

Praise for *How the Light Shines Through*

The challenges of discipleship in the twenty-first century seem overwhelming to many Christians. Lakies explores our underlying sense of bewilderment and fear as society changes around the church. Affirming the relational nature of God's reality, Lakies turns our attention to the person of Jesus, demonstrating how His assumption of a self-sacrificing identity shines His light into our lives and through us into the lives of those whom He has made our neighbors. Readers are equipped to embrace those who can only confront and refute in the spirit of acceptance, patience, and humility displayed by the Lord Himself.

ROBERT KOLB, PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY,
CONCORDIA SEMINARY, ST. LOUIS

What do drums, tar pits, elephants, and a doctor who becomes a patient teach Christians about outreach? Chad Lakies wields these and other storied images to help a post-Christendom church mend her nets. He offers ways to share Jesus in word and deed, especially as our secular neighbors are gripped by their mortality, stirred by a sense of purpose, or roused by the light creeping in through joy and pain. People-fishing is still our calling. Lakies tunes our ears to our risen Lord. Perhaps the time is ripe to cast on the other side of the boat?

MICHAEL ZEIGLER, SPEAKER OF *THE LUTHERAN HOUR*,
LUTHERAN HOUR MINISTRIES

People are deeply hurting in this current age, when the convergence of individualism and the unending quest for personal meaning has paradoxically led to widespread loneliness and despair. The Christian Church, when embodying Christ's mission of forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration, offers a potent remedy. Dr. Lakies rightly calls the church to lean into this challenge and bring the Gospel to bear, for a relationship with Christ and His church provides what the culture cannot: identity, restoration, hope, and belonging.

MICHAEL A. THOMAS, PhD, PRESIDENT, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY IRVINE

Dr. Chad Lakies calls Christians back to bold and resilient faith. Exposing flawed responses to a confused and chaotic culture, Lakies helps believers see and articulate the saving voice, wisdom, and ways of Jesus. This book guides readers through the storm of societal upheaval and provides resources for the church to bring Jesus, the friend of sinners, to the world.

REV. MICHAEL W. NEWMAN, PRESIDENT, LCMS TEXAS DISTRICT; AUTHOR OF
HOPE WHEN YOUR HEART BREAKS: NAVIGATING GRIEF AND LOSS

Reading *How the Light Shines Through* was a timely reset for untangling complex topics in the work of the church in uncharted territory. Chad Lakies tackles issues of identity, hospitality, authenticity, and resilience in the framework of loving others. Chad gives clear direction for how my own winsome witness can reflect a discipleship path following Jesus. Using this model, now my complicated life task is to never let an issue prevent a relationship.

CONNIE DENNINGER, COFOUNDER OF VISUAL FAITH® MINISTRY

Chad Lakies invites readers into a stimulating theological conversation about Christian living and faithful witness in our pluralistic here and now, offering insight into both the way things are and how we may engage with confidence, humility, and love. Never does he lose sight of the ultimate—proclaiming Jesus Christ, the light of the world—and never is his tone less than hopeful.

REV. JACOB A. SCOTT, LCMS; CHAPLAIN, OREGON NATIONAL GUARD

Beyond tired outreach programs and scripted evangelism conversations, this book is exactly what the church needs in the here and now into which God has placed us. Lakies diagnoses the hostile culture that surrounds us without calling for a war against it. Instead, his insight into the culture, blended with some of the best practices of the early church, gives Christians a way to talk about the faith authentically with the people in their lives.

