

Catalysts for Ecclesiological Shift

Cultural Shifts

The cultural shifting we speak of relates not so much to the over-hyped rise of postmodernism alone but rather to the emergence of various large-scale cultural forces in the twenty-first century: globalization, climate change, technological breakthroughs, international terrorism, geopolitical shifts, economic crises, the digitalization of information, social networks, the rise of bottom-up people-movements, the rise of new religious movements, even the New Atheism, and others. These all conspire together to further accelerate the marginalization of the church as we know it, forcing us to rethink our previously privileged relationship to broader culture around us.

The logic of Western civilization is the increasing secularization, or at least increasing de-churching, of society as ushered in by the French Revolution. This in effect means the Europeanization of Western culture. While there are factors in American culture that work against the radical secularization of culture, the encroachment of European-style de-churching is clearly evident in the cities and population centers of the northeastern United States (for example, New York, Washington, D.C., Boston) as well as the northwest (for example, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle). However one might conceive it, there is no doubting that Christianity, as a vital religious force, is on the wane in every Western context. Many in the U.S. are just beginning to feel this, but thankfully many are also beginning to respond...

Multicultural Shifts

One of the biggest cultural shifts of our time is the increasingly multicultural nature of the West. The brute fact is that most of the evangelical church leaders who will read this book will be white, suburban, and middle-class, and the equally stark reality is that within decades, Anglo-Saxon Americans will be in the minority in the U.S. — yet our churches don't seem to be responding to this reality. In fact, the old adage that the most segregated hour in America is on Sunday mornings still holds truth. Not only is multiculturalism a missional challenge, but it's also a challenge to our ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church as Jesus designed it to be. It's going to take a lot of thinking, loving, and reaching out to correct this imbalance in the people of God.

Engaging the 60:40 — The Blue and Red Oceans

The Future Travelers conversation was catalyzed, in part, by the probing of questions raised by the changing role and appeal of the church in Western society. Until recent years, the church — especially in the Christendom period — retained a very significant cultural connection with the prevailing society around it. In other words, most people were within the cultural orbit of the church and open to being

influenced by the ideas that energized the church. However, this has definitely begun to shift in the last fifty years.

It is our opinion, and that of the Future Travelers group, that the prevailing, contemporary church-growth approach to church will have significant cultural appeal — marketability, if you will — to about 40 percent of the American population. (This is informed opinion, anecdotal in nature because to date there is no hard research on this.) This is not attendance; we know that attendance in these forms of churches is far less than that. This means that the prevailing models of evangelistic churches could likely max out at around 40 percent of the population, perhaps 50 percent at the very best. However we cut it, it leaves us with two major problems.

Strategic Problem

The first one is a strategic problem. Most of our churches believe and act as if modeling on (and perfecting) the successful contemporary church approach will resolve their problems of mission. But even if they could all become successful megachurches, the vast majority of churches cannot and should not. The financial capital, managerial infrastructure, leadership ability, communication strategies, and amount of artistic talent are huge in megachurches — all making for a model that is not very reproducible.

So we have a vexing situation where probably 90 percent or more of evangelical churches in America (and other Western contexts) are aiming at becoming a model that not only is improbable for the vast majority but also (even if they could crack the codes) effectively would still just be competing with other churches for the same 40 percent. This should concern us very deeply. Anyone with a sense of strategy should be immediately alert at this point.

Why? Because all our missional eggs are in one ecclesiological basket! We have no diversity of options — most of our current practices are simply variations of the same model. This is not to say it's wrong or not used by God, and so on. Please don't hear us wrong here. Clearly, God uses the contemporary church. It is simply to say it is not sufficient to the increasingly missional challenge now set before us.

It was psychologist Abraham Maslow who noted that when the only tool you have is a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail. The tool itself begins to define us and determine our approaches. However, if we are going to rise to the situation we face, we are going to need more tools.

More disturbing, perhaps, is that this dearth of options demonstrates a serious poverty of imagination in the way we think about the church and mission and indicates why we desperately need to innovate.

