

Mike Erre

DEATH  
*by*  
Church



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## DEATH BY CHURCH

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## Introduction: When Jesus Comes to Church



My impression has been that church is a place where Jesus is always found. This seems to be a fairly common idea around the Christian community. After all, Jesus Himself said, “Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them” (Matthew 18:20). Which I always took to mean, of course, that Jesus was happy anytime His followers got together (for whatever reason), and so He would oblige our efforts by coming along. I had always heard this proof text used to verify that Jesus always shows up to church services simply because we’ve gathered.

And of course He must be pleased with us when we gather, right? We take time out of our demanding weekly schedules to worship Him; we sing, clap, and pay attention, and if we are really good, we give our money. So He must be glad we showed up, correct?

Obviously, none of us would say it this way, but I think this is the unconscious assumption that undergirds most of what we do at weekend church services across the country. Without a doubt, the passage in Matthew suggests that Jesus is present when several gather. The section from which the quote comes, however, deals with how to handle sin between two disciples. That passage as a whole addresses the issue of church discipline and conflict resolution. This is hardly the sure basis we think it is for our flippant assurance that Jesus is pleased simply because we show up and do church every week.

In fact, the only real interaction we get between Jesus and His church comes in the book of Revelation. There, Jesus speaks to seven

flesh-and-blood first-century churches and has very interesting things to say. Our Lord seems to have an opinion on church polity and practice, and it isn't always positive.

Of course, we can demythologize the whole section (or book, for that matter) and end up with some nice sentiments about how the church has grown and developed over the years. But in so doing, we would lose the context (that the whole book was an epistle, written toward the end of the first century to encourage actual flesh-and-blood churches in the face of mounting persecution) and the power of Jesus' message to the church.

Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus doesn't always appear to go to church. The oft-quoted passage about Jesus standing at the door and knocking is written to a *church*.

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me (Revelation 3:14-20).

In other words, the image shows Jesus on the *outside* while the church is gathering, and He is inviting them to receive Him into their church.

Not only that, but Jesus is clearly aware of what is going on in each of the seven communities. Time and again throughout Revelation 2–3 He declares, "I know your deeds" (2:2,19; 3:1,8,15). He commends some for perseverance and faithfulness, and He denounces sexual

immorality and false teaching in others. But in every case, He seems to have a strong opinion about what is going on.

This should strike fear into our liturgies, worship, and teaching. How much of what passes for “church” these days would Jesus Himself commend? And why do we rarely (if ever) even think to entertain this question? As long as people are coming and excited, most of us assume that God is moving. But NASCAR races and Mormon temples draw big crowds too.

The modern church is clearly in trouble. Declining attendance and participation are rampant. Sexual scandal and cover-up are commonplace. Books like this one are being published at breakneck speed, cataloging the failures of the church and offering solutions.

But behind the prescriptions and prognostications, behind the doubts and defeatism, beyond the debates about emerging churches and postmodern contexts is something that I think pleases Jesus: *hunger*. Hunger for deeper, wider, and higher community that genuinely and organically transforms the communities we belong to and the ones that surround us. I see a hunger for something beyond the individualized, self-absorbed, bloated faith that is the common fare of most churches.

Hunger for the power of the gospel—not only to forgive sin but also to transform what makes us sinful in the first place, bringing freedom, healing, and deliverance.

Hunger for grace—to see all those excluded and hurt by the church brought again into contact with Jesus and His bride and told of their pricelessness.

Hunger for joy—transcending our techno-isolation and consumer orientation, hunger to taste the joy, wonder, and awe of the world and people around us.

Hunger for justice—to see the gospel proclaimed and lived out in word and deed, corporately and individually, structurally and personally, globally and locally.

Hunger for worship—to see the offering of our whole selves as the only fitting response to God’s mercy, holiness, love, and grace.

Hunger for truth—tired of talking heads proffering countless human

opinions, always in conflict, we hunger for a definitive word, a voice with authority, a way of discerning what really matters and why.

Hunger for honesty—disgusted with the scandals of our churches and our hearts, we hunger to find places where we no longer have to hide our true selves from God or from each other.

This hunger, when combined with the sweeping cultural changes accelerating rapidly around us, has provoked many questions—both of orthodoxy and orthopraxis—that place us in the midst of a new reformation.