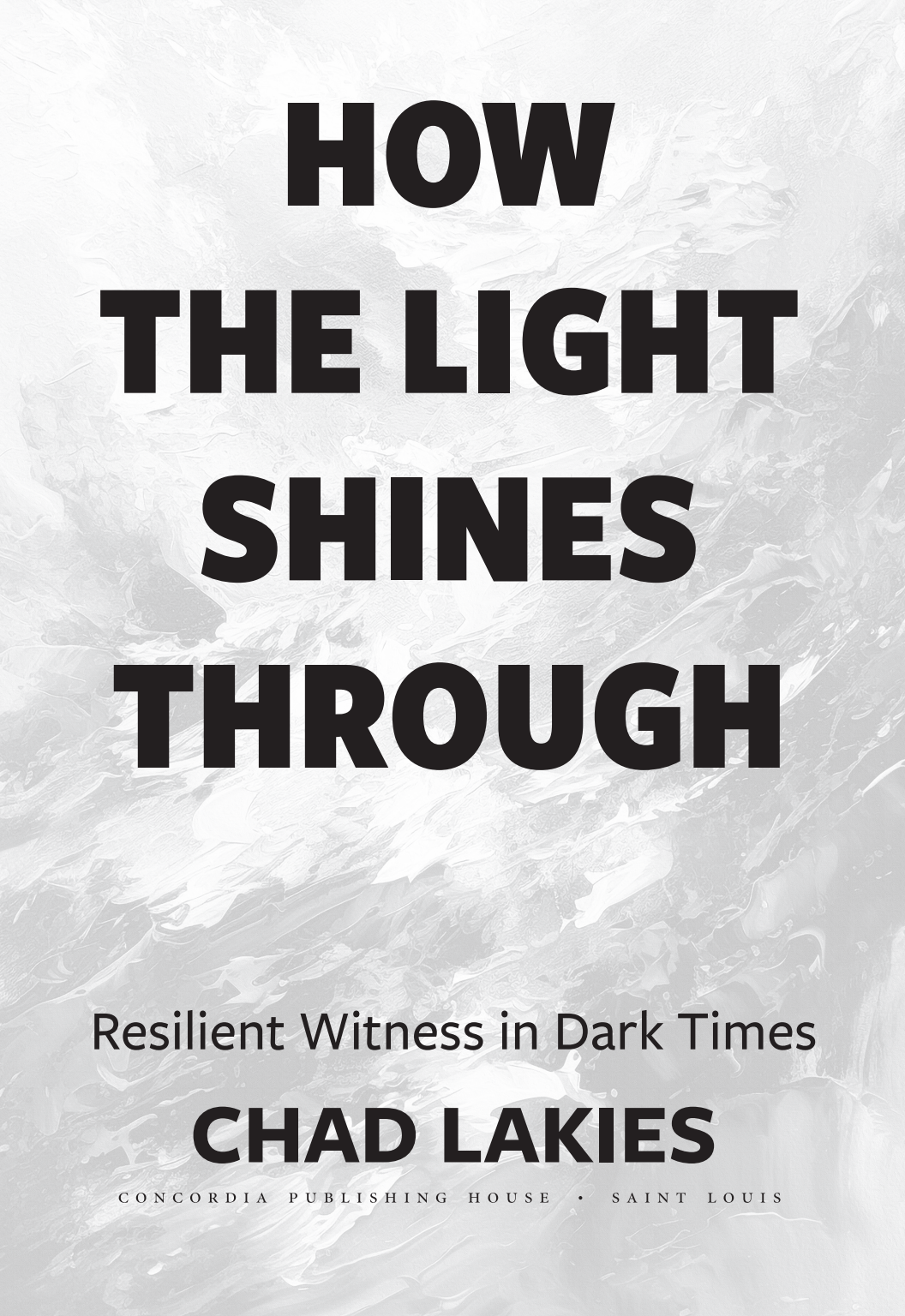
REV. GRANT A. KNEPPER, PASTOR,
GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH, MODESTO, CALIFORNIA

Dr. Lakies has written to the church's heart with this book, speaking to our fears and frustrations as well as to our loves and our very identity as Christians. Through his deep reading of Scripture, theology, and the best of sociology, he has collected critically important insights for anyone who serves our Lord in the contentious present age. Pastors and lay leaders will find herein both keen insight into what we are feeling and helpful advice to guide us in these turbulent times.

PHILLIP BRANDT, PhD, PASTOR, ST. MICHAEL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, PORTLAND,
OREGON; CAMPUS PASTOR, CONCORDIA ST. PAUL GLOBAL'S ABSN NURSING
PROGRAM IN PORTLAND; AUTHOR OF SUNDAY-SERMON.COM

If all the swift changes in culture have you feeling back on your heels, you owe yourself the chance to calmly think alongside Chad Lakies before reacting out of fear or frustration or even zeal. In his new book, Lakies helps us understand these dark times in nuanced and important ways, and he points out hopeful steps we can take toward embodying a resilient witness.

REV. DON EVERTS, AUTHOR OF *THE RELUCTANT WITNESS:
DISCOVERING THE DELIGHT OF SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS*

The background of the entire cover is a complex, organic marbled pattern in shades of gray and white, resembling stone or liquid swirls.

HOW THE LIGHT SHINES THROUGH

Resilient Witness in Dark Times

CHAD LAKIES

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS



Published by Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118-3968
1-800-325-3040 • cph.org

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lakies, Chad, author.

Title: How the light shines through : resilient witness in dark times / Chad Lakies.

Description: Saint Louis, MO : Concordia Publishing House, [2024] | Summary: "How the Light Shines Through examines the Christian church's reaction to a changing culture, discusses challenges the church faces while existing in this new environment, and suggests practices and habits to help Christians live out a faithful witness today"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024022988 (print) | LCCN 2024022989 (ebook) | ISBN 9780758674500 (paperback) | ISBN 9780758674517 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Witness bearing (Christianity) | Christianity and culture.

Classification: LCC BV4520 .L323 2024 (print) | LCC BV4520 (ebook) | DDC 248/5--dc23/eng/20240613

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024022988>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024022989>



To my parents,
Brenda and David Lakies,
giants upon whose shoulders I stand

And to my daughters, Anabel and Daphne:
May you, your children, and your
grandchildren meet Jesus
in the winsome witness
of a resilient church

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Foreword

Years ago, I preached a sermon titled “It’s a Great Time to Be the Church.” Afterward, a woman asked, “How can you say that?”

I understood. Her church was struggling. I sensed it. Empirically, things aren’t looking good for the institutional church. “Christian” America is gone, and many of us grieve that loss. We’re in dark, unfamiliar times. Rev. Dr. Chad Lakies starts this book by explaining how we got here.

