THE REBIRTH OF THE CHURCH

Applying Paul's Vision for Ministry in Our Post-Christian World

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*To my wife, Renee, who has supported me
far more than I deserve; our family; and the many
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Contents

Introduction

In most places in the Western world, churches are declining in membership and in social influence. As they find themselves increasingly marginalized and unable to count on the support of the communities they are meant to serve, they are finding that long-established approaches to ministry—well-publicized, attractive services and a range of activities to meet the needs of individuals and families from the cradle to the grave—no longer have the broad appeal that they had for previous generations. Becoming increasingly nervous about the future, more and more church leaders are asking themselves, "Where do we go from here?"

But this is not the first time that this question has arisen. Throughout the centuries, the church has encountered times of crisis as it battled the storms of profound cultural and political upheavals. It must have been a question in the mind of the apostle Paul as he responded to God's call to take the gospel to non-Jewish peoples. He was himself a leading Jew with a reputation for zealous persecution of the new messianic movement that was causing alarm throughout the land of Israel and increasingly among the Jews of the Diaspora. How was he to translate Jesus the Jewish Messiah's message, focused on Jesus's inauguration of the reign of God, for a Greco-Roman world that was required to acknowledge Caesar as lord?

Much has been written on the need for Western churches to embrace a missional ecclesiology. But what will that look like in post-Christendom Western settings? This book outlines key responses to that question. As we endeavor to reimagine the church for the twenty-first century, we must look for models that are both biblically rooted and culturally engaged. There will be both continuity and discontinuity with the church's previous centuries of ministry and mission.

One of the serious issues concerning the church under the influence of Christendom, which has inhibited the vitality of churches throughout the Western world and beyond, has been the separation of ecclesiology from missiology. Mission became a department of the church that has often been marginalized and starved of human and financial resources. By contrast, a missional ecclesiology recognizes that mission is the heartbeat of the church precisely because the God that Christians worship is the God of mission. From Genesis to Revelation, God is the sending God, with all three persons of the Trinity engaged in that mission.

We begin by examining the cultural and political challenges facing the church today and comparing and contrasting them with those that faced churches birthed in the first century through the mission endeavors of Paul and his companions. We recognize the urban priority that characterized his missionary journeys as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and affirm the same priority for today. At the same time, we recognize that the urban world of Paul's day was very different from urbanization in the twenty-first century. Having described the cities addressed by Paul in his letters, we identify the recurring issues he encountered in the pluralistic, neo-pagan, preindustrial cities in which he labored. These issues we then relate to the challenges facing churches today by asking to what extent they are relevant to contemporary contexts.

While we cannot reproduce pre-Christendom first-century models of church, we may have much to learn from them as we seek ways of birthing new faith communities in order to reach the 90 percent or more of the population who no longer darken the doorways of churches in most countries and in many regions within countries with higher average attendance rates.

I offer this volume with some hesitancy, in that I am neither a Pauline scholar nor a church planter. But I have been informed and inspired by a large number of biblical scholars, together with groundbreaking apostolic missionaries to the Western world. The number of these individuals and the networks they are developing are increasing significantly in our day. They are not content to simply ask the question, "Where do we go from here?" They are determined to embark on bold journeys of exploration. I pray that what I have written will serve to affirm them in many of the directions they are heading and perhaps provide a few course corrections along the way!

<div align="right">Eddie Gibbs</div>

COMPARING CONTEXTS

1

Engaging Twenty-First-Century Post-Christendom Contexts

There is an impressive, ever-growing body of literature highlighting that Western societies are in the midst of unprecedented cultural, economic, and political upheavals. This literature is not confined to one discipline but covers economics, political commentary, the business world, education, communication, entertainment, and religion.

In the midst of this seismic upheaval, the church cannot simply bury its head in the sand, hoping that the earthquakes and aftershocks will pass and that it will then be able to emerge and continue with business as usual. The changes taking place in Western societies have been described as all-pervasive, discontinuous, and irreversible. They are having a profound effect on churches of all traditions, including not only historic denominations but also diverse contemporary expressions of church. None is immune, although the changes are affecting different traditions in a variety of ways.

Defining *Christendom*

As the designations "pre-Christendom" and "post-Christendom" feature prominently in this book, it is appropriate to define *Christendom* at the outset. The term was developed from the Latin word referring to Christians collectively as the *corpus Christianum*, the "community of Christians."

With the conversion of the emperor Constantine and the Edict of Milan in AD 313, the church took on a more political aspect, reflecting the coming together of religion and the empire to present a united front against the external enemies that were threatening the Roman Empire. This relationship was further cemented with the First Council of Nicaea in 325. By 392, Christianity became the state religion of the empire, at which time pagan religions were prohibited. State recognition of Christianity had a profound impact on the significance of conversion for the bulk of the population. By the fourth century,

> Tertullian's primary concern as a leader was formation of a people around a specific set of habits and practices that came out of his engagement with Scripture. . . . This is a missional activity focused on formation of a people as God's new society. As church historian Alan Kreider points out, this focus on formation was lost in a Christendom that continued to shape the imagination of Christian life in late modernity. . . . As a result, the church entered the long period of Christendom and the focus of leadership shifted from formation of a people as an alternative society of God's future to oversight of orthodoxy, proper administration of the sacraments, and regulation of specialized and privatized ethical practices increasingly disconnected from any biblical or theological understanding of the *ecclesia* as the people of God.[1]

Christendom represents a dramatic shift in understanding, of both the church and its relationship to its broader cultural context, from that which prevailed during the first three centuries. The church shifted from a loose network of local faith communities to a much more institutional, bureaucratic, and centralized institution. *Christendom* named that amalgam of church and state bound by a common ideology in order to present a united front in the face of growing external threats.[2] Alan Hirsch identifies the following characteristics of Christendom:

1. Its mode of engagement is attractional as opposed to missional/sending. It assumes a certain centrality of the church in relation to its surrounding culture. (The missional church is a "going/sending one" and operates in the incarnational mode.)
2. A shift of focus to dedicated, sacred buildings/places of worship. . . . It became more static and institutional in form. (The early church had no recognized dedicated buildings other than houses, shops, etc.)

1. Roxburgh and Romanuk, *Missional Leader*, 119–20.
2. For a reassessment of the birth of Christendom, see Leithart, *Defending Constantine*, and the recent surprising change of mind of the Anabaptist scholar Craig Carter, under the influence of Augustine among others, which he reveals in his blog, *The Politics of the Cross Resurrected* (http://politicsofthecrossresurrected.blogspot.com).

3. The emergence of an institutionally recognized, professional clergy class acting primarily in a pastor-teacher mode. (In the New Testament church, people were commissioned into leadership by local churches or by an apostolic leader.)

