

Foreword by David Kinnaman

# the resilient pastor

Leading Your Church in a  
Rapidly Changing World

Glenn Packiam

With new insights and research from

**Barna**

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## foreword

It's hard to remember a time when being a pastor has been more challenging.

When we zoom in, we see that recent events—a global pandemic, digital worship, racial and social unrest, deep political polarization, and more—have greatly intensified the obstacles to forming human beings in the way of Christ. The disruptions of 2020 and beyond still ripple through the religious and social landscape. For pastors, things are unlikely to snap back to a sense of “ministry as usual.”

And if we zoom out, we see the recent turmoil merely added to the massively shifted landscape that pastors already faced *before the pandemic*:

- Social norms and perspectives edging further toward secularism.
- A growing indifference toward Christianity, especially among Millennials and Gen Z.
- Increasing perceptions that orthodox Christian faith is extremist and wrong.
- The credibility gap facing pastors, in which they're viewed primarily as service providers for marrying and burying but not as leaders who have much more to offer.

- The promise and peril of ministry in the digital age, where attention spans are stymied and alternative sources of advice and authority grow like weeds. (The Gospel According to YouTube essentially is feeding those who seek whatever it is the algorithms can serve up.)
- The generational gaps that make ministry to Millennials and Gen Z equal parts vexing and more perplexing—and rewarding when it’s done well.

All of these zoomed-in and zoomed-out trends—and many more—add up to a unique set of challenges facing pastors. Pastoring has never been easy, but it’s much more difficult today. After one of the hardest, most bizarre years of ministry, Barna conducted our research for this book in the spring of 2021 and learned that 29 percent of pastors were giving serious thought to quitting.

Christian leaders need hope and a way forward, even those who haven’t considered throwing in the towel. This incredible book, *The Resilient Pastor*, by my friend Glenn Packiam, helps pastors and future pastors consider the current landscape and issues a clarion vision of what the church must do to navigate eight major shifts swirling around us.

Because we wanted this Barna book to be *about* pastors and *for* pastors, we figured it was only natural to be *written by a pastor*. Glenn Packiam came immediately to mind, and he was our team’s first choice. I met with Glenn over coffee in Colorado Springs at the beginning of 2020—just a few weeks before the coronavirus would massively alter the trajectory of church-based ministry—to ask him to consider writing the book you’re now reading.

He prayerfully considered it and said yes!

I am grateful, and I hope you will be too, as you read his sparkling prose, fresh analysis, and hopeful vision for the future of pastoring.

As part of this book project and alongside Glenn’s direction, Barna conducted brand-new research that explores the current

state of pastors. I expect you'll be surprised, humbled, stirred, and inspired by the data among leaders who share the same heartbeat for the transforming message of Jesus.

At Barna, it's been a privilege to serve pastors since 1984, when George Barna began his pioneering work focusing on equipping church leaders. Barna Group has interviewed and listened to more pastors than any other research firm in the U.S. Through our research, we aim to be an accurate and helpful voice for pastors and leaders by allowing you to share your opinions and views, hopes and fears for the benefit of your fellow leaders.

We care deeply about your health, well-being, effectiveness, and perseverance—you becoming and remaining a resilient pastor!

As you start this book, here are a couple of observations. First, in 2 Corinthians 11:28, Paul writes that he has the “daily stress” of the churches. As a church planter and apostle, he describes his concern and anger over the condition of the Jesus communities he's tending. Lots of things are going right, but he also says he is “furious” when someone is led astray. The context of the passage suggests that Paul considers the emotional strain of caring for the resilience of these churches to be at least equal to the strain of all of the life-threatening situations and conflicts he's endured.

This reminds me that being a resilient pastor does not mean we get to pack away our emotions or concerns. The church is worth our godly agitation, ambition, and urgent prayer and action. Resilient leaders, in other words, must be filled with realism about the actual, tangible, brutal reality of leading the church and forming people into Jesus's image.

The second perspective I'd like you to consider as you begin is this: in addition to realism, resilient pastors must be anchored to hope. Hope in the Lord's work in the world. Hope in a God who knows us and hears us. Hope in the reality of a resurrected Jesus. Hope that all this work and effort and toil really does amount to something both here and now and in eternity.

Resilient pastors hold realism and hope in beautiful tension.

I hope you discover both these themes, as I did, in *The Resilient Pastor*. For Glenn, for me, and for both our teams, our prayer is that this book refires your imagination and energy for a new, fresh, Spirit-driven season of ministry.

Come, Lord Jesus!

David Kinnaman  
President, Barna Group  
Ventura, California

## prologue

### *Dear Pastor . . .*

I know you're tired. You've taken some hits, but you've kept on going. Perhaps you've been misunderstood and maligned and have made a few mistakes of your own.

But here you are. You've picked up this book. Weary as you might be, you are trying to grapple with the obvious fact that the pace of change in the world has accelerated. Maybe it sparks your own anxiety or insecurity, but you've got to face it. You want to last, to be faithful, to be *resilient*.

The last thing any of us needs is a condescending lecture about how unready we are for the new world. We don't need a futurist predicting trends and forecasting the demise of the church. We don't need a list of qualities we surely don't have or descriptions of a pastor we could never be. We don't need theories or hypothetical proposals drawn up in libraries or academic towers.

We need sages to guide us and mentors to speak to the moment. Pastors need a pastor too.

But there are times when a student might be better than their teacher. That's what C. S. Lewis wrote in the preface to his *Reflections on the Psalms*. "The fellow-pupil can help more than the master because he knows less. The difficulty we want him to

explain is one he has recently met. The expert met it so long ago that he has forgotten. He sees the whole subject, by now, in such a different light that he cannot conceive what is really troubling the pupil; he sees a dozen other difficulties which ought to be troubling him but aren't."<sup>1</sup>

I write here as a schoolboy, not an expert. I write as a fellow student along the way. I write as your friend, your peer, your colleague and cheerleader. The pastoral vocation is holy—it is wholly other, a sacred calling that cannot be codified or copied. Pastors need a space for pastors to talk to one another, to question our assumptions and explore new perspectives. This book is an invitation to think out loud together.