But it’s still a great time to be the church, because this is the church of Jesus Christ! Yes, we have challenges, but we’re the church of the living Lord Jesus. The deciding question for the church today is this: Do we live by faith or by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7)? Faith centered on our risen, ascended, ruling, and soon-to-return Lord is faith that is optimistic about the church. Of course, we must also be realistic. Faith seeks understanding, as Anselm of Canterbury wrote. Unfamiliar times invite soul-searching—who are we? What is, or should be, our being in these times?

In these not-so-cozy times for the church in society, we can learn anew or for the very first time that our identity is in the Lord Jesus Christ. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

In dark times, the church knows who we are, and we know where the light is! Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (John 9:5). Note that He uses the present tense. Right now, as you read this, Jesus Himself is the light to guide and sustain us through these challenging times.

Perhaps we have focused so much upon the work of Christ in His first-century state of humiliation that we don’t preach enough, teach enough, to center the piety of our people on Christ now ascended, now ruling and guiding all for the good of the church He has redeemed by His blood, and who will soon appear in glory to make all things fully right. Perhaps we have left people with the impression that the church is a museum of first-century artifacts, a Christ of history. We say Christ will come again, but how many Christians actually believe that in their workaday lives?

The ascended Lord is now with and over His church. “Jesus Christ . . . has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him” (1 Peter 3:21–22). “He upholds the universe by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3). “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body” (Colossians 1:17–18). Present tense!

This reality of Jesus in our lives here and now changes how we act, and Lakies offers suggestions for how the church can live out that present-tense reality. As he writes in chapter 2: “When we live in a manner that aligns with what we say is important, only then will the world see a compelling public witness.” Unfamiliar times compel us to recognize that we are called to be a peculiar, countercultural people. We followers of Jesus have an unprecedented opportunity in our lifetimes to offer a resilient witness to the light that shines in today’s darkness.

There are signs of hope—if we'll see them. Younger followers of Jesus are bringing Christ into a context that may be unfamiliar to older people but is familiar to them. Equipping their witness is a rising generation of scholars, like Lakies, who are doing faithful theology for the mission of the church in this time. His very practical guidance in this book, all well-researched and documented, can shift our mindset from grief that the church is increasingly on the margins of society to confidence that the church is perfectly positioned to make a difference.

In post-Christendom America, we have a unique opportunity to teach people within and without the church how the love of Jesus forms us for life in our impersonal, uncaring, and often cruel society. A congregation flourishing in worship and witness will be a fellowship gathering around Jesus Christ, hearing Him speak about how to live now in this world as we anticipate His appearing. Our Lord Jesus is present in His church, but as our exalted, reigning Lord, He is also over us in the church. This means He continues to form and fashion us, as Lakies describes, to be people of confidence, humility, and patience in a pluralistic culture. That entails being more intentional about faith-motivated good works to people outside of the church, creating occasions to witness the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15). As Luther wrote:

A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. (*Luther's Works*, vol. 31, p. 371)

Historian Phyllis Tickle has written that every five hundred years, the institutional church holds a giant “rummage sale,” when it “cleans out its attic.” She writes:

One of the hallmarks of the Church’s semi-millennial rummage sales has always been that when each of the things was over and the dust had died down, Christianity would not only have readjusted itself, but it would also have grown and spread. Never has that principle been more operative than now.¹

Five hundred years ago, the Reformation cleaned out medieval excesses and bequeathed to us *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura*. *How the Light Shines Through* points us to the necessity of Christ-centered faith and works, and with Jesus at the heart of all we do, resilient witness is guaranteed!

Dale A. Meyer
President emeritus, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

1 Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 19, 121.

INTRODUCTION

The Loss You're Feeling Is Real

*The world is changed. I feel it in the water.
I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air.*

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (2001)

These few words, spoken by the elf queen Galadriel at the start of an epic saga, capture what many of us feel as we look back over our lives. The world seems much different now than even a few decades ago. At times, we feel terrified about all of this; in other moments, exhilarated. Change often produces discomfort. We're forced to adjust. But we fit more easily into new realities when we're prepared in some way for the change. Perhaps we've learned something new to help mitigate the adjustment. Maybe we just have a flexible disposition.

Yet those adjustments tend to be increasingly difficult, if only because the world does not cease to change just so we can catch up. The overwhelming nature of how different things seem today than they did just a handful of decades ago often elicits a sense of nostalgia. We look back on some time in the past when things felt easier, when making those adjustments seemed to go so smoothly

it was as if we did not have to adjust at all. We want to feel something like that again.

But nostalgia often views the past through rose-colored glasses; rarely do we remember it accurately. We allow ourselves to forget that there were likely just as many hard times in the past as we experience now. The new, more immediate challenges of today seem more difficult—ones we'd rather not endure. If we must endure anything, we'd prefer the old challenges we've successfully navigated. Those are the ones we feel prepared to face. Those are the ones we know how to approach, how to overcome.

Yet God has brought us to today. How do we inhabit this day, this moment in time? How do we face the realities of the present? Galadriel's words are not nostalgic. They are an announcement made as she and the rest of her world face a disconcertingly different reality than what they had known. And face it they must. So also for us.