4. The paradigm is also characterized by the institutionalization of grace in the form of sacraments administered by an institutionally authorized priesthood. (The New Testament church's form of communion was an actual [daily?] meal dedicated to Jesus in the context of everyday life and the home.)[3]

The Christendom model and its assumptions have shaped the church for the past fifteen hundred years. As a consequence, we have come to regard such churches as normative. Now that we are transitioning into a post-Christendom missional environment, we struggle to redefine church and to motivate and restructure church in order to function effectively in this changing environment.

Pre-Christendom Contexts

The biblical focus of this book is on the missionary strategy of the apostle Paul, which confines us to the first century. However, the pre-Christendom context lasted until the conversion of Emperor Constantine early in the fourth century and the eventual adoption of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. During this period Christianity spread from the Eastern Mediterranean across North Africa and from Damascus east. Gradually it emerged from the margins of society and was no longer regarded with suspicion and hostility or even as a threat to established Roman order and the privileges that Jewish communities had established for themselves as a traditional religion. Jews existed in an ambivalent relationship with the new messianic movement. Some Hellenized Jews were, along with the Gentile "God-fearers" among them, attracted to the new movement, whereas other Jewish groups regarded the new movement as theologically heretical and socially disruptive.[4]

What is important for this study is to recognize from the outset that in our treatment of Paul we must not think we can return to that pre-Christendom period in looking for pioneering missionary strategies. Neither must we idealize

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3. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 276–77. Bracketed question appeared in the original.
4. Scholars are divided in their assessment of the strength and duration of Christianity's appeal within the extensive Jewish population of the Diaspora. See Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 57–59. He believes that the majority of the churches established by Paul were principally made up of Hellenized Jews.

the New Testament era by focusing on the impressive expansion of the church to the neglect of the challenges it had to face. Consequently, we will focus on lessons to be learned, not models to be reproduced.

Historical Development of Christendom

The church experienced a dramatic change in status and legitimacy following the Edict of Milan in AD 313, when embracing Christianity became a matter of birthright, instituted by infant baptism. Church became an obligatory weekly gathering at a specially designated building ruled by professional clergy. Theological orthodoxy was demanded. Moral values were made the norm, based largely on the Old Testament ethical demands and enforced by law. Within the Roman Empire, under increasing military pressure from beyond its porous borders, a sharp distinction was made between Christendom and "heathendom," with the latter regarded as ground to be conquered in order to bring about the conversion of its populace to Christianity. These measures radically changed the nature of Christianity as it had existed and spread during the previous centuries.

The primary focus of this book is on the first century, when the church expanded to non-Jewish communities, mainly around the Eastern Mediterranean, through the missionary initiatives of Paul and others. During the following two centuries, Christianity continued to expand at an exponential rate, and in the process the issue of control became a dominant concern. Darrell Guder draws attention to the expanding nature of this problem as cultural diversity became more emphatic in the wake of the disintegration of the Roman Empire.

> As Christianity became the established religion of expanding European culture, the problem of control constantly presented itself. Following the disintegration of the Roman Empire, as various cultures migrated and changed the cultural map of Europe, Christian mission was remarkably effective. These cultures rapidly became integrated into the Christian civilization over which the Latin pope exercised authority. Although originally Germanic, these various cultures (Franks, Saxons, Suevians, Allemanians, etc.) accepted (or had imposed on them) the Roman culture of established Christendom. Acknowledged as the spiritual authority in the western half of the empire, the Latin papacy claimed that it could define the doctrinal *and* cultural shape of faith as Christendom expanded its boundaries and absorbed more and more cultural groupings.[5]

5. Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 85.

Christendom flourished throughout the medieval period and into the Renaissance with little questioning of the alliance of church and state. Each reinforced the other while at the same time creating tension between them. Church and politics were intertwined, with the assumption that Christian values undergirded society. Throughout Europe, church-state relationships remained close, with each reinforcing and seeking to gain advantage over the other, and reached their height in the medieval and early modern period when churches lived in a dynamic equilibrium with the culture.

Lesslie Newbigin points out that "Christianity had become almost the folk religion of Western Europe for almost a thousand years," during which the people of Western Europe, "hemmed in by the power of Islam to east and south, had the Gospel wrought into the very stuff of their social and personal life, so that the whole population could be conceived of as the *corpus Christianum*. That conception is the background of all the Reformation theologies" and the establishing of state churches.[6]

In subsequent centuries Christendom in the West faced new challenges when the legal basis of society became governed by canon law as decreed by the church. With power came cruelty and corruption, expressed in this period by the Crusades, to regain control of the Holy Lands; the Inquisition, to deal with religious heretics, who were regarded as a threat to the social order; and pogroms against Jews. Andy Crouch highlights the tragic cultural blind spots evident among Westerners with the Christendom mind-set: "Right in the midst of Christendom were firmly entrenched cultural practices—consider the Crusades and the relentless persecution of the Jews—that exhibited Christendom's failure to culturally embrace the gospel's key themes of peace and God's particular concern for his chosen people."[7] We might speculate, however, on what the subsequent history of Europe would have looked like without the cohesive response by Christendom to the military and religious challenge of Islam. Would it have succumbed, as did much of the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa?

As corruption and greed became increasingly evident during the twelfth century so cracks began to appear in Christendom in the late Middle Ages, with the power struggle among three rival popes and increasing corruption and greed evident during the Renaissance. These conditions paved the way for the Reformation in the fifteenth century. These three centuries witnessed an unprecedented era of creativity, both technologically and in theological insights, many of which challenged the long-standing assumptions of the Catholic Church. This was the

6. Newbigin, extract from *The Household of God* (1953), in *Missionary Theologian*, 115.
7. Crouch, *Culture Making*, 176–77.

age of global exploration and of the dissemination of information made possible by the invention of printing. It brought about a transition from feudalism to capitalism and the rise of strong nation-states led by increasingly powerful and independent-minded monarchs. Alan Hirsch offers the following evaluation:

> For all its failings, the church, up till the time of the Enlightenment, played the overwhelmingly dominant role in the mediation of identity, meaning, purpose, and community for at least the preceding eleven centuries in the West. Its demise, or rather its forced removal, came about when two or three other major forces were on the rise. These were
>   • The rise of capitalism and of the free market as the mediator of value
>   • The rise of the nation-state as the mediator of protection and provision
>   • The rise of science as the mediator of truth and understanding.[8]

Embedded in the Christendom cultural arrangement is an unresolved tension that surfaces in a variety of forms during the course of Christendom's long history.