This is not a manifesto. There are no prognostications about the future, no predictions about trends, and no easy steps to success. As we explore some research, mine the wisdom of church history, and let our roots go deeper in the soil of Scripture, we might gain some light for the journey. This book is a way to add my candle to yours as we step together into a world that is known and yet unknown, familiar and yet uncharted.

Above all, this book is written to give you hope. Hope is the spark of resilience. I have a framed quote from John Wesley that sits in my office, a gift from a dear friend and colleague at our church, Jason Jackson, that says, “Best of all, God is with us.” That’s what I want echoing in your heart as you read this book. *Best of all, God is with us.*

We’re going to take a whirlwind tour in the first chapter of the shifting cultural trends. But be of good courage, Jesus is with us.

When we explore the challenges facing pastors and the churches we lead, remember that Jesus is the shepherd of your soul and the head of the church, and he is with us.

When we lift our heads in the epilogue to consider the reasons for hope, we remember that there are others who are traveling with us.

The church has been through the fire and the storm, walked through darkness and desolation, and has been renewed and purified through all of it. We have a great cloud of witnesses who have

gone before us. Our calling is sure, our future secure. And best of all, God is with us.

That is why I believe by the grace of God we can be resilient pastors.

## **A Gradual Awakening**

Maybe you don't see yourself as a pastor. I didn't always think of myself as one. In fact, my sense of calling as a pastor was a gradual awakening. For much of my adolescence and in young adulthood, I never imagined myself a pastor. I hardly expected to become one. Not because I did not esteem the profession. On the contrary, I held it in such high regard that I did not think myself worthy of it.

My parents were pastors. My mum has the gift of teaching, my dad of exhortation. Both of them were well-practiced in the care of souls. Our home was always buzzing with people, a motley collection of folks from church or work or the neighborhood—family, friends of a friend, friends we had not yet met. My mum was always ready to cook up a feast. My dad would sit with people who had been broken by the hardships of life and weep with them and pray for them. Sometimes he'd empty his pockets for them. Ministry life was personal and relational and sacrificial. I never thought I could care for people like they did. But then, somewhere in my midtwenties, I realized another way of looking at it: I had been preparing for pastoral ministry my entire life.

When I was eight years old, I sat on the floor of a retreat center in the highlands of Malaysia, listening to an American missionary lady tell a story about David Livingstone. In spite of what we now know about Livingstone and his weaknesses, in that moment, the hagiographical version was what God used to stir something in my soul. I responded to her altar call with tears streaming down my face, surrendering my life to be a missionary in Africa. That calling, though I didn't fully understand it then, was a symbolic calling. My yes was an act of yielding my life to God's service, whatever shape it would take.

When I moved to America for the second time, I was seventeen. We had lived in Portland, Oregon, for three years—for me, ages ten through thirteen—while my parents went to Bible college and my sister and I attended our church’s Christian school. Having returned home to Malaysia, where I completed my high school through a kind of homeschool extension of the Christian school in Portland I had attended, it was now time to think about college. It made the most sense to think about colleges in America. I didn’t know too many Christian colleges, and finances were a challenge. So when the doors opened for me to attend Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with some scholarship help, I took the opportunity. I knew I wanted to study theology, but I also wanted to be involved in music. And I was sure that I didn’t want to be a pastor.

After graduation, I took a job at ORU for a year as the worship leader for chapel services. Then came invitations to work at various local churches. It seemed like the right next step, but I was unsure. My youthful idealism and vain ego had imagined being a touring artist or a traveling speaker. But to be planted in one local church . . . *Could I really do that?* New Life Church settled the question.

The first time I visited New Life, I wept during the entire worship time. There were flags from the nations hanging from the ceiling; the teal carpet and matching teal chairs faded to the background as the music transported me to a deep encounter with the Lord. I knew there was something special about this church. I remember saying to a friend shortly after that I wanted to live in Colorado Springs just so I could attend New Life. It would be a base of sorts for my itinerant music and teaching ministry. In hindsight, I realize that the Spirit was just setting the hook. Here I am, writing this over twenty years after my first day of work at New Life Church. I never thought I’d be a pastor, but God knew better.

I began my time at New Life as an apprentice to the worship pastor, Ross Parsley. Wherever he went, I went. If he was doing a hospital visit, I was doing one too. If he was singing at a funeral, I was the piano player. It was a great way to be a fly on the wall for the various meetings and moments that make up a pastor’s

day. He was and is a spectacular pastor, a true shepherd who cares for the flock.

My calling to pastoral ministry was a gradual awakening, but the final clarity came like the loud buzz of an angry alarm clock. In November of 2006, the founding senior pastor at New Life Church, Ted Haggard, had been caught buying drugs from a male prostitute. And while there are disputes about what else did or did not occur, the events led to his resignation and a remorseful letter of repentance to the church. I, a young twenty-eight-year-old staffer, was devastated. How could this be true? And yet, it became the catalyst for rethinking what pastoral ministry is actually about and what a church is meant to be. I had been so excited about our national influence and how I had benefited from it as a young worship leader and songwriter who was on a record label with his friends. But why did those things mean so much? How had I confused the American dream of success with the actual blessing of God? It spurred a spiritual awakening in my own heart.

In the months that followed, my focus became less on the failures of a leader and more on the condition of my heart. What pride and vanity were tainting my work? How had God become a means to my ends, the agent responsible for making my dreams and aspirations come true? I embraced the sobering and slow work of surrender. The eight or nine months between the founding pastor's departure and the arrival of a new senior pastor were difficult. Ross Parsley stepped up as the interim pastor in a remarkable way. He led with courage and compassion. He helped us lean into our roots of worship and prayer. The church survived by God's grace.

Our new senior pastor, Brady Boyd, arrived in the summer of 2007 and helped us heal. Then, one hundred days into his time, a gunman came onto our campus and opened fire in the parking lot, taking the lives of two teenage girls. As he entered the long hallway at the east end of our campus, he began shooting randomly. He was apprehended by a volunteer security team member before taking his own life. Tragedy reopened the wound of trauma. Yet with a steady hand and a gentle heart, Pastor Brady shepherded us through it. He kept us focused on Jesus, encouraged us to care

for one another, and even brought in a team of counselors for our staff to get the help we needed.