First, then, we must do it all with the help of God. Second, we must remember that time is not prodding us along from behind, pushing us into these new times and new situations against our will. Rather, God Himself is pulling us forward into the future He has ordained for us. We are on a trajectory, and God is drawing us and all things to Himself. Still, it may be the case that our experience of God pulling us toward Himself feels like being dragged kicking and screaming into the future. The part of us that tends to lean on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5) resists believing that it is God who has brought us to this new territory, placed us here, even created us for such a time as this: to echo Esther 4:14, God doesn't do things by accident.

We might confess all of this to be true, but our lives reveal that, deep down, we likely believe otherwise. Our habits, practices, routines, and even the way we talk tend to reflect our real attitudes

and convictions. As we face this new frontier, we are indeed often nostalgic, but also fearful. Nothing is familiar. What tools do we use to navigate the terrain? Are we really capable of adjusting to this new reality?

AFTER CHRISTENDOM

Yet, what exactly has changed? I think the sense of what has changed, what we feel we've lost, what we look back on with nostalgia, can be captured in one word: Christendom. I want to be clear on what I mean here. Christendom has a long tail, reaching back through history to the fourth century, during which the Roman emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in AD 313, effectively legalizing Christianity in the Roman Empire and ending the persecution the church had endured for three centuries. While the Edict of Milan was a significant turning point, a more important one for our purposes came about half a century later in AD 380. The Edict of Thessalonica made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christendom, then, is the coming together and intermingling of church and state.¹

1 I should clarify what I mean when I say that Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire following the Edict of Thessalonica. The relationship between religion and the state in premodern society is difficult for modern minds to grasp. When the Edicts of Milan and Thessalonica were issued, religion and government always commingled. This was the way of things in premodern society. For example, Roman emperors, among many others across different civilizations, were considered divine, valorized as gods. It is more accurate to say that the Edict of Thessalonica made a certain version of Christianity (the one authorized by the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, from which we receive the Nicene Creed) the official version within the Roman Empire. Other versions of Christianity, then, became not only heretical in the eyes of the church but also illegal in the eyes of the state and thus punishable. While other religions existed, over time, Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire because it was so deeply intertwined with the state through the conversion of its leadership and the influence of Christian leaders upon those who ruled.

For the last seventeen hundred years, Christianity has had a close relationship with state power in the Western world. This is what is meant by *Christendom*. Some scholars use the term *coextensive* to describe the relationship, suggesting that the church and the state have long been mutually legitimating each other.

Yet the relationship between church and state in the West has begun to deteriorate over the last few centuries. Many shifts in Western culture have weakened the ties between church and state, effectively weakening the church's influence in society, while the influence of state or government has increased. Since the middle of the twentieth century, even as the church in North America experienced its highest membership, religion has held less and less sway. As religious influence decreased, we experienced a rise in so-called hostility against religion.

Today, we live *after* Christendom. Some define our era as post-Christian. While there are good things about the decoupling of church and state—a separation and a recognition that the church and state operate as two unique kingdoms with distinct tasks given by God is one of Martin Luther's great contributions to Western Christianity—there are also lamentable changes. Primarily, as society no longer identifies closely with religion, Christianity has become merely one option among many others. Religious influence and the voices of religious leaders in the lives of citizens are but a whisper and thus easily ignorable. The effects of consumer capitalism subtly distract us from religion, such that Christianity is caught in a clash of competing allegiances, each vying for attention and commitment. The comfort of an affluent society makes people less concerned about spiritual things, spurring a growing sense of apathy about faith (and many other religious sensibilities).

POST-CHRISTENDOM AS LOSS

Another significant consequence of the slow disappearance of Christendom is that ministry seems more difficult than it used to be. We don't feel adequately prepared to do ministry in the changed world Galadriel describes. The new challenges can be overwhelming, especially for those of us who have been in ministry for a while. We seem to be spinning our wheels. The harder we try, the more burned out we become. Writer Andrew Root says that it often feels like we're trying to minister to people who don't need a god.² Perhaps the best way to describe the nostalgia stirred by the challenges of modern ministry is that we feel a deep sense of loss. We can describe that loss in several ways.

First, we experience the loss of the way things were. We have lost a familiar context and environment in which to do ministry. There were times when we had the right tools, times when our tactics and strategies were effective. Conversations about faith were warmly received. People regularly showed up to Sunday worship. The Judeo-Christian worldview, and its sense of moral norms, was widely shared, even by those who didn't follow Jesus. Yet none of these experiences can be expected any longer. And we feel their loss like a heavy weight that drags us down.

The second way we experience loss is more subtle but perhaps more powerful: we feel as if something has been taken from us. The previous paragraph lists mainly matters of historical experience, which implies that something must have happened to make that former reality fade away. As humans, we often want to understand why something happened. Even more, we want to know why it

2 See Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019).

happened the way it did. Knowing this helps us make sense of things and find a path forward. For example, when we try something new and fail, it's healthy to want to know why so we can improve on our efforts and avoid repeating the same mistakes. But that's not the approach we usually take with this issue.

When we ask why the comparatively Christian culture of the past eludes us, we tend to imagine that some entity is responsible for the loss of a situation we once enjoyed. It has been taken from us, we think. And so along with the feeling of loss come other emotions: anger, frustration, outrage, resentment.

