing scheme is more informed by the neighboring casinos than by the New Testament. Or I think of the "worship" service of a new church I attended a few years ago on Easter Sunday. The only music that the congregation sang was the soft-rock tune, "I Can See Clearly Now the Rain Has Gone." The pastor's message addressed how to have a better marriage. Not one word about Resurrection—and this on the one Sunday of the year guaranteed to

have pre-Christians in attendance! No one connected the dots for the attenders by telling them that their ultimate hope for better vision and marital intimacy is secured by divine intervention of the same God who raised Jesus from the dead. What a lost opportunity! What a pathetic and anemic response to the collapse of the church culture—a capitulation and denial of the power of the gospel. Trying so hard to be with it, this church just doesn't get it.

The point is, all the effort to fix the church misses the point. **You can build the perfect church—and they still won't come.** People are not looking for a great church. They do not wake up every day wondering what church they can make successful. The age in which institutional religion holds appeal is passing away—and in a hurry.

Before consulting one brand-new congregation, I visited their Web site. On their front page they declared that they were a church for unchurched people. Their stated vision was to “develop a congregation of over a thousand members on twenty-five acres.” The people they professed to be interested in reaching could care less about how big they are or how many they are. These numbers are how church people keep score. The belief by the leadership core group was that building a better church would automatically attract seekers who were in the market for a church. They didn't understand that church hopping is for church people.

Church leaders seem unable to grasp this simple implication of the new world—people outside the church think church is for church people, not for them. We may have saturated the market of people who want to be a part of the church culture, who want church the way we do it in North America.

The pursuit of the wrong question will continue to turn the wheel of the church industry, but it will do little to expand the kingdom of God. The need of the North American church is not a methodological fix. It is much more profound. **The church needs a mission fix.**

Tough Question: How Do We Deconvert from Churchianity to Christianity?

This tough question is about challenging the way we think about Christianity. North American Christians think in terms of its institutional expression, the church, as opposed to thinking about Christianity in terms of a movement. This shift in thinking is so profound that it resembles a deconversion, a deprogramming that we typically associate with helping people escape the clutches of a cult. Deconversion will require a disentangling, an intentional self-differentiation from church in order to gain perspective, a willingness to abandon church club member mentality for the sake of following Jesus.

In North America the invitation to become a Christian has become largely an invitation to convert to the church. The assumption is that anyone serious about being a Christian will order their lives around the church, shift their life and work rhythms around the church schedule, channel their charitable giving through the church, and serve in some church ministry; in other words, serve the church and become a fervent marketer to bring others into the church to do the same. In my denominational tradition I grew up with a telling euphemism used to describe when people became Christians: they “joined the church.” The reduction of Christianity to club membership can’t be said better than that.

Many church leaders confuse the downward statistics on church participation with a loss of spiritual interest in Americans. That’s because these leaders can’t think of Christianity outside of institutional terms. The truth is, although intrigue with institutional religion is down, interest in spirituality is up. A 2003 Gallup poll indicates that a vast majority of Americans say that religion has an impact on every area of their life. The cover of *Wired* magazine (November 2002) has a cross on it and devotes an entire section to God and spirituality. In fact, many have

observed that there is a spiritual awakening occurring in America. However, it is not informed by Christian theology, and it's not happening in the church.

People may be turned off to the church, but they are not turned off to Jesus. Jesus is popular. He still makes the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* every year (generally around Easter). As I write these lines he's just come out on the cover of a prominent scientific journal. Church people sometimes get excited by this but fail to understand that people in the nonchurch culture don't associate Jesus with the church. In their mind, the church is a club for religious people where club members can celebrate their traditions and hang out with others who share common thinking and lifestyles. They do not automatically think of the church as championing the cause of poor people or healing the sick or serving people. These are things they associate with Jesus. People outside the church see the handling of the sexual abuse scandals by the Catholic Church as an indictment on the church as a whole. They believe the church is out for itself, looking out more for the institution than for people.

A Theology of Mission

We need to recapture the mission of the church. In both Old and New Testaments we encounter a God who is on a redemptive mission in the world. In fact, we are astounded at the lengths to which God will go in pursuit of his mission to redeem the crowning achievement of his creation—people.

The central act of God in the Old Testament is the Exodus, a divine intervention into human history to liberate his people from oppression and slavery. The decisive act of the New Testament is the divine intervention of God into human history to liberate his people from oppression and slavery. In the Old Testament Moses takes on Pharaoh to liberate his fellow Israelites (though Moses is one of them, he is not one of them). In the New Testament Jesus takes on sin, death, and Satan to effect

deliverance of captive kinsmen (though Jesus is one of us, he is not one of us). In both cases the deliverance is not just *from* something but *to* something. The Hebrew slaves were destined for the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Jesus promised his followers abundant life. Included in that deal is heaven.