Through scandal and shooting, my own calling as a shepherd came into focus. I didn't want to be a public figure or an itinerant speaker, holy as those vocations can be. *I wanted to be a pastor.*

When Pastor Brady came, he gave everyone who had been on staff seven years or more a sabbatical. Mine was six weeks. It was the longest consecutive time off I had ever received. While we were away, my wife, Holly, and I read a few books by Eugene Peterson on the pastoral vocation. The main one was *Under the Unpredictable Plant*. I'll share more about how reading Peterson deeply affected us later in this book, but for now I'll just say it woke us up. *This* was what God was calling us to be: pastors rooted in a particular place, paying attention and calling attention to God at work in that very soil. All my notions about being a missionary or a musician, a speaker or a teacher, coalesced in one clear vocation. *I am a pastor.*

## How This Book Came to Be (and What It Aims to Be)

There are many books that deal with the vocational vision of pastoral ministry, what a pastor truly *is* or is called to be. And there are other books that forecast a future for the church, a prediction of the gathering storm. There are others still that seek to articulate a biblical theology of the church in fresh language for our day. Though this book will contain elements of each, none are descriptions of what this book is meant to be. Perhaps I should tell you the story of its genesis.

In February 2020, David Kinnaman, president of Barna Group, texted me to say he was coming to town and wanted to see if I had time for a chat over coffee. We caught up on life and the battle his dear wife, Jill, was fighting with brain cancer. Then he presented an idea to me. Would I like to partner with Barna on a book about the challenges facing pastors in the midst of a rapidly changing world. I was honored and intrigued. I knew of the many studies they had conducted and reports they had produced in the past few years on everything from racism to digital technology, from the

state of pastors to the condition of relationships and community. This project would cull insights from each of those but would feature a brand-new study of pastors that I would help shape.

My love for the blend of situational analysis with theological reflection—a method I learned during my doctoral work at Durham University in the U.K.—led me to give David an enthusiastic response. Then COVID-19 happened. It didn't take long before I realized what a significant undertaking I had agreed to. I felt in over my head. But the team of researchers at Barna are world-class. We began regular Zoom calls; they took my chapter outline and the initial notes I had made cross-referencing their previous studies and added their own notes to it. As I began writing the chapters, I discovered gaps in the existing data and began to have a clearer picture of what our new study would need to uncover. They were brilliant about wording the questions and designing the survey. We were also able to include several questions about attitudes toward pastors and churches in a new study of the general population. Both studies were complete in late fall of 2020.<sup>2</sup> To retain focus, we had to restrict our study to the North American context, though I suspect those reading in other parts of the world will find places of resonance.

But this book is not really about data. This book is about you and me and the road ahead. It's about our stories and our struggles, our hopes and our longings. To move beyond statistics, I hosted three focus groups over Zoom with twenty-three pastors in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K., testing my hypothesis and listening to their perspectives on the key issues. These were faithful women and men of different ethnic backgrounds, lead pastors and associate pastors, church planters and church revitalizers in rural and urban contexts. I listened and learned as I reflected and wrote.

My goal in this book is to place ancient wisdom in dialogue with current challenges and opportunities. While Barna's researchers provide an analysis of the current situation and its trends, I try to provide theological reflection, drawing on the wisdom of Scripture and church history to guide us. There will be chapters where it seems we have a clearer picture of the problem than of the solution. Sometimes naming the complexity of the challenge is

enough to get us started. I try to avoid cheap, easy, one-size-fits-all solutions. In short, this is an attempt at *pastoral theology*. Reading it will require wrestling with the Spirit in the context of a group of trusted friends and peers. Perhaps a pastors' book group is the perfect way to do that.

I am convinced that the darker the world gets, the brighter the church can shine. Amid all challenges, there are opportunities hidden for pastors and for the church. By the power of the Spirit, we can be faithful for the glory of God and for the good of the world.

The book is outlined in a fairly straightforward way. The first chapter is about how the crises we've experienced have exposed *and* accelerated the shifts and trends in our culture. We'll talk about seismic shifts, resulting storms, and the debris in the aftermath. The next eight chapters, parts 1 and 2, compose the core of the book. We will name eight challenges—four facing pastors and four facing the church—and grapple with how to live faithfully in the midst of them. These crises overlap and interlock, but they are artificially separated here to aid our reflection. The final section of the book, part 3, sketches the outlines of two characteristics of a kingdom community that will be critical in the season ahead: collaboration with one another and the presence and power of God.

This book is not only for those who are called “pastor” or “reverend.” It is for all who call on the Lord and want to see Christ build his church. It is for the faithful women and men who pray and serve and give, who want to participate in the kingdom coming to the earth. It is for all who are burdened by the challenges facing the church, troubled by the turbulence of our times. It is for Christians everywhere. My wish for you as you read this, dear pastor, dear Christian, dear friend, is that you will know you are not alone. You will find in me another companion for the journey, a fellow student listening and learning and growing. Above all, my prayer for you is that you will be filled with hope. Jesus is the head of his church. The Holy Spirit is at work—in us and through us. God is making you faithful and helping you become a resilient pastor.

Take a deep breath. Close your eyes in silence and prayer. Our journey is about to begin.

## the shift, the surge, and the aftermath

I am writing in the middle of a pandemic. The situation changes nearly daily. We keep our eyes on a dashboard for our county that reports case counts, positivity rates, hospitalizations, and deaths. We monitor headlines for the latest restrictions from local government and the counterbattles in court. All these factors and more swirl in our brains as we try to prayerfully discern what being a good neighbor means. Do we close our doors and go fully online, or do we find a way to keep gathering in person? Do we weigh physical health more heavily than emotional, mental, or spiritual health?