Sociologist James Davison Hunter borrows the French term *ressentiment* to capture all of those feelings in one word. *Ressentiment*, he says, includes what we “in the English-speaking world mean by resentment, but it also involves a combination of anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge.”³ There are also felt elements of disrespect and humiliation that amplify the other emotions since these are especially felt when one is in the losing position. Hunter goes on to suggest that *ressentiment* is never just a feeling or sentiment; it is always attached to and expressed according to a story. When we feel wronged in some way, whether the injury is real or perceived, we use narratives to frame our *ressentiment*.

When we frame our sense of loss in this way, that something has been taken from us, we start to imagine what we must do to recover what we had. Perhaps we'll seek some kind of justice. Perhaps we'll try to remove from power those we hold responsible for eclipsing the cultural situation that once existed in which ministry was easier and our influence more respected and broadly shared. Perhaps we'll seek

3 James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 107. Copyright © 2010 Oxford University Press, Inc. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

vindication with vitriol. Our narrative of loss might even morph in a way that generates fear—fear that we have more to lose and that there is a “them” trying to eradicate “us” and take away our way of life. We will then need a plan for how to protect ourselves. Perhaps this will mean rooting out the perceived rot from within, those who claim to be part of “us” but who really don’t belong. Or we might find ways to malign the character of outsiders to the extent that we believe violence against them is justified.

There are two things to note from Hunter’s discussion of loss and the *ressentiment* it elicits. First, storytelling has the power to unite people under a shared sense of identity and belonging because they collectively feel like victims. It is always powerful to know that we are not alone in our experiences. Social groups are easily bound together by shared interests (e.g., fans of the Detroit Lions or model train enthusiasts) but even more so by shared experience. Especially if the experience is some kind of pain—and Hunter suggests we experience loss *as* injury—the bond is immediately deeper because those who share it carry similar scars.

Second, if the story we tell about our loss *as* injury enables us to imagine possibilities for recovering what has been lost, then our emotional response to the loss—our *ressentiment*—will affect how we react to the new situation. If something is merely lost, we want to try to find it. But if something is taken from us, we want to get it back. And we might fear that something else could be taken. Both responses are almost instinctual. We have behaved this way since we were children. If we believe that our ministry context has been actively and aggressively taken from us, it’s easy to see how our reaction will be either equally aggressive, deeply fearful, or some combination of the two.

VALIDATION AND WARNING

Before we go any further, it's important to understand the point of the previous section. My intent here is simply to acknowledge this sense of loss. It is true that things have changed; it is not as easy to do ministry or live as a Christian in these dark and precarious times. The feelings that attend our sense of loss—the anger, frustration, outrage, envy, humiliation, disrespect, nostalgia—are valid and legitimate. They are to be expected. They are normal. And they are indeed widely shared. You are not alone in feeling this way. You are not entirely in control of the feelings either. They can surprise us, appearing when we don't expect them. At other times, they lurk in the background in ways we can't articulate. It is not bad or wrong to feel *ressentiment* because of the loss we have experienced.

Still, our *responses* and our *reactions* to our emotions are critical. We have agency over our response to emotions in a way that is not quite true of the feelings themselves. Scripture teaches that feelings are untrustworthy. As we live drenched in cultural messages encouraging us to “follow your heart,” “do what feels right,” and “be true to yourself,” we're wise to distrust our feelings at least somewhat. The prophet Jeremiah warns, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). While the feelings might erupt unexpectedly, how we react is on us.

The consequences of those reactions are most important for the argument of this book. Since the very beginnings of the church, Christians have been observed by outsiders. What outsiders see, their interactions with individual Christians and their experiences with the church at large, constitutes our public Christian witness. We are in the eyes of the world what we have been before the eyes of the

world. Our witness is never not on display. In situations where we feel afraid of or injured by others, our reactions matter intensely for our witness. Will people meet Jesus in us if we aggressively respond in kind to the threats we feel? Or are they more likely to meet Jesus in us if we patiently endure the challenges set before us, constantly leaning back in reliance upon Him? Despite how we might be feeling—whether threatened, fearful, or angry—Scripture regularly exhorts us to trust not in our own selves, our own feelings, or our own plans. Instead, Scripture calls us to put our trust in the Lord.

GOD'S PREFERENCE FOR A WINSOME WITNESS

Concern for the quality of our witness is easily visible in Scripture and the life of the early church. We'll say more about this in later chapters, but at the very least, the New Testament writers make it clear that God prefers a positive, winsome witness. Paul advises the Colossians to "let your speech always be gracious" (Colossians 4:6), and Peter encourages us at length, saying,

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. *But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.* For it is better, if it is God's will, to

suffer for doing good than for doing evil. (1 Peter 3:13–17, NIV, emphasis added)

How people perceive us matters. The New Testament writers continually encourage us to do right by others. Outsiders may still react negatively, but we will maintain our internal sense of having done right according to God's guidance.

The fruit of a winsome witness is increased trust in Christians and the church. And with God's help, more are added to the kingdom of God. While it is the Holy Spirit who generates faith in every person who comes to trust in Jesus, God has chosen to use human relationships built on trust to introduce people to Jesus. None of us who claim to be followers of Jesus has experienced coming to know Him without the intervention of another person (and often many people). This is God's chosen means for Kingdom expansion. Thus, the character of our witness makes possible our ability to "walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time" (Colossians 4:5), such that we can take advantage of opportunities to share the Good News with others.