> Within Christendom one is familiar with two contrasting attitudes: on the one hand there is the attitude, typical of a national Church, which accepts a certain responsibility for the whole life of the community, but fails to make it clear that the Church is a separate community marked off from the world in order to save the world; on the other hand, and in opposition to this, there is the attitude of the gathered community—the body which is very conscious of being called out from the world, and from a merely nominal Christianity, but which yet can wash its hands completely of any responsibility for those of its members who fail to fulfill its conditions for membership.[9]

Such inner tensions, plus the growing influence of secularization and pluralism in the 1960s, opened still wider the cracks within Christendom that eventually pushed the church to the margins and radically changed both the nature of Christian ministry within the church and the church's mission to the larger community. However, the Christendom cultural arrangement has proved to be amazingly resilient in the face of its weakening and fragmenting foundations. Alan Hirsch observes,

> It seems that the template of this highly institutional version of Christianity is so deeply embedded in our collective psyche that we have inadvertently put it

8. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 108.
9. Newbigin, extract from *The Household of God* (1953), in *Missionary Theologian*, 119.

beyond the pale of prophetic critique. We have so divinized this mode of church through centuries of theologizing about it that we have actually confused it with the kingdom of God, an error that seems to have plagued Catholic thinking in particular throughout the ages.[10]

In 2008, Phyllis Tickle drew attention to a continuing pattern of upheaval in her book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*. She argues that we are currently experiencing another such dramatic upheaval and provides a historical overview identifying cultural upheavals of seismic proportions occurring approximately every 250 to 500 years. She describes the "Great Emergence" as a "monumental phenomenon." In my estimation, her description is no exaggeration, as such upheavals affect every aspect of our lives and permeate every dimension of our culture. In terms of the implication of the Great Emergence for the church, Tickle identifies at least three consistent results or corollary events.

> First, a new, more vital form of Christianity does indeed emerge. Second, the organized expression of Christianity which up until then had been the dominant one is reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified expression of its former self. As a result of this usually energetic but rarely benign process, the Church actually ends up with two new creatures where once there had been only one. That is, in the course of birthing a brand-new expression of its faith and praxis, the Church also gains a grand refurbishment of the older one. The third result is of equal, if not greater, significance, though. That is, every time the incrustations of an overly established Christianity have been broken open, the faith has spread—and been spread—dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas, thereby increasing exponentially the range and depth of Christianity's reach as a result of its time of unease and distress.[11]

When one reflects on this statement in the light of the unrelenting decline of nearly every former mainline (now "old-line") denomination throughout the countries of the North Atlantic since the mid-1960s, the confidence Tickle expresses may be open to question.[12] Highly divisive theological and moral issues are tearing at the organizational fabric of many denominations—including those at the conservative end of the spectrum—by under-

10. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 51.
11. Tickle, *Great Emergence*, 17.
12. See Roozen, *Decade of Change*, for details of the FACT Survey of 28,789 randomly selected congregations, which reveals the continuation of the trend of fewer persons overall in the pews and decreasing spiritual vitality.

mining trust in leadership and eroding mutual respect and civility. Perhaps this is what Tickle had in mind when she spoke of an "energetic but rarely benign process"!

In an earlier book, *ChurchNext* (2000), I describe this comprehensive and deep-rooted cultural turbulence in terms of "discontinuous change," which has profound implications for church leadership.

> How do systems function, including church structures, in the midst of unpredictable and discontinuous change? The quantum world is not the straightforward world of cause-and-effect relationships but of unanticipated consequences and previously unidentified potential and resources. Preparation for ministry [I would now add "and retraining in ministry"] in such a climate of uncertainty and surprise cannot best be accomplished in a highly structured environment or with predictable routines. Rather, the student [and experienced pastor] must be faced with the unexpected and the need for rapid response.[13]

Since I wrote those words at the dawn of a new millennium, we have so far witnessed three largely unanticipated upheavals that have played out on the global stage. The first is the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the second is the economic meltdown that has caused the worst recession since the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the third is the social revolution impacting most of the Middle East with political, social, and economic repercussions that have left Western nations perplexed as to how to respond. And who knows how many more surprises await us just around the corner?

This is the unpredictable world in which we live. It requires renewed confidence in the Lord of history and being prepared to place our trust in God when earth-shaking events leave us feeling perplexed and powerless. Eschatology takes on fresh significance and urgency in such times.

Challenges Facing Churches in Post-Christendom Contexts

Across the theological spectrum, local churches and denominations are struggling to redefine the church in response to the new challenges they are facing. The debate and experimentation are taking place across a range of traditions, from Anabaptist to Anglican, embracing both long-standing congregations and recent church plants.

13. Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 105.

Theological and Social Consequences of a Reductionist Gospel

As the church finds itself increasingly marginalized in post-Christendom contexts, and with the secular state moving into the spiritual vacuum that has been created, the question remains as to where society will now look for its values and vision. Traditionally these have arisen out of religious convictions shared throughout local communities and the nation as a whole. This challenge comes at a time when so much of the church in the West has succumbed to a reductionist gospel, narrowed to concern for personal piety and life after death. Darrell Guder, one of the founding members of the Gospel and Our Culture Network, expresses his concern regarding this restrictive understanding as it relates to the missional task.

> My thesis is that our particular Western reductionisms are the great challenge that the North Atlantic churches face when they seek to develop a theology of evangelistic ministry. We are not simply dealing with the need for continuing translation because of the inevitable reductions that occur in that process. *Our challenge is far broader. It is a question of the church's radical conversion from a deeply engrained reductionism whose result is a gospel that is far too small.*
>
> The reductionisms of Western Christianity are very deeply rooted in a long history. They are, by now, largely unconscious. They define the air we breathe as Western Christians. We have taken them with us into the modern missionary enterprise and left them as a dubious legacy with the churches we have founded. . . . *The reductionism we struggle with is related to our attempts to reduce the gospel, to bring it under control, to render it intellectually respectable, or to make it serve another agenda than God's purposes.*[14]

Reductionism has occurred on a number of fronts in Western Christianity. First, Christians in the West have taken the good news of the reign of God inaugurated by Christ and have individualized that message. It has been translated into personal benefits and a highly privatized form of religion, especially by people who consider self-reliance to be a high priority. Under the pervasive influence of secularization, churchgoers tend to divide the sacred from the secular and thus live in two separate worlds. The result for many is that they live by two standards: one set by the widely accepted norms of the marketplace and interpersonal relationships of today, and the other set by gospel values as presented in the New Testament. The problem is that the former prevails throughout most of their waking hours.

14. Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 102. Italics added.