One of the more interesting public conversations has been about whether churches are essential to a society. Are we dispensers of goods and services? Are we optional gatherings like concerts and sporting events? Are worship services leisure activities or sacred duties? In an attempt to justify its place in monetary terms, the National Churches Trust in the U.K. commissioned an independent study of all the food banks, alcohol support groups, mental health and counseling services, youth clubs, credit unions, and after-school care that were created and are supported by churches. Their

conclusions, released in 2020 when all churches in the U.K. were forced to close their doors, was that the “market value of church-based projects” was about 12.4 billion pounds a year.<sup>1</sup> That’s one way to make the case. And yet there is no ignoring it: Christianity’s influence in society has been receding.

Did the pandemic cause that decline? In one sense, perhaps. The shift online for most churches created some bad habits in churchgoers. It is, after all, so much more convenient to stroll downstairs in your pj’s, prop up the iPad, and stream the service while making breakfast with friends or family. Engagement is optional. The restrictions certainly caused some churches to close their doors permanently because they could not survive financially. And for others, the pandemic became the occasion for people to go “church shopping” online and switch their place of worship. Worse yet, early on, Barna reported that “nearly half of church-ed adults—that is, those who say they have attended church in the past six months” say they “have not streamed an online service in the last month.”<sup>2</sup> Even among “practicing Christians, who are typically characterized by at least monthly attendance, one in three (32%) admit they have not streamed an online service during this time.”<sup>3</sup>

But in a wider sense, the pandemic accelerated changes. It’s true that things change quickly in a crisis, but it’s also true that a crisis makes changes already in progress occur more rapidly. The trends toward online everything—shopping, conferencing, working, connecting—experienced major jumps in 2020. Will it hold? Are these changes cemented? No one knows for sure, but it’s hard to see things returning to pre-pandemic norms. Corporate offices are questioning the need for giant campuses. Business travel to connect with clients is now being reserved for only crucial situations. Even big shopping days like Black Friday have turned into weeks-long online deals, leaving brick-and-mortar stores to wonder if they will become nothing more than distribution centers for order pickups or item returns.

For the church world, some predict that online church is here to stay not as a peripheral ministry but as a central one. Notions of “digital discipleship” meet new vocations of “online pastor,” as

Facebook groups become new “venues” for worship. Others have seized the moment to repeat a waning refrain that house churches are the future and mega-gatherings are over.

In still other ways, the pandemic—in fact, 2020 itself—has only revealed the state of affairs. When we think of the past couple years, we might be tempted to describe it as apocalyptic, meaning an end-of-the-world doomsday movie. But we’d be more accurate if we meant the term the way it’s used in the last book of the Bible. St. John’s Revelation is an *apocalypse*—a revelation not of end-time events but of the forces at work in the world.

When you consider the church’s response—late or lackluster—to issues of racial inequality and justice, the Christian voice is to some like the drone of Charlie Brown’s teacher. *We don’t really know what you’re saying or why it matters.* Worse, for many who have left the church, the evangelical response to the revelation of racism is seen as a reality-denying perpetuation of the status quo—one that looks suspiciously like it’s trying to protect the structures that enshrine privilege and power for a White majority culture. Then there was the 2020 presidential election in America. White evangelicals and their support of Donald Trump became a topic of national conversation, with some assuming Christian nationalism as the cause and others pointing to abortion and religious liberties as the reason. To be a Republican was to be cast as a racist; to be a Democrat was to be assumed a socialist or a Marxist. Some tried to claim that the only Christlike way was to vote against Trump, hoping to reclaim their faith from the mire. The voices got louder and the divisions ran deeper. And the revelation became clearer.

Whether the pandemic has been the *instigator*, the *accelerator*, or the *revealer* of cultural shifts, the change has been tectonic: Christians are seen as irrelevant at best, dangerous at worst.

## Shifting Tectonic Plates: Post-Christian?

The day after Christmas 2004, an earthquake registering at a magnitude of 9.1 shook the floor of the Indian Ocean. It propelled a

massive column of water toward beaches in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. One Indonesian city, Banda Aceh, closest to the earthquake's epicenter, was completely engulfed by a one-hundred-foot mountain of water, which arrived a mere twenty minutes after the earthquake. One hundred thousand people were killed instantly. Buildings were leveled and cars and trees were swept off by the surging rapids. That bleak December day, over 230,000 people in several different countries were killed. It was the deadliest tsunami in recorded history.<sup>4</sup>

For decades now, cultural commentators and religion scholars have been talking about a shift in countries that were shaped by Christian impulses. Whether in Europe or in North America, the plates deep beneath the surface have been rattling and shaking, disrupting centuries-long norms. A few decades ago, many were referring to the dawn of “postmodernism.”

Today, many are referring to a “secular age.” The meaning is not necessarily clear. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor sees a secular age not as one in which God has been removed from the equation. That would be a “subtraction story.” No, ours is a secular age because faith is no longer the default position. God was first pushed to the margins—a supernatural being whom you dealt with only on issues related to the afterlife. Once God became irrelevant to daily life and the material world, belief in God became a kind of *providential deism*—trusting a distant god for general provisions and cosmic order but not much more.<sup>5</sup> That too could be dismantled by science and technology, or at least pushed further away from the field where life occurs. If life is compared to a football game, God is up in the sky, the retractable roof is closed, and he has no bearing on the game on the field.<sup>6</sup>

Meaning, then, is made by individuals and their experiences and expressions. It is all *existential*. *I need to do what is good for me, what makes me happy, what helps me reach my goals.* But the individual is “cross-pressured,” with currents pushing from all sides.<sup>7</sup> Belief in a deity is not only not a “given”; it is contested.

This is why some people say we are living in a post-Christian world. But that phrase, *post-Christian*, may be misunderstood.

The term seems to imply that the world was once “Christian.” That is certainly not true. Stories from the history of empires and exploits can testify to the falsehood of such an assumption. It can also sound as if Christianity and its influence are gone or have been erased. This too is untrue. Examples from daily life may be summoned as witnesses.