Regardless of how our cultural position as Christians has changed, consider the life and times of the people to whom Peter and Paul wrote. Centuries before the Edicts of Milan and Thessalonica, Christians in the Roman Empire were marginalized and persecuted. The encouragement and exhortations offered by Peter and Paul always directed those Christians to a posture of winsome witness. The early church fathers wrote similar letters and exhorted the first three centuries of the church to be patient.⁴ These exhortations turned out to be remarkably helpful for the growth of the early church. And perhaps we should also note that they were necessary

4 See Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

to curb the common temptations to run away or to react in kind to the persecution they were experiencing. After all, Jesus would not have had to tell us to turn the other cheek or to love our enemies if doing so were part of our natural inclination.

THE PLAN FROM HERE

As we move into part 1 of this book, the first chapter will explore the dangers of responding to our sense of loss and *ressentiment* according to our natural inclinations. The final chapter in part 1 will give a brief account of our so-called secular age, attempting to put a name to what our feelings tell us about this world and how much it has changed.

Part 2 will address various challenges the church faces as we attempt to navigate the new contours of our secular age. First, we will tackle some of our human tendencies that lead to the fractured, splintered, and polarized social dynamics that define our time. We'll learn some strategies to help us be more like Jesus, who never let an issue prevent a relationship. Second, we'll engage in a challenging discussion of hospitality, seeking to live better as the Body of Christ in a world full of others and enemies. Third, we'll examine the common effort to "find oneself" and live authentically, seeking to explain what we're really trying to find when we are trying to find ourselves and how the church offers a story that all of us can confidently live by. Fourth, we'll dig deep into the rise of concerns about identity and explore a better starting point for such conversations. Finally, we'll seek direction together on how to reach out in a secular age, focusing on looking for the cracks in the secular that let the light of God's presence and the Gospel shine through.

In part 3, we'll return to the earlier exhortations that aim the church toward a winsome witness. The final three chapters will help us take note of the reputation of the early church as a means of inspiring us to see what's possible for the church today.

RECURRENCES

Throughout this book, we will bump into a common cast of characters. They are the thinkers I reference most, the giants whose shoulders I stand on. I find wisdom in their work that applies to many situations. Rather than use a wide variety of voices, I will engage some of the same thinkers repeatedly to create continuity (and a more accessible starting point for those who'd like to read further). One such voice is James Davison Hunter, whom we already met in this chapter. Others include Charles Taylor, Yuval Levin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Alan Jacobs, Jonathan Haidt, John Inazu, and Luke Bretherton. I am thankful for what I've learned from them and commend them to you for further engagement.

We will also keep bumping into an ecclesiology in a nutshell—that is, a brief doctrine of the church—that I often use to help us understand the role of the church in a secular age and why a winsome witness is vital. We'll explore this more fully in later chapters, but it goes basically like this:

- ♦ Dietrich Bonhoeffer called Jesus Christ “the man for others.”
- ♦ Paul said, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

- ✦ If Jesus is the man for others and His disciples are those in whom the man for others lives, then that makes us—the church—a people *for* others.
- ✦ The church, then, Bonhoeffer said, is “Christ existing as church-community.” Or as he put it elsewhere, “The church is nothing but that piece of humanity where Christ really has taken form.”⁵

If the community called the church is the very means by which God has chosen to make Himself known in the world, then the world will meet Jesus in us. This requires us to trust in God, build trust with others, rely on the Holy Spirit to prepare hearts, and winsomely spread the seeds of the Gospel on good soil, beginning with people we know, one by one. There is nothing fancy, innovative, or flashy about any of this. This is how it has always been. While the world around us has changed, everything I’ve written here is meant to help the church accomplish its original goals (Acts 1:8; Matthew 28:18–20) in a manner that is sensitive to today’s cultural context. I hope that you find help here for this task. Whether you’re an interested layperson who feels a sense of urgency to share the Good News, a student in a professional church-worker program preparing to serve and lead God’s people, a parent or grandparent who wants to better engage your children or grandchildren with the Gospel, a church worker seeking to lead as faithfully as possible, or

5 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. John de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 501; Bonhoeffer, *Sanctum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, vol. 1 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 121; Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 97.

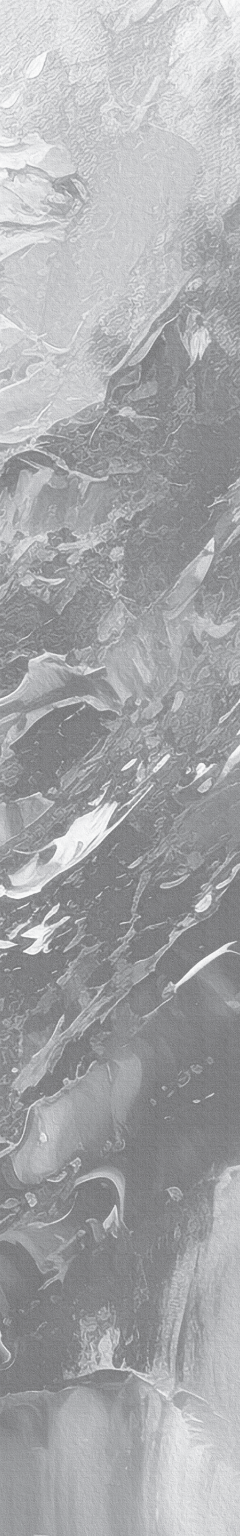
any other role you might play in the Kingdom, may the Lord use you to faithfully introduce Jesus to those around you.