A further aspect of reductionism is to relate the good news primarily to the future life. It is the means by which individuals are forgiven for their sins and secure a place in heaven. In other words, the gospel has more to do with life after death than with how we should live as servants of Jesus here and now in preparation for his coming to reign on earth.[15]

Last, Western reductionism avoids too close an identification with Christ's suffering on the cross by placing most of its emphasis on the triumph of Christ's resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven. Suffering is an essential part of being an apprentice of Jesus, according to his own teaching and the larger witness of the New Testament. Darrell Guder exposes the impact of reductionism on the mission of the church: "The benefits of salvation are separated from the reason for which we receive God's grace in Christ: to empower us as God's people to become Christ's witnesses."[16]

Reductionism can be understood in terms other than the establishing of no-go areas in which the gospel is not allowed by society to meddle. It can also be perceived as a diminution of influence. The radical nature of the gospel is progressively diluted to ensure the restriction of its impact on society to the point where it is simply ignored. But such a strategy fails to recognize that the churches remain one of the most viable institutions in many dysfunctional localities, with a numerical strength greater than any political party or interest group. The challenge for the churches remains one of motivation and their preparedness to set aside their internal agendas for the greater common good. We will return to this topic later in the chapter.

Again, Alan Hirsch provides trenchant comment: "Even America, for so long a bastion of a distinct and vigorous form of cultural Christendom, is now experiencing a society that is increasingly moving away from that church's sphere of influence and becoming genuinely neo-pagan." Hirsch laments: "So many of the problems in the world relate to the wrong use of power and authority—and in the history of Christendom it is to our great shame that the church has too often led the way. One has only to look at the Crusades, the Inquisition, the persecution of nonconformist Christians, and the treatment of Jews to see how we have so missed the mark in relation to authentic moral leadership."[17]

The woes afflicting Western societies in both Europe and North America give urgency to the task of reimagining the church in its post-Christendom contexts. The individualistic and consumerist churches that have arisen under

15. See Wright, *After You Believe*. For a summary, see http://trevinwax.com/2010/01/05/the-rebirth-of-virtue-an-interview-with-n-t-wright.

16. Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 120.

17. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 118.

modernity will not prove either relevant or effective as agents of mission in the current climate—one in which society is becoming increasingly dysfunctional as communities crumble and the notion of civil society is eroded, with conflicting interest groups vying for power.

The Church's Role within Modern Dysfunctional Societies

There is growing concern in both the United States and the United Kingdom that society is fragmenting and trust in institutions of all kinds is eroding, resulting in growing dissatisfaction with leaders in every sphere: government, industry, financial institutions, and the church. Social issues have been exacerbated by the economic crisis of 2009, but they were present before this financial meltdown that spread across Europe and North America. Two influential books have drawn attention to the seriousness of the situation, one addressing the United Kingdom and the other addressing the United States.

In 2010, Phillip Blond, Anglican theologian and fellow of the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, attracted national attention with his analysis of the situation in Britain in his book *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*.[18] He highlights the failure of top-down, central-government approaches of both the Left and the Right to remedy the social and economic woes of society. He also attacks the monopolistic consumerism of those who depended on market forces to restore consumerist power to the people. Blond opens his book with a gloomy analysis of the woes of contemporary British society.

> Something is seriously wrong with Britain. This is an intuition that everybody, whatever their politics, shares. But what is this malaise from which we suffer? We all know the symptoms: increasing fear, lack of trust and abundance of suspicion, long-term increase in violent crime, loneliness, recession, depression, private and public debt, family breakup, divorce, infidelity, bureaucratic and unresponsive public services, dirty hospitals, powerlessness, the rise of racism, excessive paperwork, longer and longer working hours, children who have no parent, concentrated and seemingly irremovable poverty, the permanence of inequality, teenagers with knives, teenagers being knifed, the decline of politeness, aggressive youths, the erosion of civil liberties and the increase of obsessive surveillance, public authoritarianism, private libertarianism, general pointlessness, political cynicism and pervading lack of daily joy.[19]

18. *Radical Republic*, a US edition of Blond's book, relates his analysis and argument to the United States and to US politics.
19. Blond, *Red Tory*, 1.

Blond underlines his concern by stating that his assessment "is not just a private opinion held by a disgruntled few but also a public discernment universally shared but seldom addressed."[20] He traces this social malaise back to the end of World War II, since which Britain has experienced two governing paradigms. The first, state-sponsored Keynesianism, extended from 1945 through the oil shocks of 1973 to its death in 1979. The second, neoliberalism, ran from 1979 until the global debt crisis of 2007–8. Blond argues that the consequence of these two approaches has been the creation of a bipolar nation—a bureaucratic, centralized state that presides dysfunctionally over an increasingly fragmented, disempowered, and isolated citizenry.[21]

The destruction of community from 1945 until the late 1950s left Britain financially bankrupt and with mounting social problems as hundreds of thousands of military personnel were demobilized; food and clothing shortages entailed severe rationing; and many homes, most concentrated in the deprived inner-city areas, needed to be rebuilt. ("Prefabs" that were manufactured from asbestos were regarded as a hard-to-come-by luxury.)[22] Squalid row housing was replaced by high-rise human filing cabinets, and other segments of the population were dispersed to new towns, which often lacked the most basic amenities. By contrast, older communities that—in spite of their squalor—provided mutual support and a sense of local identity were destroyed.

Phillip Blond was invited to the United States to lecture at the Tocqueville Forum at Georgetown University in March 2010.[23] That same month, political and cultural commentator David Brooks, a regular columnist for the *New York Times*, wrote an op-ed piece in which he argued that the United States is on a parallel track to becoming a broken and polarized society. "The public has contempt for the political class. Public debt is piling up at an astonishing and unrelenting pace. Middle-class wages have lagged. Unemployment will remain high. It will take years to fully recover from the financial crisis. This confluence of crises has produced a surge in vehement libertarianism. People are disgusted with Washington. The Tea Party movement rallies against big government, big business and the ruling class in general. Even beyond their ranks, there is a corrosive cynicism about public action." Aligning himself with Blond, Brooks expresses the conviction that "there is another way to respond to these problems that is more communitarian and less libertarian."[24]

20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 9–24.
22. See Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945–51* and *Family Britain, 1951–57*.
23. To access the video, see http://government.georgetown.edu/tocquevilleforum/90279.html.
24. Brooks, "Broken Society."

On both sides of the Atlantic, society has experienced a cultural revolution from the Left and a free-market revolution from the Right.