It may be more helpful to say *post-Christendom*. Christendom is a kind of mashup between *Christian* and *kingdom*. It speaks to the connectedness and symbiosis between Christianity and country that resulted in a prominent *presence*, pervasive *influence*, and at times even total *dominance* of Christianity in a culture. Ideals, morals, motivations, and more were shaped by Christian texts and traditions. To say we are “post” that is not to say Christian presence or even influence is gone, but its dominance certainly is. And the influence is tapering even while remnants of its presence remain. There is a fission between Christianity and culture, and still they move toward each other with a kind of residual magnetism. This push and pull creates its own friction. The tectonic plates on which many Western societies were built have shifted.

## **The Surge: Pluralism, Paganism, and Individualism**

The oceanic waters have swelled and are surging toward the shores. It’s taken years—not minutes and hours—but the effects are arriving. As you’ll see in the chapters ahead, pastors are no longer perceived as a credible voice or a trustworthy source of wisdom on much. Churches don’t have much of a role in a community unless they can provide tangible help or practical care. And people aren’t likely to turn to a church for help when facing difficulties or crises. In fact, Christianity is just *one* way of making meaning of this world, and it isn’t really even a respected way. For many, it is archaic and outmoded, prude and rude. *Sure, millions of people claim it as their identity, but how strange that is!* As David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons demonstrate in *Good Faith*, Christians are seen as “*irrelevant and extreme.*”<sup>8</sup> There are other ways of motivating yourself toward goodness and kindness and love.

And other ways of defining those words too that are less restrictive and far less judgmental of others. Spirituality and morality, vaguely defined, can be clear enough to provide you with a target and to mark you off from others but blurry enough to prevent you from pronouncing judgments. Post-Christendom is still not nearly specific enough as a descriptor for our age. There are other terms we can use, like lenses in the eye doctor's office, to bring the picture into focus. Here are three terms that help us identify the surging waters.

### *Pluralism*

Some have compared the world in the West to the kind of religious pluralism found in Asia. There are resonances for sure. And the missionary mindset for the church—as Lesslie Newbigin notably advocated—is certainly on the mark. But today's pluralism is different. I grew up in a religiously pluralistic culture in Malaysia. The friends I rode the bus to school with every day were Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. And there might have been a Christian or two. The boundary markers between religions were well-defined. A Hindu friend might come to my house for a birthday party and even to a youth group function, but they could never actually go to church on a Sunday. And were a Buddhist or a Hindu to pray the sinner's prayer, they could certainly not get baptized. That would be a step too far and a great shame on the family and on their ancestors who were always watching somehow.

If you were to tell a Buddhist or a Hindu in Asia that their religions are essentially the same, they would laugh (if they were kind) and tell you that you don't understand these ancient religions. If you told a Muslim in Malaysia that they are not so different from a Christian, they might never speak to you again. Contrast this with Western Buddhism, which sounds like repackaged Hinduism, and is cloaked in Christian language. I once heard a prominent writer describe himself as a sort of Catholic-Buddhist and speak of his dark fiction works as a quest for redemption. Redemption, however, is not in the lexicon of Buddhist belief.

This new pluralism is the manifestation of Western arrogance. Empires from the West once moved slaves from one country to another to provide a labor force for their enterprises or an army for their exploits. These imperialistic impulses echo in the way the post-Christian West steals what it likes and marries it to what it wishes. We will take a little here, transplant it over there, mingle it with some of this—whatever suits our fancy and achieves our ends.

Today's pluralism is also different in its general attitude toward all religions. In the wake of 9/11, religious fundamentalism is singled out as a dangerous influence in the world. Rather than examine whether Islam is a particular seedbed for terrorism, *all religious fundamentalism* has become suspect for its potential to produce *fanaticism*. Thus, as Gene Edward Veith writes, "Before, all religions, in elite opinion, were considered to be equally good. Afterward, all religions were considered to be equally bad."<sup>9</sup> The antidote to fundamentalism is a kind of religious pluralism that more closely resembles *polytheism*. Where the old pluralism meant the view that "different beliefs and traditions were allowed to exist side by side," the new pluralism means that you "must accept all of these deities and religious traditions, but you are not allowed to believe in one of them only."<sup>10</sup> The new pluralism has no place for exclusivism.

In sum, the new pluralism is *imperialistic* and *polytheistic*.

### ***Paganism***

The eclectic approach to faith today—stitching various conflicting religious systems into one patchwork quilt of society—has led others to compare our cultural context to the paganism of ancient Rome. Religions in the ancient world were important for keeping the fabric of an empire together, but they were essentially private rituals that had little bearing on how one lived. Cultic practices in a local temple may have been strange, but that was all it was: an act or an event necessary to appease the gods and obtain favor for a harvest or a war or for the attempt to have children.

The key to the parallel, however, is not in the rituals but in the worldview. Paganism is about a sacred earth without a transcendent

heaven. The gods are material and substantive, close at hand, and perhaps even shaped by our hands. In paganism, the rules are clear: offer these sacrifices for these outcomes. The gods become agents of human wishes.

The comparisons now become clear. Our society has the same pursuits of money, sex, and power. The gods that can deliver them to us are technology, commerce, and politics. Paganism is not simply about fragmented religiosity; it's about placing agency in human hands. The gods are not up there; they are down here. And you can make transactions with them.

The chief effect of the new paganism is therapeutic.<sup>11</sup> It gives us the veneer of a meaningful life—complete with rules and rituals—without the sting of a sovereign deity providing moral clarity or making claims of how we should live. Where the old paganism was about peace for the empire, the new paganism is about solace for the soul.

In sum, the new paganism is *transactional* and *therapeutic*.

Perhaps the main differences, however, between the new paganism and the old are that now the gods are not visible and the rituals are not public.<sup>12</sup> This leads us to the third and final lens.

### *Individualism*

Charles Taylor describes the rise of “expressive individualism” in the “age of authenticity,” where the definition of human flourishing is to be your truest and fullest self, and the highest good is the freedom to pursue becoming that. Andrew Root describes the progression as Taylor argues it: “The pursuits of flourishing had shifted from keeping the devil in the woods, to keeping the machines of urban America moral, to me being happy, flourishing in my own individual life project.”<sup>13</sup>

Individualism is first about the exaltation of the self as the source and goal of “goodness.” You are holy, divine, and sacred, and the freedom to unleash that being within, to express your truest self to the fullest, is the equivalent of eternal life. It works like a religious system except that it has no real interest in involving others.