To God be the glory.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways has the relationship between church and state changed in your lifetime?
2. How have your country, state, and church reacted to the changing times?
3. As an individual, how have you experienced a community of *ressentiment*?
4. Describe someone you know or have known who has a winsome witness. What characteristics did that person display?



A vertical strip of marbled paper with a complex, swirling pattern of dark and light grey tones, resembling stone or organic textures, runs along the left edge of the page.

PART 1

The Church in Dark and Unfamiliar Times

Unintentional

Eclipsing the Gospel and the Church's Vocation

I've been playing drums since I was young. When I was in high school, I joined the marching band. My skills advanced more over those four years than at any other time in my life, in part because of my instructor, but mostly because half of each rehearsal was spent on basic drumming exercises. I realized that the right technique allows you to play faster and more accurately, and relaxing is a key to both.

Drumming is a highly physical activity, so if you've never played drums before, you might imagine it requires a lot of tension to control your body and accomplish playing a beat or particular licks. I've taught a few younger players over the years. Sometimes people would visit my home and want to sit down at my drums and try out a few things. They all had the same idea I used to have—that to control yourself and play well, you need to keep your body, and particularly your arms and hands, rigid.

Now, no one had ever taught any of us this. It's unlikely any of us could have articulated this assumption out loud. It's just that, when we started trying to play drums, our bodies automatically took on a tense posture. Through four years of constant exercises

and slight adjustments from my instructor about posture and grip, I learned that not only were my previous assumptions wrong, but they prevented me from playing at my best. My body had to unlearn bad habits before I could improve. Whenever I could share this insight with those few students I worked with, they, too, seemed to experience it as a kind of revelation.

In this chapter, I want to serve readers in a similar way. I take it for granted that if you are reading this book, you want to faithfully live and serve in the kingdom of God and make an impact in the world through the power of the Gospel in the lives of people who don't know Jesus. What I will discuss below might feel like learning the same kinds of difficult lessons I had to learn about my own drumming. I had all the wrong assumptions about how to play well, and they prevented my improvement and sometimes led to my drumming poorly. Learning those difficult lessons forced me to adjust and do something different. It was hard to believe those adjustments would lead to improvement, but the proof was in the experience.

The church seems to believe several things about how we should respond to this new time in which we are experiencing loss and feeling *ressentiment*. But these beliefs are preventing us from achieving our true goals, and we end up hurting our own witness. I believe that by knowing clearly what *not* to do, we are better empowered to do what we *ought* to do. This chapter will help us unlearn what hinders us so we can start to imagine better ways to respond.

SCANDAL AND DISTRUST

Since the 1990s, the United States has witnessed a series of high-publicity scandals within the church—from the sexual abuse

and pedophilia accusations affecting the Roman Catholic Church to the mishandling of finances and power, rampant emotional and sexual abuse, and marital impropriety in many other church bodies. The actions of many high-profile ministers and leaders have brought great public disdain toward the church.

Churches and Christians are experiencing the lowest level of social trust in nearly a century. The Gallup organization has been polling Americans across a wide variety of issues for decades. In 2022, their research showed that confidence in the institution of the church was at its lowest level since polling on this question began in 1973.¹

While it's safe to say that social confidence in the church has been deeply damaged by scandals of many sorts, they are not the only reason. Social trust for the church is also affected by how the church responds to the challenges of our new social landscape. The church's reactions to losing its previously prominent social position have contributed to the decline in social confidence.

In this chapter, I will highlight three different ways the church tends to react to its current situation and describe how those reactions undercut the church's witness, damaging public perception and preventing social confidence in the church as an institution. With each reaction, the church is actively trying to stop the decline in membership and recover something of the cultural prominence it used to have. They have each made the church's situation worse. The three reactions are relevance, resignation, and resistance.

The sooner we realize the inherent problems in these reactions, the sooner we can avoid them.

1 "Confidence in Institutions," Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx> (accessed September 9, 2022).

TO BE RELEVANT AGAIN

It stands to reason that if confidence is down, church leaders would want to do whatever it takes to get people to sit up and pay attention to the church again. They believe in the church's mission and that the church has much good to offer to the wider society. The Gospel message of God's saving action in our lives through Jesus Christ is always relevant. Similarly, that God provides our daily bread—and not just ours but everyone's—is a timeless truth. We could argue that there's no reason for the church to *seek* relevance because our mission of proclaiming the truth is never *not* relevant. However, seeing as the church cannot proclaim that message without hearers, we expend additional effort to gain those hearers, to attract listeners who might become followers of Jesus.

Attention is difficult to cultivate in our time. We're constantly distracted by various bids for our attention. Church leaders work hard to win the competition for attention, to draw eyes to the Good News of the kingdom of God.² It is often here that seeking relevance inadvertently becomes troublesome.