Like it or not, the generations to come will see this period in church history as a massive reevaluation of all things “church.” This is cause for alarm to many, but it need not be so.

And yet, for all the press and pages spent on such a quest, nothing much has changed so far. We are in the midst of immense and unprecedented cultural change. That is well known and has been well documented elsewhere. A massive dialogue about what it means to be the people of God has arisen in evangelicalism between so-called emerging or emergent churches, traditional mainline Protestant churches, and more traditional evangelical churches (often of the megachurch variety). Much has been written from all three perspectives.

What often seems missing in this wider conversation are the anchors that should tether us to historical, apostolic, Christian faith and practice as we begin to experiment with methods and modes of being and doing church that are emerging with increasing momentum. The emerging church types and their missiologist friends are correct in this: Those churches that continue to do things the way they always have will suffer from the law of diminishing returns. We must prayerfully seek after new wineskins in order to engage and incarnate the gospel to our fragmented and increasingly fractured world. But the critics of the emerging church movement also have cause for concern: Nothing is wrong with the old wine, and it should not be cast out of churches that seek more authentic community and faithful witness.

Too much conversation in and about the emerging church is theologically imprecise and unhelpful at best and incorrect at worst. What



we think and say *does* matter; no amount of epistemological gymnastics can demonstrate otherwise. The generations who have moved beyond the traditional understandings of what the church is and how it acts in the world give their critics fodder for critique when ambiguity reigns. I would like to propose that there are some nonnegotiables as we seek to know how God would have His people live in the world.

Regardless of whether one is in a mainline denomination or a leaderless house church, certain things must be true for this to be properly called *church*. Remember, our whims and reactions do not serve as the ultimate norm for the way we shape and do community; Scripture does. Much of the emerging theology and practice of church seems simply to be reaction to the abuses and failures of the modernistic church. Thus, I don't see too many *postmodern* churches, but I see plenty of the *antimodern* variety. But the Protestant Reformation taught us that it is not enough to simply live in reaction to something—we must stand for something else, and that something else needs more justification than simply faulting the other way of doing things. We are people of the Book and of the Spirit. The Word of God and Spirit of God set the course, purpose, function, and practice of the community of saints. Therefore, revolt against the long-standing norms must be supplemented with biblical and pneumatological underpinnings for the emerging church movement to become a way station along the road to something truly and lastingly different.

I love the church universal and the church particular. As ugly and unfaithful as it may be at times, it is still the bride of Christ. We must not allow our disdain of some of modern praxis to turn into contempt for the body of Jesus Christ in this world.

This book attempts to outline some of the symptoms of what ails the Western church these days and to explore the root issues behind those obvious problems. From there, we'll offer anchors, postures, and pictures that should guide any spirit-led exploration of church. Finally, we'll move forward into what should be at the heart of our corporate witness to the world as salt and light: confession and repentance.

I write from an American evangelical perspective. I affirm the historic,

orthodox creeds of the Christian faith. I pastor in a large, middle- to upper-class megachurch in Orange County, California. I acknowledge that the center of Christianity is no longer in the West and that we have much to learn from our brothers and sisters in developing nations. I am incomparably rich by the standards of poverty that most of the world lives by. I confess that it is easier to write this stuff than live it.

I write with some questions in mind. What constitutes a church as opposed to a religious organization? What is essential to its life and witness, and what is merely a reflection of the particular form of society in which it was embodied? What is the purpose of the church? Are some modes of belief and practice about church more pleasing to Jesus than others? Can someone be a part of a large church and not lose Jesus in the middle of it? Why are so many of us dissatisfied with the faith and practice that many in my generation have been handed? Why do the activities of the church matter to the church? How do they matter to our participation in God's redemptive work in the world?

I hesitate making specific applications for several reasons. I would not want to rob any of us of the hard work of prayer, discernment, and incarnation in whatever context we find ourselves. Modes and methods and models of church are part of what we must look past in order to free our imaginations from the confining assumption that what works one place will automatically work somewhere else. Also, my own church community, Rock Harbor, is still learning and growing. By no means do I, or we, have it much figured out. I'll include some of our story along the way to illustrate our attempts to live out the kingdom of God, but these are not suggestive. Were you to visit us, you would find us to be a pretty imperfect crew, united only by our love for Jesus and our desire to explore, experiment, and grow into what Jesus intends for His people.