And that is the second dimension of privatism—not simply the *exaltation of the self* but also the *exclusion of threats and dangers*, whether from the community or from the cosmos. Anyone or anything that stands in the way of your authentic self-expression is evil. They are either to be shrugged off (“Haters gonna hate”) or defeated. Hence the “evil” of fundamentalism noted above. *How dare a religious system and institution try to tell you what is and is not off-limits in your sexuality! That is oppressive!* Earlier critiques of power structures, like those of Marx, are reformatted and re-aimed at *anything* that seeks to limit or restrain an individual’s quest for self-actualization and fulfillment.

It’s not just being self-boundaried from others; it is becoming a general way of seeing ourselves as what Charles Taylor calls “buffered”: the “new sense of the self and its place in the cosmos” is “not open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers.”<sup>14</sup> Taylor tracks this as a development that came along with the disenchantment of the world. It isn’t simply that the roof to the heavens has been closed; it’s also that we have summoned a stronger “confidence in our own powers of moral ordering.”<sup>15</sup> We can draw our own lines and dictate our own distances from the things that we don’t like or that we perceive as dangers. Taylor draws out two facets of the contrast between an older “porous self” and the new “buffered self.”

First, the porous self is vulnerable, to spirits, demons, cosmic forces. And along with this go certain fears which can grip it in certain circumstances. The buffered self has been taken out of the world of this kind of fear. . . .

The second facet is that the buffered self can form the ambition of disengaging from whatever is beyond the boundary, and of giving its own autonomous order to its life. The absence of fear can be not just enjoyed, but seen as an opportunity for self-control or self-direction.<sup>16</sup>

The stage is now set for the third dimension of what I’m calling individualism: the move toward an *exclusively interior spirituality*.

The effects of the buffered self are that our *spiritual choices* no longer have *social consequences*.<sup>17</sup> It also means that we become the author of our own story's meaning, the architect of our own structures of purpose. As James K. A. Smith, summarizing Taylor, puts it, we have developed a kind of "cultural Pelagianism," the "confidence that *we* can make *this* world meaningful."<sup>18</sup>

This meaning-making now is interior work. It does not come from a god or a spirit. It is not out there; it is in here. The focus on an interior life is found in many religions, including Christianity. But individualism locates the center in the internal, private world of the individual. In that sense, it is like a remixed version of the old first-century philosophy called gnosticism. Veith puts it nicely in saying that "secularists are not necessarily without religion," but "what makes them secular is that their religion has nothing to do with the world."<sup>19</sup> Their spirituality is interior, within themselves. This indeed is "the spirituality of Gnosticism."<sup>20</sup> N. T. Wright, in his book from his 2018 Gifford lectures, notes that the "Gnostic believes, not in 'redemption,' but in 'revelation,' the unveiling of the true self rather than its death and resurrection."<sup>21</sup> Today, this sort of "low-grade Gnosticism" has become "the only orthodoxy in some quarters, where 'finding out who I really am' is the ultimate imperative, and any challenge to this project is seen as the ultimate denial of one's human rights."<sup>22</sup>

That was a dizzying tour of the culture, a swirl of chaos like the surging waves we compared it to.

Now for the aftermath.

## The Aftermath: A Christ-Haunted Age

### *Beyond the Numbers*

"I don't believe in God, but I miss him."<sup>23</sup>

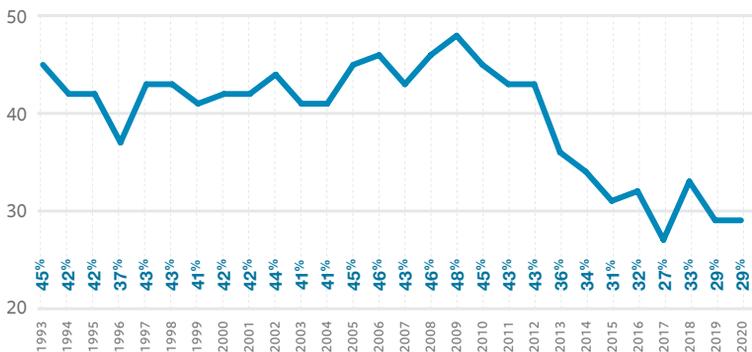
This is how the British writer Julian Barnes opens his 2009 memoir of mortality, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. It aptly captures the cultural mood. The West is not quite ready to move on from Christianity.

Let’s look at the research. The majority of Americans—67 percent—still identify as Christians. And yes, the “religiously unaffiliated,” sometimes called “nones”—people who “describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or ‘nothing in particular’”—are a concerning 25 percent of the population, up from 9 percent in 2011.<sup>24</sup> But can a country with 67 percent of the population describing itself as Christian be called post-Christian?

A closer look at the numbers reveals a more complicated situation. For one thing, that 67 percent of Christians is down 15 percentage points from Barna’s 2011 data. Church attendance is also a strong indicator of the presence and influence of Christianity in a culture—and it’s slipping. In the span of a decade, those who say they attend a church service weekly dropped from 45 percent in 2010 to 29 percent in 2020 (it was just as low in 2019), as the following chart indicates. Even for less-frequent attenders, commitment waned. Those who attend church at least once or twice a month dropped from 54 percent in 2009 to 45 percent in 2019.<sup>25</sup>

### WEEKLY CHURCH ATTENDANCE: 1993–2020

● All U.S. adults



n=103,603 U.S. adults, 1993–2020.