Missionary Problem

If the first problem is a strategic one highlighting the need for genuine ecclesiological innovation and a diversity of approaches, the second one is a very serious missionary problem taking us to the core purposes of the church Jesus built. This problem is perhaps the most important question facing us in relation to the

long-term viability of Christianity in Western contexts. As Jesus' sent people, we have to ask ourselves, what about the possible 60 percent of people who for various reasons report significant alienation from precisely the contemporary church-growth model(s) we rely so heavily on? What will church be for these people? What is good news going to sound like for them? And how are they going to access the gospel of Jesus in ways that are culturally meaningful for them?

The reality is, if we expect more variations of the prevailing practices to reach into increasingly de-churched and unchurched populations, we are fooling ourselves. We're avoiding the missionary call of the church to take Christ's message to the people and nations. In many ways, our situation is experienced in the broader world of business strategy and global markets. Leading strategists Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne use the vivid metaphor of red and blue oceans to describe the situation. The red oceans concept is used to describe all the industries in existence at any given point — the known market space. In the red oceans, industry boundaries are defined and accepted, and the competitive rules of the game are known. Here companies try to outperform their rivals to grab a greater share of product or service demand. As the market space gets crowded, prospects for profits and growth are reduced. Products become commodities or niche, and cutthroat competition turns the ocean bloody. Hence the term red ocean — the sharks battle it out with each other for survival.

Blue oceans, in contrast, denote all the industries not in existence today — the unknown market space, untainted by competition. In blue oceans, demand is created rather than fought over. There is ample opportunity for growth that is both profitable and rapid. In blue oceans, competition is irrelevant because the rules of the game are waiting to be set. There is no frenzied feeding, and so little competition. Blue ocean describes the wider, deeper potential of spiritual idea-space that is not yet explored. Kim and Mauborgne suggest that the cornerstone of blue ocean strategy is value innovation — that is, the creation of innovative new markets to unlock new demand. According to the authors, organizations must learn how to create uncontested market space by reconstructing market boundaries, focusing on the big picture, reaching beyond existing demand, and getting the strategic sequence right.

To illustrate this point, Rob Wegner of Granger Community Church (GCC) recently told us that back in the early days of GCC (late eighties to midnineties), they were literally the only contemporary church in their community. Nobody was doing what they were doing in the region. It was unique; it was a breakthrough. They had created the buzz and set the tone. He says,

Friends would tell friends, "You've got to check this out. This is not like any church you've ever seen." But nowadays there are a number of churches in this community doing contemporary church, and they serve with excellence. It is not unique anymore ... Before, we were the only church reaching the 40 percent; now we have a whole slew of churches in our community trying to reach that 40 percent. I'm excited about that. I even think our presence helped facilitate the growth of contemporary church in our community. But it's definitely a red ocean scenario.⁷

This is exactly the issue we face. We are all competing in the red waters of the 40 percent while the 60 percent remains largely untouched. It's time for some value

innovation. Christian churches with a strong sense of missionary calling — while maintaining best practices in what they do — will also venture out to innovate new forms of church in the vast uncharted territories of the unchurched populations of our day. To do less is to fail in our missionary calling.

More of the Same?

It was Einstein who said that the problems of the world couldn't be resolved by the same kind of thinking that created them in the first place. And he's right, of course — we do well to take note! The popular application of this maxim comes to us in the form of what has become known as the definition of organizational insanity: trying to achieve significantly different results by doing the same thing over and over. In other words, what got us here won't get us there if "there" is missional movements in the West. Perhaps a more visual way of saying this is that we cannot dig a hole over there by digging this hole deeper — and yet that is what we seem to do most of the time.

The combination of strategic and missional problems creates more than enough anomalies to precipitate a major paradigm shift in the way we do and be church. But other reasons also have caused us to move toward more missional forms of church, namely that of apostolic movement.