My hope is that this book will provoke and inspire us to greater faithfulness to the way of Jesus together. And where we fall short, I hope that we'll have the courage to confess and repent of our mistakes along the journey.

Part 1

# Symptoms: Washing Feet in Dirty Water

# Descent into Irrelevance



We live in a time unlike any other time that any living person has known. It's not merely that things are changing. Change itself has changed, thereby changing the rules by which we live...

There is more to this change than simply a linear extrapolation of rapid change and complexity. Quantum leaps are happening that are nothing like evolution. They remove us almost totally from our previous context. Simply learning to do old chores faster or to be able to adapt old forms to more complex situations no longer produces the desired results...

Running harder and harder in ministry will not work in this new world...

Established churches are becoming increasingly ineffective because our past has not prepared us for ministry in the future. The discontinuity we have experienced because of these quantum leaps is comparable to the experience of the residents of East Berlin when the Berlin Wall came down. Nothing in their past prepared them for life without the Wall. Very little in our past has prepared us for ministry in today's world.

WILLIAM EASUM

America is simultaneously the most professedly Christian of the developed nations and the least Christian in its behavior.

BILL MCKIBBEN

**G**one now from the place of privilege as the center of Western culture, the church finds itself increasingly marginalized from the world around it. As a whole, God's people no longer answer the pressing questions of culture, or if we do, we do so in ways that alienate others or violate God's revelation of Himself. This chapter will highlight some of the ways the church is rushing towards obsolescence.

Many of us have already known that the Western church is in

serious trouble. We see this, at the very least, in the drastic rise of publications celebrating, explaining, or protesting its demise. The title of this book, *Death by Church*, is simply a shorthand way of saying that much of the church has ceased giving life, light, and hope to the world and has often dispensed exactly the opposite. This is not to say we don't have reason for great hope and optimism; we do. But such hope is no longer based on existing structures and methods. Those are becoming increasingly irrelevant (and in some cases harmful) to the world around us. No, we need new (or old, depending on how you look at it) ways of thinking and doing church.

This chapter seeks to lay out the case for why we need such change. Much of this is examined in greater detail elsewhere. By necessity, I will be oversimplifying and generalizing, but what I lay out here in broad strokes plays itself in particular instances all the time.

## Our Witness to the World

For the vast majority of the last 2000 years, the church has been the sponsor and center of most of Western culture and civilization.<sup>1</sup> The catalytic cultural shifts around us, however, remind us that the world is no longer content with a single religious sponsor (what some call pluralism) or with the idea of religious sponsorship of culture in general (what some call secularization). Rodney Clapp identifies two of the most widespread responses from the church to this state of affairs. The first one he calls *sentimental capitulation*. Clapp argues that this response is, in essence, a capitulation to the post-Christian world's assertion that Christianity has nothing distinctive to offer or to embody to the culture around it. The church can still perform some perfunctory and sentimental roles (weddings, funerals, baptisms, hospital visits, and the like) but it exists only to be called upon when needed in a moment of personal or national crisis.

The second response that Clapp identifies is that of *retrenchment*.<sup>2</sup> This comes in several different varieties. One of the most popular forms of retrenchment comes from religious conservatives who insist that America was founded as a Christian nation and should be so again.

Another form is to ignore the political and public sphere altogether and focus on making people happy, wealthy, and content.

Therapeutic and marketing techniques are key for these retrenchers—they preach a kind of religious Reaganomics: Ask yourself: are you spiritually better off, more comfortable and tranquil and satisfied, than you were four years ago? If not, then you need our church...They [both sentimental capitulation and retrenchment] are not stances that question the dominant culture; instead they embody it.<sup>3</sup>

The idea that the majority of the church no longer embodies an alternative counterculture but rather reflects the attitudes, practices, and beliefs of the world around it has been well documented.<sup>4</sup> Divorce and domestic abuse rates are roughly the same in the church as they are outside it.<sup>5</sup> Studies show the church to be just as racist and materialistic as the rest of American society. Theologian Michael Horton makes this assertion:

Gallup and Barna hand us survey after survey demonstrating that evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general.<sup>6</sup>