Attitudes toward pastors are, naturally, greatly tied to both church attendance and whether a person identifies as a Christian. In the new Barna study we conducted for this book, 57 percent of the general population said they at least somewhat consider a pastor to be a trustworthy source of wisdom. Those numbers rise for Christians and churchgoers. Seventy-two percent of self-identified Christians see pastors as a trustworthy source of wisdom.<sup>26</sup> But if you're not a churchgoer, that percentage drops to 40 percent. And if you're not a Christian, it's an abysmal 22 percent.<sup>27</sup> Conversely, non-Christians have the strongest reaction against pastors, with 29 percent saying a pastor is "definitely not" a trustworthy source of wisdom. That may be unsurprising in our present culture, but it is still telling and discouraging.

What about the rise of religious "nones"? Should we be concerned? Surely. Yet there are some who suggest we ought not be alarmed. Ed Stetzer wrote in 2015 that the rise is due to a move from "nominals" to "nones." "For those who have only ever considered themselves 'Christian' because they've been to church before, or because they aren't Muslim or Hindu, it is starting to make more sense to check 'none' on religious identification surveys."<sup>28</sup> It might make sense, but we don't want to find refuge in false comfort. I don't think we can ignore the significance of this rising segment of the population.

Then there are the changing cultural tides that come with each generation. Barna reports that older Americans (Elders, sometimes called the Silent Generation, and Baby Boomers) and Millennials differ in their levels of religious affiliation and attendance. Three-quarters of both the Elders (those born between 1928 and 1945) and Boomers describe themselves as Christians. In stark contrast, only three out of five Millennials (59 percent) and Gen Z (the youngest generation, 58 percent) identify as Christians.<sup>29</sup>

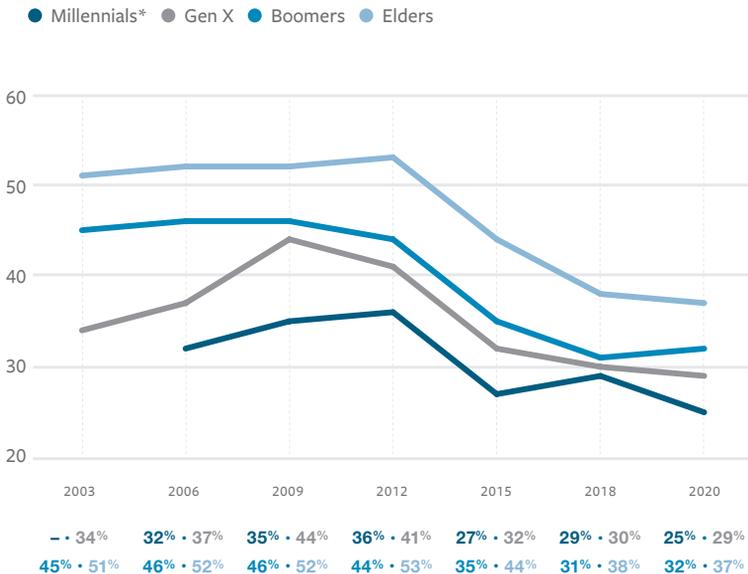
Gallup writer Frank Newport says these are not shifts so much as well-established generational trends. He writes:

Generational changes in religiosity . . . happen consistently to every generation as they age and are not specific to a particular time

period or cohort. Religiosity plummets after age 18, coincident with young people leaving home and heading out into the real world of work or college. Then, religiosity begins to rise again as young people go through their 30s, coincident with marriage, children and more stable involvement in specific communities. Religiosity generally continues to rise with age, albeit with some points at which it is fairly flat, and reaches its peak in Americans' late 70s and 80s.<sup>30</sup>

But I'm not sure he's right. David Kinnaman and the team at Barna have been tracking faith practices of young adults for decades. Barna data on weekly church attendance by generation shows that whatever rise in religiosity there might be later in life, the relative peak seems a bit lower than it once was. Elders through Millennials have lower weekly church attendance rates than in years past.

### WEEKLY CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY GENERATION: 2003–2020

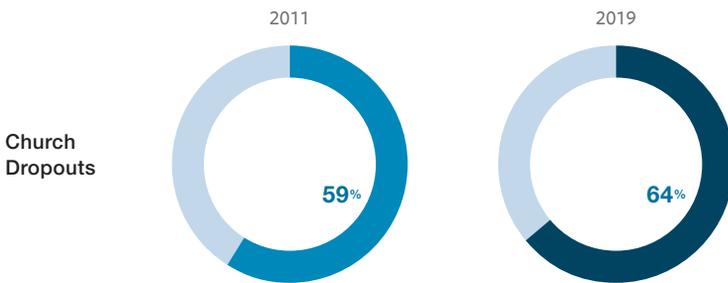


n=96,171 U.S. adults, 2000–2020.

\*Due to low sample size, the 2003 attendance rate for Millennials is not included in this chart.

In 2011, Barna published their discovery that “59% of young adults with a Christian background had dropped out of church at some point during their 20s—many just for a time, but some for good.”<sup>31</sup> In 2019, Kinnaman’s book, *Faith for Exiles*, coauthored with Mark Matlock, revealed that the percentage of dropouts rose to 64 percent.<sup>32</sup>

## INCREASE IN CHURCH DROPOUTS



n=1,816 U.S. adults 18-29 current/former Christians, January 2011; n=1,514 U.S. adults 18-29 current/former Christians, February 16-28, 2018.

Barna’s research also led them to outline four distinct categories for eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds who grew up Christian:

- *Prodigals* (22 percent): “ex-Christians” who “do not identify themselves as Christian despite having attended a Protestant or Catholic church as a child or teen, or having considered themselves to be Christian at some time.”
- *Nomads* (30 percent): “lapsed Christians” who “identify themselves as Christian but have not attended church during the past month. The vast majority of nomads haven’t been involved with a faith community for six months or more.”
- *Habitual churchgoers* (38 percent): those who “describe themselves as Christian and have attended church at least

once in the past month, yet do not have foundational core beliefs or behaviors associated with being an intentional, engaged disciple.”

- *Resilient disciples* (10 percent): “Christians who (1) attend church at least monthly and engage with their church more than just attending worship services; (2) trust firmly in the authority of the Bible; (3) are committed to Jesus personally and affirm he was crucified and raised from the dead to conquer sin and death; and (4) express desire to transform the broader society as an outcome of their faith.”<sup>33</sup>

Kinnaman’s analysis tells us we should not be too quick to say that the “kids are all right” (the resilient minority aside). Things are shifting, and we’ve got to pay attention even if we can’t forecast the future.