> These two revolutions talked the language of individual freedom, but they perversely ended up creating greater centralization. They created an atomized, segmented society and then the state had to come in and attempt to repair the damage.
>
> The free-market revolution didn't create the pluralistic decentralized economy. It created a centralized financial monoculture, which requires a gigantic government to audit its activities. The effort to liberate individuals from repressive social constraints didn't produce a flowering of freedom; it weakened families, increased out-of-wedlock births and turned neighbors into strangers. In Britain, you get a country with rising crime, and, as a result, four million security cameras.[25]

In his lecture, Blond argued that "the project of radical transformative conservatism is nothing less than the restoration and creation of human association, and the elevation of society and the people who form it to their proper central and sovereign station." His solution, as summarized by Brooks, is to "remoralize the market, relocalize the economy and recapitalize the poor."[26] In response to this polarization, there are moves on both sides of the Atlantic, from central government in the United Kingdom and state and city governments in the United States, to release financial resources into the hands of community leaders.[27] Such leaders are much closer to their local situations and are better able to prioritize needs in terms of financial institutions, the regeneration of local businesses, and support for local schools and community colleges. Central government must focus on the society-wide concerns it handles best, including social security and health care, national defense, upgrading the transportation infrastructure, regulating banks and financial institutions, and enhancing educational standards by allocating sufficient funding in a highly competitive

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25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. For example, see the autobiography of world-renowned business management guru Peter Drucker, *Adventures of a Bystander*, originally published in 1978. In his preface to the new edition in 1990, Drucker wrote,

> Where the prevailing doctrines preached control by big government or big business, I stressed decentralization, experimentation, and the need to create community. And where the prevailing approaches saw government and big business as the only institutions and as the "countervailing powers" of a modern society, I stressed the importance and central role of the non-profit, public-service institutions, the "third sector"—as the nurseries of independence and diversity; as guardians of values; as providers of community leadership and citizenship. . . . But I was swimming against a strong current. (vi–vii)

See also Professor Mark Mitchell of Matthew Henry College, who is also an enthusiastic advocate of localism: www.frontporchrepublic.com/about/who-we-are/contributors/mark-mitchell.

international environment and encouraging and monitoring the research and development of the next "big ideas" that will impact our global economies.

Fragmented Self

Blond writes as both a theologian and a social scientist. His analysis identifies the root causes of the woes of contemporary society, which have been widely recognized for some time. The first of these is the fragmented self. Blond's approach reflects his theological conviction that because humans are made in the image of God, their identity has more to do with their relationships than with their individual rationality. As relationship bonds are weakened and broken, so our very humanity comes under threat.

In *The Missional Church in Perspective*, Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile point out that Western societies have entered a vastly more complicated era of hybridity—signifying the mixing and fusing of cultures—especially within the context of globalization: "Locality today is rendered more complex because people live in both spatial and virtual neighborhoods."[28]

Both the fragmentation of self and the loss of neighborhood identity have weakened the position and influence of institutions that once provided neighborhood identity and cohesion. As Lesslie Newbigin discerned, writing in 1953, in such contexts, "the Churches tend to become loosely compacted fellowships within a wider semi-Christian culture, providing for only a small part of the total concerns of the members. Membership in a church may often involve only slight and relatively superficial contacts with other members, because the church is—for each member—only one among the many associations to which he belongs."[29]

In both the United Kingdom and the United States, we have witnessed the centralization of power. This has been easier to achieve in the United Kingdom due to there being no state legislatures to compete with central government. Also, the United Kingdom, being a much smaller country, brings the center closer to local contexts. It is too readily assumed that well-funded centralized projects are the best way to tackle urgent and widespread social and economic problems. But many of these government-initiated programs generate huge resource-devouring bureaucracies and spend money on the wrong priorities, because the people in charge are not sufficiently in touch with local realities.

The people on the ground are often in a much better position to direct the resources to achieve maximum impact. We have seen a recent example of this in the complaints of fishermen in the Gulf states following the catastrophic BP

28. Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*, 128.
29. Newbigin, extract from *Household of God* (1953), in *Missionary Theologian*, 118.

oil spill of 2010. The leaders of the shrimpers feel that they could have acted far more promptly and effectively to save their industry in the aftermath of the disaster, and they blame not only BP but also their own federal government for the slow and inadequate response.

More and more, significant change is taking place from the ground level up. As I write this chapter, two items have caught my attention on the national news. In one case, a seven-year-old named Joshua, who was just learning Braille, had the idea of putting Braille notices on all the produce at his local Trader Joe's grocery store so that he could share in the shopping experience with his parents. The store adopted his idea, which has now spread to the branches of Fresh and Easy (the US expansion of the United Kingdom's Tesco chain). In many other initiatives—for instance, in the provision of food and clothing for the homeless or in tree-planting projects—it is children who are leading the way. These are today's entrepreneurs who dramatically emphasize the need for imagination and creativity in education.

It is against this cultural backdrop that we see how so many of our inherited denominations are out of sync with the significant and, I believe, irreversible cultural trends of the twenty-first century. Van Gelder and Zscheile conclude, "Many denominations and judicatories still reflect the organizational assumptions of industrial bureaucracies in their (1) centralization of authority, communication, and resources; (2) regulatory approach to controlling and managing ministry; and (3) rigidity."[30]

If the Left believes that government programs will provide the answer, the Right has confidence in the power of market forces to turn around the economy, increase the standard of living, and thereby solve our urgent social problems. They believe that the very rich will pour their resources into the multinational companies to bring about a "trickle-down" benefit. The problem here is that it is more likely to be a "trickle" down than an inundation, human nature being what it is! As I write this chapter, we see this in the rise in gas prices, caused not by shortage of supply but by speculators taking advantage of the fear generated by an uncertain international situation.

We know that the big companies do not create most new jobs. Small companies with less than fifty employees in fact generate 80 percent of new jobs. Local banks need to provide financial backing and professional support to maximize these small companies' chances of success. Under current conditions, both the United Kingdom and the United States are experiencing increasing social inequality. The gap between the richest and the poorest continues to widen, with the vast majority of the profit remaining with the wealthiest.

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30. Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*, 159.

Summarizing Phillip Blond's solution, David Brooks writes, "Essentially, Blond would take a political culture that has been oriented around individual choice and replace it with one oriented around relationships and associations." Brooks compares and contrasts the political cultures of the United Kingdom and the United States: "Britain is always going to be more hospitable to communitarian politics than the more libertarian United States. But people are social creatures here, too. American society has been atomized by the twin revolutions here, too. This country, too, needs a fresh political wind. America, too, is suffering a devastating crisis of authority. The only way to restore trust is from the local community on up."[31] I agree with Brooks that the challenges are greater here in the United States, owing to its tradition of rugged individualism in reaction to the controls of central government and to a number of space-related factors: the fact that the country is far larger, that family support structures are broken by distance, and that big cities have spread through the initiatives of property developers whose plans have shown little regard for providing community and "third-space" locations where neighbors can socialize and enjoy local amenities. (In fairness, it must be added that such property developers are only responding to the consumer demand for privacy and security.) Together, these factors will make it all the more difficult to change political structures in the United States.

Collapse of Culture and Erosion of Civil Society

According to Phillip Blond, the gradual erosion of a sense of place, where individuals feel that they belong and are known, is another root cause of the problems facing Western societies. Today's fragmented self travels from location to location and between networks of associates but belongs nowhere. The "nowhere person" lacks both accountability and support, with those who have contact with the individual knowing only a segment of that person's true self. The loss of place also fragments communities into competing groups, with a consequent loss of common vision, mutual concern and understanding, and civility toward one another.