Only 6 percent of evangelicals give 10 percent or more of their income to their church. The average church attendees donate only 2.66 percent of their income, which is roughly the same percentage as those outside the church who give to charities. Those who are most likely to object to neighbors of another race are white evangelicals. The numbers of unmarried couples that are living together are higher in places where there are a greater percentage of evangelical Christians than in other places. The percentage of Christian men involved in pornography is the same as that in non-Christian culture. There are many more such surveys to be found, but this is just a sampling of what many of us know about ourselves and about our churches. Sider makes this conclusion:

Whether the issue is divorce, materialism, sexual promiscuity, racism, physical abuse in marriage, or neglect of a biblical worldview, the polling data point to widespread, blatant disobedience of clear biblical moral demands on the part of people who allegedly are evangelical, born-again Christians.<sup>7</sup>

We should not be surprised, then, that the world these days objects more to Christians than to Christ.<sup>8</sup> The hypocrisy of the church is what keeps most away from Jesus. “We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than who we are for.”<sup>9</sup> According to one survey, the three most common perceptions of present-day Christianity are “antihomosexual (an image held by 91 percent of young outsiders), judgmental (87 percent) and hypocritical (85 percent).”<sup>10</sup> The authors rightly conclude, “Modern Christianity no longer seems Christian.”

Again, the point isn’t to debate the merits of this study or approach versus another one. I just find it interesting that most of those who were included in this study had a vast deposit of firsthand knowledge to draw from. These were kids who had been to church and knew Christians and Christianity.<sup>11</sup> This doesn’t mean, of course, that we should tone down or soften the message of Jesus, or skip those parts of the Bible that aren’t comfortable. It also doesn’t mean that the non-Christian world around us is not paying attention. They are paying attention, but they are simply objecting to what they see. Because of this, young adults are abandoning the church in record numbers.<sup>12</sup>

The American church’s descent into irrelevance hasn’t come primarily from the influence of the “liberal media,” “secular Hollywood,” or any other external factor. It has come primarily from within. The enormous disparity between what we say we believe and how we live removes any moral or cultural authority to influence (or, in some cases, even to engage in) the cultural discussions around us.<sup>13</sup>

These are problems that will take more than vision statements, better leadership conferences, better sermon illustrations, and bigger auditoriums to address. More of “the way we’ve done it before” won’t be enough. Alan Hirsch (quoting Sally Morgenthaler) makes this point: “According to 2003 actual attendance counts, adult church-going is

at 18 percent nationally and dropping...Of 3,098 counties in the US, 2,303 declined in church attendance.”<sup>14</sup> George Barna predicts that “by 2025 the local church as we know it now will lose roughly half of its current ‘market share’ and...alternative forms of faith experience and expression will pick up the slack.”<sup>15</sup>

## Pastors Gone Wild

The statistics regarding the health and longevity of clergy are staggering. If the clergy are doing so poorly, is it any wonder our churches suffer as well? Here is a sample from a recent study:

- Churchgoers expect their pastor to juggle an average of 16 major tasks.
- Pastors who work fewer than 50 hours a week are 35 percent more likely to be terminated.
- The typical pastor has his or her greatest ministry impact at a church in years five through fourteen of his or her pastorate; unfortunately, the average pastor lasts only five years at a church.
- Eighty percent of pastors believe that pastoral ministry affects their families negatively.
- Seventy-five percent report they’ve had a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry.
- Fifty percent feel unable to meet the needs of the job.
- Forty percent report a serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month.
- Forty percent of pastors say they have considered leaving their pastorates in the last three months.
- Thirty-three percent confess inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church.
- Twenty percent say they view pornography at least once a month.



- Twenty percent admit to having had an affair while in the ministry.
- Twelve percent of pastors say that since they've been in ministry, they've had sexual intercourse with someone other than their spouse.
- Fifty-one percent say that Internet pornography is a possible temptation for them; 37 percent admit that it's a current struggle.
- Thirteen percent have been divorced.
- Eighty percent say they have insufficient time with their spouse.
- Sixty-six percent of pastors and their families feel pressure to model the ideal family to their congregations and communities.
- Seventy percent do not have someone they consider a close friend.
- Ninety percent feel they're inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands.
- Forty-five percent of pastors say they've experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry.<sup>16</sup>

At the risk of presenting too many statistics, here is another set with similar findings:

- Fifteen hundred pastors leave the ministry each month due to moral failure, spiritual burnout, or contention in their churches.
- Fifty percent of pastors' marriages will end in divorce.
- Eighty percent of pastors and 84 percent of their spouses feel unqualified and discouraged in their role as pastors.