### *Cross-Pressured*

The complexity of this picture—a majority of Americans self-identifying as Christians, even as the percentage drops; church attendance declining; those with no religious affiliation rising; resilient disciples persisting—is part of what Taylor means by a cross-pressured age “where both our agnosticism and our devotion are mutually haunted and haunting.”<sup>34</sup> Faith is contested, but it remains in the picture. We are “pushed by the immanence of disenchantment [think: closed-roof universe] on one side, but also pushed by a sense of significance and transcendence on another side, even if it might be a lost transcendence.”<sup>35</sup>

The mid-twentieth-century Southern writer Flannery O’Connor called the American South “Christ-haunted.”<sup>36</sup> That is a fitting description of many cultures in the West. The specter of the crucified Savior looms over conversations from #BlackLivesMatter to #MeToo. We might not care about victims the way we do if it weren’t for the triumph of one particular victim two thousand years ago. Even many of the critiques that have been leveled against Christianity itself would not have been possible if not for

Christianity and its Christ. This is the core argument secular historian Tom Holland makes in his book *Dominion*. In an essay for *The Spectator*, Holland writes:

Christianity had revealed to the world a momentous truth: that to be a victim might be a source of strength. . . . The commanding heights of western culture may now be occupied by people who dismiss Christianity as superstition; but their instincts and assumptions remain no less Christian for that. If God is indeed dead, then his shadow, immense and dreadful, continues to flicker even as his corpse lies cold. The risen Christ cannot be eluded simply by refusing to believe in him. That the persecuted and disadvantaged have claims upon the privileged—widely taken for granted though it may be today across the West—is not remotely a self-evident truth. Condemnations of Christianity as patriarchal or repressive or hegemonic derive from a framework of values that is itself nothing if not Christian.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, the notion of a human right began with canon lawyers in the 1200s. The *Decretum* (a compilation of church canons and teaching) concluded, “A starving pauper who stole from a rich man did so, according to a growing number of legal scholars, *iure naturali*—‘in accordance with natural law.’”<sup>38</sup> Thus, they were not guilty of a crime. They had a human “right” to the necessities of life.<sup>39</sup> When the friar Bartolomé de Las Casas visited the Spanish colonies in the Americas, he rebuked Christians for thinking that they had not merely a right but a duty to conquer and “prosecute” idol-worshiping peoples.<sup>40</sup> Though such a view sat easily with Aristotle’s doctrine that “it was to the benefit of barbarians to be ruled by ‘civilized and virtuous princes,’” the Christian belief that every human had been made equally by God and had been endowed with reason made the suggestion that natives were slightly higher than monkeys blasphemy by Christian standards.<sup>41</sup> Thus it came to be that Las Casas coined the phrase “*Derechos humanos*”—human rights.

The great experiment of the post-Christian but Christ-haunted world is whether the fruit of justice and peace will remain when

the tree of society has been severed from the roots of Christianity. Can you enjoy the fruit of Christianity—arguably, the gifts of Christendom—without the root of Christian faith and practice? To live in a Christ-haunted world is to live where (most of) the fruit of the Spirit are prized as virtues but the testimony of the Spirit that Christ is Lord is scorned.

## **Making Sense and Making Our Way Forward**

What have we observed so far? There has been a shifting of cultural tectonic plates as many contexts have become more and more post-Christian. The clearest way to explain that in terms of the earthquake-like shift is to say that we are post-Christendom, that era when Christianity and country, the kingdom of God and a sociopolitical kingdom, were symbiotically connected. This shift—though not necessarily the total rupture of the relationship—has caused a surge in the cultural oceanic waters. These waves look like the rise of new kinds of pluralism, paganism, and individualism.

The aftermath is a mess. There are casualties—think of the programs churches would run that no longer exist, the TV shows in which Christianity was assumed as the backdrop for the family conflict, the changing laws about marriage, and more. And there is confusion. Christian impulses and values are being used to condemn Christian doctrines, practices, and institutions. The West is trying to sever the tree from its root while still demanding its fruit.

What is a pastor to do in such an age? The challenges discussed in this book are not all new. In fact, I have chosen to frame them in terms that are evergreen. We will *always* have to wrestle with our vocation, our spirituality, our relationships, and our credibility; and we will *always* have to discern how to lead our churches in worship, formation, unity, and mission. These things will always be with us. And yet, the situation is different, not perhaps unique or unprecedented—that greatly overused word of 2020. “Each day,” Jesus said, “has enough trouble of its own” (Matt. 6:34). So each age has its own challenges.

My goal is to pair situational analysis with theological reflection. I'm trying to find the connective tissue between ancient wisdom—from the Scriptures and from church history—and the present challenges. But really, I'm hoping all this will provoke you to do your own situational analysis and theological reflection. Statistics alone don't tell a story. Robust empirical research requires some form of ethnography—an insider's look at how people describe things in their own words. As a pastor, you are doing this every day with your congregation. You're listening to people talk about their health challenges, political opinions, and busy schedules, and you're trying to hear the music underneath it all. Where are their fears and anxieties? What are they really hoping for or longing to find? This book is a chance for you to pay that same kind of attention to your own life and ministry. What weighs most on you? What decisions keep you up at night? What aspirations get you up early in the morning? You know the cause of the dread in your soul and the reason for the spring in your step. Think through these as you read the chapters ahead.

If you're not a pastor or don't consider yourself a church leader, think of reading this book as a kind of trust-building exercise. We're pulling the curtain back and showing you how we wrestle with some of the biggest challenges we're facing. Perhaps you'll be heartened by the honesty and the humility. Maybe by seeing the desire to be faithful shepherds in the midst of these challenges, you will find yourself willing to trust again, to put your hand back to the plow again, or at the very least, to pray more fervently for those who serve and lead the church.

It's time now to explore the challenges of pastoral ministry in a rapidly changing world.