The Technology of Movement

We should never doubt the power that technologies possess to seriously alter social patterns and fundamentally change the way we think and act. If futurist Rex Miller is right when he said the printing press ushered in the modern world and the Reformation/Protestant churches, and the radio ushered in the broadcast era that gave birth to the church-growth paradigm, then the digital revolution will also inevitably change the way we go about being God's people.⁸ The digital era — with the internet, social media, smartphone accessibility, and so on — has the effect of democratizing knowledge and radically altering the way we think and act. The new disruptive technology is having a massive reciprocal effect on social patterns across the world. Books like *Here Comes Everybody*, *Linked*, *Wikinomics*, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, *Tribes*, *The Tipping Point*, *The Rise of the Chaordic Era*, *Outliers*, *Smart World*, and so on, are among countless others describing the profound, unalterable revolution that is literally redesigning the world we live in.⁹

And like it or not, technology — particularly information technology — is changing the church. For one, it breaks the hold that singular, centralized institutions have had on power and knowledge. It also opens people to spiritual influence from diverse sources, rather than keeping them dependent on a priestly system to mediate information about God.

The new digital democracy that technology ushers in is also realigning the way we organize ourselves. Things are getting more fluid, less centralized, more interpersonal. We celebrate this as an opportunity, because in many ways it puts us much closer to the radical, people-oriented movement of the New Testament church: the priesthood of all believers and the ordination of ordinary people. The

digital era, with the associated network thinking and acting, sets us up to experience movement again in a significant way. That doesn't happen often in the history of the church, as we shall see below. It's a huge opportunity to recalibrate back to our most primal and potent form: the apostolic movement.

Dethroning Constantine

Adopting a Verge church paradigm requires learning what it means to become a more fluid, adaptive, reproducible, viral people-movement. In other words, it means taking seriously the idea that the church Jesus built — and therefore what he intended — is meant to be more of a movement than a religious institution. The New Testament church is move-mental to the core, and — following Jesus' prophetic critique of religious systems — it is inherently critical of highly institutionalized religion.

Christianity is designed to be a people's liberation movement, a social force, a viral idea passing from person to person through the medium of gospel and discipleship, creating gospel communities in its wake. And yet, by all accounts, most churches can be described as primarily institutional in form and nature. That is, they are conceived (by insiders and outsiders alike) as being made up of buildings, programming, creeds, rituals, denominational templates and formulas, symbols, clergy and religious professionals, and so on. Now, these things aren't necessarily wrong, but we must not confuse this with New Testament ecclesiology.

In other words, most of us mistake the forms, theology, and models of church for the church itself. We know intellectually that the church isn't a building but a people, but our language and actions betray what we really think. That's why we can talk about "going to church" or "getting married in the church" or "the Presbyterian church," and so on. We understand the word church in the context of its formal structures and institutions, rather than as dynamically located in the people (laos) of God. And while clearly God permits (and human societies need) structure and some level of institution, this is definitely not what the Bible means when it talks about ecclesia, which is the main biblical term and dynamic of church.

Actually, this institutionalization of our way of thinking and doing church stems mainly from the period when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Even though immediately prior to the Edict of Milan, the church was developing forms, theology, ritual, and structure, when Constantine co-opted Christianity, he fundamentally altered the way we saw and experienced ourselves as God's people. What was largely an illegal, underground people-movement was now given money, status, power, and legitimacy. Everything changed.

The previously subversive Jesus movement of the early church was now given magnificent buildings at the epicenters of towns and cities, was pressed by the emperor to standardize its theology and formulate creeds and to develop a formalized clergy caste to guard and maintain the affairs of the church. The emperor Constantine became the Pontifex Maximus, a title later given to the popes. The deal was that the church became the religious and cultural center of the Roman Empire — a pretty enticing bargain, but one that fundamentally changed our ecclesiology. This was a radical shift, and we've never escaped it. Constantine is still the emperor

of our imaginations, of the way we see and experience ourselves as church, seventeen centuries later.

Ferguson, Dave; Hirsch, Alan (2011-04-19). *On the Verge: A Journey Into the Apostolic Future of the Church (Exponential Series)* (Kindle Location 303-436). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.