In both Old and New Testaments all other mini-dramas and subplots relate back to this central theme. Throughout Old Testament history God is at work on behalf of his people, whether it is raising up a shepherd boy to whip a Philistine giant or causing a pagan Persian king to repatriate the Promised Land of Palestine. In the New Testament the Spirit comes to serve as the continuing presence of God in the lives of the liberated. Much like the pillar of fire and cloud by day given to ancient wilderness-wanderers in the Exodus to guide them, the Spirit of God superintends the journey of God's people, the followers of Jesus, as they spread out from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and beyond. This same Spirit would call up a man enslaved to religion and legalism and turn him into a point person in spreading the gospel of grace.

Many church leaders miss an all-important parallel in the two testaments' stories of God's interventions. God has a purpose and an assignment for the liberated people. After Moses delivered the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, he brought them to Mt. Sinai just as Yahweh had instructed him. It was here Moses had encountered God in the burning bush and had held the conversation that launched him on his mission to Egypt. He certainly had to be curious about what was next as he climbed the mountain to be sequestered with Yahweh. He didn't have long to find out. There God revealed to Moses his heart for his people. It involved a purpose and a mission.

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings, and brought you

to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” (Exodus 19:3–6, New International Version [NIV]).

Yahweh rescued the Hebrews so they could partner with him in his redemptive mission in the world. They were chosen to be the priests of God, representing him to the whole earth. The significance of this designation as royal priests was not lost on those Hebrew ex-slaves. Royal priests in Pharaoh’s court were very powerful figures. They were second only to Pharaoh. The Israelites’ new status was quite a social promotion from their previous position as slaves. At Sinai, God delivered an assignment to his people. They were to tell the whole world about God and convince the world of his love for them. Unfortunately, Israel never quite grasped that their “chosen” status was for the sake of the mission. It incurred responsibility, not just secured the enjoyment of privileged position.

In the New Testament the apostle Peter reaches back to this episode to educate the new followers of Jesus about what it means to be in relationship with God through Jesus. “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9, NIV). Not only is the language reminiscent of Sinai and the commissioning of the people of Israel, the message is the same. The salvation secured by Jesus had come to them so they could pass it on to others. The church had inherited the purposes of God for Israel—to tell the story of the redemption as proof of God’s love for all. As the priests of God’s kingdom they had been given the responsibility for brokering the relationship between God and humanity.

In the book of the Revelation this special relationship between God and his people is rehearsed one final time. “To him

who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever!” (Rev. 1:5b-6, NIV). And in a scene in the throne room itself, those in attendance break out into song:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,
 because you were slain,
 and with your blood you
 purchased men for God
 from every tribe and language and
 people and nation.
 You have made them to be a kingdom
 And priests to serve our God,
 and they will reign on the earth.

Rev. 5:9–10, NIV

Last summer the daughter of a friend of ours got married. My wife directed the wedding and decorated for it. My job was to be transportation for a bagpiper being brought in by the bride to surprise the groom (he loves bagpipes). I picked up the bagpiper from a reunion of World War II veterans. The group converges each year from all over the country to rehearse war stories and celebrate the living. They are a tight group. The reunion dynamic of war veterans who shared combat mission experience, who risked life together, who dealt with death together, is a special fellowship. This is the picture of the people of God forever united to the One with whom they have shared a life-challenging and life-transforming mission. The obvious kinship that God feels for the redeemed is tied to the special bond of being on mission together.

The North American church is suffering from severe mission amnesia. It has forgotten why it exists. The church was created to be the people of God to join him in his redemptive mission in the world. The church was never intended to exist for itself. It was and is the chosen instrument of God to expand his

kingdom. The church is the bride of Christ. Its union with him is designed for reproduction, the growth of the kingdom. Jesus does not teach his disciples to pray, “Thy church come.” The kingdom is the destination. In its institutional preoccupation the church has abandoned its real identity and reason for existence.

God did not give up on his mission in the Old Testament when Israel refused to partner with him. God is a reckless lover. He decided to go on with the mission himself. We do not need to be mistaken about this: if the church refuses its missional assignment, God will do it another way. The church has, and he is. God is pulling end runs around the institutional North American church to get to people in the streets. God is still inviting us to join him on mission, but it is the invitation to be part of a movement, not a religious club.