Blond considers civil society to include "everything that ordinary citizens do that is not reducible to the imposed activities of the central state or the compulsion and determination of the marketplace."[32] Although groups abound at the local level, each has a narrow focus and insists on promoting its own rights over against the rights of groups with opposing views or different pri-

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31. Brooks, "Broken Society."
32. Blond, *Red Tory*, 3.

orities. At the same time, however, "the culture of individual rights has also grown up at the expense of very important group rights or religious and other corporate bodies that preserve and encourage rights that may be at odds with the nihilistic culture of liberalism."[33] Western societies have been sliding toward a comprehensive relativism in which standards of good and bad, of right and wrong, are grounded in the opinions of individuals. Tolerance has become an absolute in a culture where anything goes. The exercise of discernment is frequently interpreted as an expression of judgmentalism.

The resulting erosion of social capital is having a devastating effect on our capacity to bring about significant social transformation at the local level, where the turnaround must begin. Before such a comprehensive change can take place, social capital must be restored. For Blond, *social capital* is "a term that tries to express the value, both in terms of money and quality of life, that we derive from our reciprocal social relationships through friendships, contacts, families, groups, neighborliness, political membership, sports teams and churches."[34] He draws attention to "the power and value that horizontal social relationships can have in reversing the symptoms of the erosion of social capital."[35]

The challenge facing Western societies consists in finding ways to recreate a geographical sense of community in a twenty-first-century world. The shattered "Humpty Dumpty" of Christendom cannot be pieced together and returned to its original vantage point on the wall, because the wall has itself crumbled. Western societies need radical restructuring if they are to return to the time when neighbors lived in close proximity, with their daily lives intertwined around local voluntary organizations and the shops that met their basic needs, whose owners and assistants were known by name by the customers and when they spontaneously rallied to the support of their sick and infirm neighbors, often without the need for government intervention.

Today's world, as we have noted, is far more complex—with increased mobility, long commutes to and from work, interest groups competing against each other, the breakup of the family, groups living alternative lifestyles, turf wars between rival gangs, and religious and ethnic pluralism—with some groups electing to colonize rather than assimilate. This is the overwhelmingly challenging environment in which local churches must carry out mission to their surrounding communities and beyond. And many of them are at a loss to know how to respond.

Every ministry situation is unique. In smaller, homogeneous, and stable communities, civil society still prevails. Neighbors readily come to one another's

33. Ibid., 156.
34. Ibid., 71.
35. Ibid., 81.

assistance, whether that consists of routine acts of kindness, coming together in response to a natural disaster, or raising funds for a person needing urgent lifesaving surgery. However, in the vast urban sprawl where so many of the multimillion inhabitants of a major metro area dwell, there is no sense of local identity or commitment. Faced with such daunting challenges, churches and other local voluntary organizations will need to be both creative and resilient to build a civil society, piece by piece.

The recent (2011) devastating earthquake and tsunami in northeastern Japan provides an impressive example of community support. With most government buildings having collapsed and many of the employees killed, the community came to realize that they could not rely on the central government to solve their pressing problems. But the survivors represented long-standing, tight-knit communities and began organizing to provide shelter and food and to develop cottage industries and farming cooperatives. There was no looting or civil disorder. One wonders what the social consequences of such a devastating experience would be like in a city such as Los Angeles.

In order to reconnect and reinforce civil society, we need to begin by learning about people who are very different from ourselves. Richard Mouw specifically addresses the need to show genuine curiosity in other persons as a basis for reestablishing common decency in our culture. He writes, "We ought to want to become familiar with the experiences of people who are different from us simply out of a desire to understand the length and breadth of what it means to be human."[36] Why should our curiosity be roused? In the words of Psalm 139:14, precisely because all of us are "fearfully and wonderfully made." According to Mouw, "All of this applies directly to our public lives. We ought to want to know what makes our fellow citizens tick, why they think and act the way they do, how they have formed their deepest loves and loyalties. To learn civility in the public square is one important way to satisfy a healthy curiosity about what is 'genuinely human.'"[37]

Challenge of Difference Experienced through Pluralism and Relativism

The churches in the West historically have had little exposure to pluralism, especially the kind in which they are in a minority position of relative powerlessness. Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that

36. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 59.
37. Ibid., 60.

Western Christendom took its distinctive form during the long period in which it was the religion of a small region isolated from the religious worlds of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa by the massive power of Islam and from the religious world of the American peoples by the ocean. . . . But, such is the dominance of Western thought in the modern world, the idea that religious pluralism is something new is accepted as though it were true.[38]

The immigration flow into the Western world in the years following World War II has been from predominantly non-Christian cultures, by people seeking to escape poverty and avail themselves of work opportunities not only in low-skill sectors but increasingly in high-tech jobs, plus an ever-increasing tide of refugees, all of which has brought fresh challenges to local churches. Unfortunately, the majority of local church leaders had little preparation for such a change in their ministry priorities. They were effectively trained for the social reality of Christendom. Hence, the vast majority of churches were ill prepared to respond to the trauma of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Furthermore, they have struggled to make respectful and compassionate contacts with the influx of peoples from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the Muslim-majority areas of Africa, not to mention their failure to embrace the Christians from those areas. Many seminary-trained pastors came to the sudden realization that their education had not prepared them for the cultural and religious pluralism that now surrounded them. In particular they did not know how to enter into gracious, truth-honoring dialogue with devout followers of other monotheistic faiths, whether they be Jewish or Muslim.

How Will Churches Respond?

Here in the United States, working independently from Phillip Blond in the United Kingdom, James Davison Hunter has come to similar conclusions regarding the ills of society. More specifically, he has related his findings to the shortcomings of the three main Christian traditions, each of which have professed and pursued strong social agendas. He describes the approaches of the evangelical, the liberal, and the Anabaptist traditions as representing three paradigms of engagement. He labels the evangelical approach as "defense against" the culture, the liberal approach as "relevance to" the culture, and the Anabaptist approach as "purity from" the culture.[39] Each is engaged

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38. Newbigin, extract from "Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach" (1993), in *Missionary Theologian*, 172.
39. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 213.

with the broader culture according to its own convictions and understanding of the gospel.