- Fifty percent of pastors are so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could but have no other way of making a living.
- Eighty percent of seminary and Bible school graduates who enter the ministry will leave the ministry within the first five years.
- Seventy percent of pastors constantly fight depression.
- Almost 40 percent polled said they have had an extra-marital affair since beginning their ministry.
- Eighty percent of pastors' spouses wish their spouse would choose another profession.
- The majority of pastor's wives surveyed said that the most destructive event that has occurred in their marriage and family was the day they entered the ministry.<sup>17</sup>

Something has apparently gone very wrong in the preparation of, caring for, and role expectations of many clergy. They live the same disparity between belief and behavior that characterizes most Christian congregations. There are probably many reasons for this.

One of the foremost characteristics of modern American culture is reductionism. We love to reduce big things to little things, complicated things to simple things, worldviews to bumper stickers, theological diversity to uniformity. This comes to us as a gift of the Enlightenment worldview that sought to control the world through breaking wholes into their component parts in order to understand them better.

This has its costs. For instance, in my four systematic theology classes in seminary, I did not read the Bible. I read other books that systematized the Bible into various topics and categories so that each could be understood apart from the others. This isn't all bad, of course, but I wonder what violence this enterprise does to make sense of the Scriptures as a whole in the diversity of its entire witness. We have reduced salvation into four steps that allow me entrance into heaven when I die.

But in so doing, we have bypassed the gospel that Jesus preached—the gospel of the kingdom of God. This gospel deals much more with the “here and now” than the “then and there.” In this case, our reduction has helped to create the disparity between belief and behavior that we see everywhere. If the gospel is only concerned with forgiveness and the life to come, the real discipleship to Jesus becomes optional.

We see this reductionism also applied to the church. Church has been reduced now to only a one-hour service on the weekends. Neil Cole makes this observation:

It amazes me to consider how much effort and how many resources (time, money and people) are expended for a single hour once a week. We have made church nothing more than a religious show that takes place on Sunday, and after it's done we all go home, until church starts again next week, same time, same place. Is this what the bride of Christ is?<sup>18</sup>

Not only that, but the weekend services for many have become so complicated that the expertise of professional ministers is needed to sustain it. This creates a very unhealthy dynamic between pastors and churches. A reduced Jesus and a reduced salvation and a reduced church all put more pressure on clergy to meet the needs of their congregations.

Our preaching has lost its prophetic fire, so we settle for tips and techniques on how to be a better parent, spouse, husband, wife, or businessperson. The mystery of God's will can be solved in three easy steps, we learn prayer through acrostics, and worship becomes mindless repetition of sophomoric choruses. Often our church services (consciously or not) reinforce our materialistic and consumeristic assumptions and produce self-centered and self-absorbed “end-users who believe that God is a resource that helps an individual secure what amounts to an anemic and culturally bound understanding of the abundant life.”<sup>19</sup>

Pastoral ministry has become so bankrupt that entire industries have been built up around helping pastors do their work for them. For

instance, one large, popular evangelical magazine devoted over half its page count to advertisements for a bewildering array of pastoral or church help resources: 12 different seminary degrees were advertised, three different Bibles, 30 different Christian books, three conferences, five different church insurers or banks, two capital fundraisers, one sermon video clip resource, two church marketing firms, and two different resources to help churches be Web savvy. Nothing is wrong with any of this individually, but if this magazine is a resource that pastors turn to for help in ministry, might we wonder if all this helps or hurts us in the long run.

Same publication, different edition: Another ad (for a church sign company) promotes how one church grew from 200 people in attendance to 800 people in attendance in just 16 months. This is the endorsement from the pastor of that church, “To date, we’re up 300 percent. The———sign by far is the number one reason.” No mention of Jesus, prayer, or the Holy Spirit. I know this is an easy target, but I am amazed that this stuff just blithely becomes part of the evangelical pastoral culture. Which is easier—prayer or putting up a new sign?