The Beginning of a Movement

When Jesus came on the scene he entered a world very similar to our own in terms of its spiritual landscape. Institutional religion had collapsed. No one really believed in the Greek or Roman pantheon of gods. People knew these beings were mere projections embodying human traits (and not just the good ones!). Judaism was also exhausted. The Sadducees (in charge of the Jerusalem Temple-based activity) had sold out to materialism and ritual. The Pharisees (holding sway in the synagogues, thereby dominating the religious agenda for most Israelites) had produced a dead religion in search of the moral high ground with God. When Jesus said, “I see dead people” (the Pharisees reminded him of tombs, Matthew 23:27 and Luke 11:44), he was not prophesying; he was stating a reality. The people of Israel in the first century knew Pharisaic Judaism had lost its luster. This is why they flocked to John the Baptist and to Jesus.

The collapse of institutional religion in the first century was accompanied by an upsurge in personal spiritual search for God and salvation. Evidence of this is seen in the two great challenges

to Christianity during its early years—Gnosticism and Mithraism. In Gnosticism personal salvation was gained through possession of certain knowledge about God. In Mithraism adherents gained entrance to the cult by adopting a very strict ethical-moral code of personal conduct and then undergoing certain rites known only to the religious members (this is why this and other similar religious cults were called “mystery” religions). The emphasis in both these cases was personal salvation, not institutional development.

Jesus tapped into this widespread sentiment of disillusionment with religion but hunger for God with his teaching about the kingdom of God and how people could become a part of it. His emphasis was on universal accessibility as opposed to the exclusivity of the Pharisees. His teaching was a radical departure from the legalistic behavioral approach of Judaism. He taught and practiced grace in terms of how God deals with people. At the same time he elevated standards of personal behavior by looking past mere externals to internal heart motivations. He preached that God was *for* people, not *against* them. He defined the litmus test for genuine spirituality in terms of one’s relationships—our relationships with God and with other people. He declared the first and second commandments as these: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Luke 10:27, NIV). This emphasis by Jesus went way past the doctrinal purity standard used by the Pharisees.

The movement Jesus initiated had power because it had at its core a personal life-transforming experience. People undergoing this conversion could not keep quiet about it. They had discovered meaning for their life and wanted other people to experience the same thing. They had a much more powerful spiritual tool at their disposal than coercion or legalism. They had grace and love.

This is the dynamic of genuine Christianity. This is what turned the world upside down at the beginning of the Christian era. The time is ripe again for recapturing this initial appeal of the

gospel. People are interested and searching for God and personal salvation through a relationship with him. Increasingly they are not turning to institutional religion for help with their search. In fact, just the opposite is true. They don't trust religious institutions because they see them as inherently self-serving. So they are off on their own search for God.

The current spiritual awakening in North America lacks Christian content and file systems. This is the scary part of it. Left to their own imagination people will devise all sorts of crazy stuff about God, from New Age crystals to self-enlightenment. But this is also the opportunity of the current spiritual landscape. People are open to revealed truth of God if they can get it.

Unfortunately, the North American church has lost its influence at this critical juncture. It has lost its influence because it has lost its identity. It has lost its identity because it has lost its mission.

The correct response, then, to the collapse of the church culture is not to try to become better at doing church. This only feeds the problem and hastens the church's decline through its disconnect from the larger culture. The need is not for a methodological fix. The need is for a missional fix. **The appropriate response to the emerging world is a rebooting of the mission, a radical obedience to an ancient command, a loss of self rather than self-preoccupation, concern about service and sacrifice rather than concern about style.**

The collapse of the church culture, along with the five other realities I will discuss, is God's gracious invitation to the church to rediscover itself. It will do this by dying to itself and coming alive to God's mission.

In the summer of 2002, the country spent several anxious days concerned about the fate of nine mine workers trapped in a mine in Pennsylvania. Rescue efforts involved several innovative strategies, including pumping heated air down a shaft. As the workers emerged from their ordeal, so did the story of their survival. One key element was their decision to huddle together to stay warm

and in touch with one another in the cold darkness of the collapsed mine.

The church in North America far too often resembles these miners. Feeling trapped in the collapse of the church culture, club members are huddling together in the dark and praying for God to rescue them from the mess they are in. This is the refuge mentality that pervades the mentality of many congregations and church leaders. Instead, the church needs to adopt the role of the rescue workers on the surface. They refused to quit, worked 24/7, and were willing to go to plan B or whatever it took to effect a rescue.

That's the church's mission: to join God in his redemptive efforts to save the world. People all around us are in darkness. They are going to die unless someone finds a way to save them. Trouble is, the church is sleeping on the job. Too many of us have forgotten why we showed up for work.

Even worse, many of us never have known.