So many of these expressions of political and social concern have been largely confined to a war of words, with the result that when all is said and done, too much is said and too little is done. The problem is that words do not contain their meanings, especially across cultural divides. In other words, their distinctive cultural contexts and the baggage they carry convey different associations when people of different cultures hear them. Hunter explains: "When the objectified and shared meaning of words is undermined, when we no longer have confidence that words signify what we thought they signified, then it is possible to impute any meaning to words one desires. And if words can mean anything, then they have no intrinsic meaning or at least no possibility of a common meaning. They only mean what we say they mean."[40] People with opposing views talk about or past one another rather than to one another. Each is eager to score points over the other by means of well-honed sound bites. This dynamic contributes to an erosion of civility in public discourse. Despite the well-meaning efforts of a wide variety of groups, the benefits on the ground are meager in relation to the efforts exerted. Hunter proposes an alternative approach. "What has been missing is a leadership that comprehends the nature of these challenges and offers a vision of formation adequate to the task of discipling the church and its members for a time such as ours. By misreading the nature of the times and by focusing so much energy and resources on politics, those who have claimed the mantle of leadership have fixed attention on secondary and tertiary problems and false solutions."[41]

In other words, Hunter agrees with Blond that in order to set a different direction for society, the most hopeful course of action is to rebuild civil society from the ground up. The various local institutions that represent its constituent parts, engaging in dialogue and joint action, must gradually foster community. These include voluntary organizations, religious institutions, local businesses, and financial institutions. Neighborhoods must be planned to include a cross section of the population and to allow for natural interactions when shopping or engaging in social activities. "Nowhere" persons must feel that they belong "somewhere" and are making their distinctive contribution.

Reimagining Western Churches in Post-Christendom Contexts

Churches in the Western world have been shaped by the Christendom paradigm in which they occupied a privileged position as a central pillar of society

40. Ibid., 206.
41. Ibid., 226.

and guardian of its beliefs and values. But over the past two hundred years we have witnessed in Europe the gradual erosion of the alignment between church and state, leading to the collapse of this arrangement in the past century. Various dates have been suggested for its demise, which has been linked to the Enlightenment, the rise of scientific inquiry, two world wars, and, more recently, an aggressive atheism.

As European churches fragmented and were increasingly marginalized, it became apparent they were now facing a missional challenge as great as anywhere in the world. In some respects, their challenge may be greatest of all, in that churches throughout the Western world have a long and checkered history, leading to increasing cynicism regarding "institutional religion." Confusion and increasing conflict between religions add to the uncertainty, as Western societies become more pluralistic due to the immigration of peoples of other religions from around the world. For many of these migrants, their religion is a significant part of their identity, so that secularized Westerners find it difficult to appreciate how their faith convictions so comprehensively and powerfully influence their worldview. The majority of these immigrants do not buy into the individualism and privatization of faith so prevalent among Western Christians.

Churches today have to face questions that probe more deeply, comprehensively, and painfully than did questions in the past. These poignant questions of today are raised by Alan Hirsch: "Will more of the same do the trick? Do we have the inherited resources to deal with this situation? Can we simply rework the tried and true Christendom understanding of church that we so love and understand, and finally, in an ultimate tweak of the system, come up with the winning formula?"[42] Hirsch goes on to answer these questions in the negative: "The tools and techniques that fitted previous eras of Western history simply don't seem to work any longer. *What we need now is a new set of tools.* A new 'paradigm'—a new vision of reality: a fundamental change in our thoughts, perceptions, and values, especially as they relate to our view of the church and mission."[43]

In response to these challenges, the past twenty years in the United Kingdom and the United States have witnessed the beginning of a movement to reimagine the church, less as a static institution and more as a dynamic movement. The church's mission, rather than being envisaged as a program within the church, often "targeted" at peoples continents away, is now seen as defining the very nature of the church. Mission is rooted in the very being of

42. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 16.
43. Ibid., 17. Italics added.

God rather than developed as the initiative of enthusiasts within the church. In order to express this new understanding and commitment, the term *missional* was coined.

The term rapidly gained popularity and began to replace *church growth* and then *church health*, which were on the lips of church leaders in the 1970s and 1980s and were promoted by many programs and much literature. Unfortunately, as the term has become popular, so has it lost coherence. When everything becomes missional, then nothing is missional. Lutheran theologian Craig Van Gelder has provided a timely identification of the main themes defining an authentically missional church.

1. *God is a missionary God who sends the church into the world*. This understanding shifts the agency of mission from the church to God. It is God's mission that has a church rather than a church that has a mission.

2. *God's mission in the world is related to the reign (kingdom) of God*. This understanding makes the work of God in the world larger than the mission of the church, although the church is directly involved in the reign (kingdom) of God.

3. *The missional church is an incarnational (versus an attractional) ministry sent to engage a postmodern, post-Christendom, globalized context*. This understanding requires every congregation to take on a missionary posture for engaging its local context, with this missionary engagement shaping everything a congregation does.

4. *The internal life of the missional church focuses on every believer living as a disciple engaging in mission*. This understanding makes every member a minister, with the spiritual growth of every disciple becoming the primary focus as the body is built up to participate more fully in God's mission in the world.[44]

These four foundational intentions emphasize that missional church cannot be reduced to an add-on program, because it is comprehensive in scope and examines the self-understanding of the church. In addition, no congregation can claim to be a missional church as a point of arrival. Rather, this identification expresses a direction and lifelong pilgrimage as the church endeavors to embody these convictions. Each member will have to be encouraged to buy into this understanding of church, which is no easy achievement for the vast majority of churches that have largely attracted numbers through consumer-driven programs.

44. Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*, 4.

Under the influence of Christendom, ecclesiology became separated from missiology, to their mutual impoverishment. The urgent task now facing the churches in the West is to develop a reconnected ecclesiology and missiology and to demonstrate what a missional ecclesiology will look like within Western contexts. As they undertake this daunting task, they must also avoid the mistake of making the institutional church central to the enterprise, resulting in a survival strategy for institutional churches under threat. Rather, the missional church's witness is not so much attraction, with the goal of increasing church attendance and membership, but to bear witness to the mission of God throughout every segment of society. The Christendom church, and especially the state churches, largely focused on *attraction*, whereas the missional church is even more concerned and structured on the *dispersion* of the people of God to undertake their God-given mission in the world.

An understanding of the church as essentially missional in nature must not be regarded as an elitist concept but rather as something that is embraced by entire congregations. Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford express this conviction: "We believe it [the concept of *missional*] belongs to the whole church and must somehow be factored into the equation of discipleship, spirituality, and church at every level of our experience if we are going to be the people God has made us to be."[45]

Connecting the Twenty-First Century to the First Century

As churches in the West emerge from centuries of Christendom existence, they have much to learn from the early church's life prior to the introduction of Christendom. However, this does not signify that we can return to that era, which in many ways is so very different from our own. This is not an exercise in what is known as "restorationism," as though the New Testament church existed in some ideal form to which we need to return. Rather, we will revisit the early church from the perspective of our post-Christendom awareness to see what we might have missed in our previous reading because of our Christendom-bound cultural bias or blindness. We may find that we have much to learn from the early church, operating from the margins in its pre-Christendom, highly pluralistic, and pagan contexts.