### **Attendance, Buildings, and Cash**

The dirty little secret behind all of this is that for many (and I include myself in this), pastoral ministry is a spiritualized form of getting our ego needs met. It is fundamentally narcissistic. Most of us talk a lot about the glory of God, but we prefer more tangible measures of success. Maybe this explains our fascination with numbers. What is the best-selling Christian book? Who are the best preachers or worship leaders, bloggers or conference speakers? How big is your campus? How many services do you have a weekend? How many people attend? How large is your congregation? How many podcast your services? Why do we find it necessary to identify the “10 Fastest Growing Churches” or “Top 100 Worship Songs” or “50 Most Influential Christians?” Why did numerical growth become the most significant indicator of success? Does Jesus evaluate churches the same way we do? The sin of pride

takes our eyes off of Jesus and fosters competition and comparison in ways that damage our witness to the world.

Certainly the Scriptures record the numerical growth of the early church, but our obsession with counting, ranking, and succeeding is idolatrous. Like the disciples, we still argue about who is the greatest in the kingdom of God, but we use the ABCs to keep score: Attendance, Buildings, and Cash. I don't want to be misunderstood. There is no question that the ABCs matter as the resources that allow churches to minister. But these are tied to deeply spiritual issues in us and often are monuments to our own egos. We'd never say this, of course, but it's true. How could it not be? In a culture that measures performance from the day we are born (including developmental milestones, appropriate grades, and athletic success), how can we think that our motives in this stuff are totally pure?

In a different edition of the publication mentioned earlier, an advertisement for a fundraising company touted its partnership with a large church to raise more than \$21 million in cash and more than \$84 million in pledges. The ad "celebrates this extraordinary demonstration of generous giving" to share the gospel of Jesus Christ to the city of— —and the world." Maybe that is true, but considering that pictures of the campus, the senior pastor, and the leader of the fundraising company are all prominently featured on the page, we must ask if this is also a celebration of something else.

I am convinced that one of the reasons so many people are turned off to the church (including pastors!) is that it all seems too explainable. How many pastors signed up to lead a revolution but are now caught in managing a spiritual business (complete with budgets, payroll, vision statements, and organizational charts)? So many churches seem to be growing because of the excellence, efficiency, and relevancy of their programming. Of course, none of this (by itself) changes anybody; only God can do that. But we certainly act as if our programs could.

We all feel as if we have to offer a church much like the Wal-Mart Supercenter down the street. People want a vast array of inexpensive

products, convenient times and locations, and a smooth checkout, so we structure our churches the same way. The problem with this, obviously, is that nothing in Wal-Mart transcends the ordinary. The same is true for most of our churches. We have little to no awareness or expectation of the presence of God directly speaking and ministering to His people. The entire ministry is mediated by well-dressed and polite people with name tags and the professionals on stage. The way the room is arranged, the worship music timed down to the second, the sermon with three points and two illustrations, the closing hymn—all these can point to human beings doing their best to be substitutes for God’s work in the lives of His people. No wonder clergy are blowing out in massive numbers. We’ve changed what church is and what pastors do—so much so that very few are able to keep this up for long. Our definitions of success are too often aimed at bigger, better, and more, and we work ourselves into exhaustion as mini-messiahs who are poor substitutes for the real thing. We may get glimpses of God’s transforming or healing power, but those are the exception rather than the rule. The “church as vendor of religious goods and services” mind-set is antithetical to the Bible’s insistence that the church is the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:19-22), the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16), and the household of God (1 Timothy 3:15). This mentality is harmful not only to the church’s members but also to other churches as they compete with one another to deliver the best experience.

All of this adds up to the increasing irrelevance and isolation of the American evangelical church. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger comment, “The end result of this increasing isolation is that a spiritual culture now surrounds a secular church.”<sup>20</sup>

Other capitulations are in our midst (more about those in the next chapter), but this quick survey reveals the terrain concerning our witness to the world and the health and well-being of our clergy. In both cases, the news is not good. But God’s kindness leads us to repentance. I don’t know about you, but I am still confident that God hasn’t given up on us, His church. I think He is calling us to reexamine some things

and reshuffle some priorities, but more importantly, He is calling us to wake up. To not just point to our shiny, happy megachurches and Christian bookstores and tell ourselves that all is well. Sometimes I wonder what would happen if we really started addressing the things that plague the church—things like pride, infatuation with power and influence, narcissism, idolatry, greed, envy, and hypocrisy. It is far too easy to point fingers at our culture and name these things in the world around us. It is a far more terrifying thing when us church folk start realizing that God's judgment starts with us.<sup>21</sup>