In the account of the expansion of the church in Acts and from the letters Paul addressed to the recently formed faith communities, we will discover that the first missionaries had to translate the message of Jesus and his discipling

45. Hirsch and Ford, *Right Here, Right Now*, 22.

methods—originally developed within a Jewish and largely rural context—into the urban Greco-Roman world. Jesus's model had to be adapted and contextualized. In other words, the early missionaries were making it up was they went along. Paul's letters are especially helpful in that they deal with a wide spectrum of specific issues arising in those faith communities.

This study seeks to make the connection between the first-century and twenty-first-century mission of the church, with due regard to their very different cultural settings. Despite the two millennia that separate them, both missions continue as expressions of the ongoing mission of the ascended Christ. The challenge faced by Paul and his colleagues in his pioneering missionary journeys in a pre-Christendom environment, and that faced by churches in post-Christendom contexts today, is how to translate the message of Jesus, originally proclaimed in a Jewish, rural, Galilean context, into the pagan and pluralistic world of either the Roman Empire or contemporary secular society.

How can the message and ministry model of Jesus, with its all-embracing concerns relating to every area of life, be expressed incarnationally and make a transformative impact on society? How can churches be truly relational in order to impact the lives of members as lifelong followers of Jesus? How can they operate from the margins to the center of the wider culture with a bottom-up approach? And to what extent are they prepared to pay the price of following in the footsteps of the Suffering Servant role of Jesus, the crucified Messiah?

The Importance of Imagination and Creativity for Post-Christendom Churches

As church leaders agonize over the future of the church in the wake of so many failed turnaround strategies and attempts at new growth, they repeatedly ask, "Where do we go from here?" The latest programs promising growth and renewal have proved no more effective than the programs of their predecessors. In this opening chapter, we have argued that the answers do not arise from our past experience. The issues are too deeply rooted and comprehensive to be addressed with any add-on program.

Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon's Porch community in Minneapolis, traces the significant changes that have taken place in Western societies from the "Agrarian Age," through the "Industrial Age," to the "Information Age," and now into the "Inventive Age." Each of these eras has made a profound impact on the church. The church has been sluggish in its response and has suffered the negative consequences. His brief book *Church in the Inventive Age* is a

tract for the times, alerting church leaders to the significance of the changes taking place around them. Of our current age, he writes, "The Inventive Age is one in which inclusion, participation, collaboration, and beauty are essential values."[46] Influence and authority arise not in any hierarchical, top-down way but through the establishing of networks of relations around a creative concept. This cultural shift has enormous implications for the church.

The term *paradigm shift* is often used in a loose and even trivial sense, whereas its true meaning identifies a period when everything is changing around us and there is no going back to the previous state of affairs. There is widespread agreement politically, economically, socially, and at every level of society that we are in such a period. Institutions that prospered under the previous paradigm but now ignore the significance of the changes taking place put themselves in peril. Institutions of all kinds fail to survive, and that includes churches and the seminaries that serve them.

Returning to the issue of the Inventive Age, both the educational and business worlds generally recognize that entrepreneurship must be encouraged if companies and nations are to maintain their influence, both locally and globally, in the twenty-first century. They must encourage imagination and creativity at every opportunity. Sir Ken Robinson has undertaken some of the pioneering research on this important issue and has come up with some disturbing findings. Whereas young children demonstrate high levels of creativity, this capacity dramatically diminishes as they grow older. Robinson claims that "we are educating people out of their creativity."[47] He elaborates on the inadequacy of prevailing approaches to education: "One of the essential tasks of education is to develop academic ability to the best standards possible for everyone. But there's much more to intelligence than academic ability and much more for education than developing it. If there were no more to intelligence than this, most of human culture with its complex fabric of scientific, technological, artistic, economic and social enterprises would never have happened."[48]

The formal educational process focuses on memory and logical reasoning but instills a fear of being wrong. Under the influence of the Enlightenment rational tradition, it has driven a wedge between the arts and the sciences and has sidelined the former. But creativity requires imagination, interdisciplinary cooperation, exploring possibilities, and the freedom to fail with dignity—as well as making all of this a valued part of the learning curve. Robinson provides

46. Pagitt, *Church in the Inventive Age*, 30.
47. Robinson, "Schools Kill Our Creativity."
48. Robinson, *Out of Our Minds*, 7.

a list of insights about the nature of creativity that could help churches and
seminaries develop a culture that fosters creativity.

- *Creativity is not a purely personal process*. Many creative processes draw
  from the ideas and stimulation of other people. Creativity flourishes in
  an atmosphere where original thinking and innovation are encouraged
  and stimulated.
- *Creativity is a dynamic process and can involve many different areas of
  expertise*. The exponential growth of knowledge has led to increasing
  levels of specialization.
- *Creativity is incremental*. New ideas do not necessarily come from no-
  where. They draw from the ideas and achievements of those that have
  gone before us or are working in different fields.
- *Cultural change is not linear and smooth*. It can be tumultuous, complex
  and drawn out. New ways of thinking do not simply replace the old at
  clear points in history. They often overlap and coexist with established
  ways of thinking for long periods of time.
- *Cultural change is not strictly logical*. Creativity and innovations should
  be seen as functions of all areas of activity and not only as confined to
  particular people or processes.[49]

The question arises as to which model of church corresponds most closely
with the faith communities birthed by Paul and his missionary team in the
first century. Were they characterized by consumerism or participation?

Looking Ahead

Throughout the following chapters we will intersperse biblical exposition with
contemporary issues in order to link the first century with the contemporary
challenges facing the churches. This will not simply represent an attempt to
reproduce ancient issues. Social and economic circumstances have changed—
sometimes dramatically. Furthermore, the churches living after nearly two
thousand years of checkered history are in a position different from that of a
new and dynamic movement that was often misunderstood and misrepresented.

In today's world many churches in the West face the opposite challenge, in that
society at large claims to know too much about the institutional church. Many
have had painful personal experiences, and many more have been exposed to
media biases and caricatures. Therefore, we must mine the past with discernment.

49. Ibid., 182.

But the effort is worth it, for we Western Christians have often read the New Testament with our understanding limited and skewed by the assumption of Christendom that the church is a central pillar of society and guardian of its moral norms. In chapters 3 to 9, we will endeavor to reread Paul's letters to the young churches from a missional perspective, which I believe was the original intention of the author. Rather than providing strings of references on given topics, I have opted to quote Paul in full so that we listen to his voice rather than focus on the accompanying commentary. The faith communities birthed in cities around the Roman world may provide some valuable insights for churches today to contribute to the rebuilding of a civil society and the reestablishing of communities that provide a sense of belonging, fulfillment, and self-worth.