New programming or practical messages, modern worship styles or the embrace of mystery within ancient traditions and liturgies, even hip and stylish aesthetics in fashion, architecture, and media—these are just a few of the ways churches and church leaders seek to stand out, to be relevant and noteworthy, and therefore to be heard. Even more, churches often end up competing with other

2 Achieving attention through efforts to appear relevant can be exhausting for church leaders. Andrew Root has written helpfully on that topic, noting how many churches are caught up in an effort to provide resources for people who have busy lives. The effort becomes something like living with a machine that always needs to be fed, leading to anxiety, burnout, and depression in leaders. See Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

local churches, seeking to gain the largest audience. The churches and ministries that are most successful at gaining attention tend to stand as models for others.

Scholar Andreas Reckwitz writes about what he calls our “society of singularities.”³ Singularities are those events, places, people, institutions, goods, or images that our society collectively recognizes as important and worth our attention. Singularities come and go, rise and fall for many reasons. But Reckwitz gives name to our efforts as churches and church leaders to make our church, our ministry, even ourselves attractive and thus relevant: we’re trying to be singularities, to have the ineffable quality that characterizes “the Most Interesting Man in the World,” made famous as a fictional celebrity in Dos Equis commercials. Whatever it is that makes him interesting, that’s what we want.

To be a singularity is to have *it*—whatever *it* is, we seem to know it when we see it. According to Reckwitz, whoever has *it* has an audience. He illuminates this for us when he says, “In the mode of singularization, life is not simply lived; it is curated. From one situation to the next, the late-modern [person/church] *performs* his or her [or its] particular self to others, who become an audience, and this self will not be found attractive unless it seems authentic.”⁴ For Reckwitz, the attractive and the authentic are effectively synonymous. Thus, when we say “relevant,” we often mean “authentic.”

For the church, what are the consequences of chasing relevance, of seeking to be a singularity? We end up captive to cultural practices that ultimately undercut our efforts to proclaim the Good News. Despite our motivations to introduce people to Jesus, in practice,

3 See Andreas Reckwitz, *The Society of Singularities*, trans. Valentine A. Pakis (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2000).

4 Reckwitz, *The Society of Singularities*, 3. Emphasis in original.

such concerns become secondary. What people primarily experience from us are the efforts to stand out, to appear relevant, to attract an audience. Eclipsed is the Gospel, the Good News of the kingdom of God for sinners, even when it's proclaimed plainly. The pomp and flash of the delivery, the environment, and the experience all overwhelm the senses, drawing so much attention that the Gospel proclamation goes unnoticed.

In aiming for relevance, the church and its leaders can easily become indistinguishable from many other institutions in our society. This is because the competition for attention leads to competition for an audience. Once we have people's attention, we vie to gain and retain their commitment and allegiance. Gaining an audience is treated as an end in itself, separate from the reason an audience is desired in the first place. The church is unwittingly caught up in all of this.

Yuval Levin, one of our recurring thinkers, helpfully describes the situation when he talks about how many people who occupy public office seem—if you keep up with their social media feeds and major news appearances—to spend a significant amount of time doing something less akin to their actual institutional job and more like performing a particular part in the theater of public politics. Instead of serving the institutions and their needs, politicians, along with journalists, educators, scientists, athletes, artists, leaders of major companies, and even ministers of religion, seem to focus on building a personal brand by leveraging their position as if it's a platform for their voice and personality. Levin points out that, in general, when these individuals raise their voices, they speak in a way that signals their allegiances in the cultural and political battles happening across our society. They're happy to lend their voice of

support to the current cultural orthodoxy people are arguing about, taking a side and encouraging their followers to join them.⁵

This extends to the church. Levin is deeply concerned that Christian leaders are leveraging the institution of the church solely as a platform for their own self-promotion, for building their personal brand, for seeking the status of “singularity.” Because of this, people have started to view familiar public institutions differently. Rather than molds that shape their members, institutions are being used as platforms to amplify certain voices and display certain personalities. And since this is happening within virtually every institution across society, Levin suggests that each institution is losing its distinction. Any given institution begins to look like every other, each presenting as yet another metaphorical podium from which those voices and personalities can announce their position in our cultural and political battles, joining in the fight.

There are serious consequences when institutions become platforms instead of molds. Institutions, Levin argues, are being undermined by the very people who lead them. He highlights two outcomes that occur when institutions are used as platforms. First, those outside of the institution—those who engage its services or observe its work—stop respecting the institution because it fails at its own goals when it merely serves the self-promotional efforts of its most significant leaders. Second, those who have roles in or are members of the institution lose sight of what it means to serve an institution, with its boundaries and ethos that shape a certain way of being and thus form people to accomplish the institution’s goals.⁶

5 Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 35.

6 Levin, *A Time to Build*, 36.

The church, then, becomes indistinguishable from most other institutions. Those who allegedly serve the church come to be seen as people who use the church to serve themselves. Granted, this is not everyone, perhaps not even most servants of the church. But the misguided efforts of the few drastically impact the social consequences for the many. The result is a damaged public perception and the loss of public trust. Ultimately, the church's push for relevance ends up generating significant distrust, all while ostensibly seeking to gain a hearing for the Gospel.

As a reaction to the loss of a prominent role and voice of influence in society, seeking relevance might initially seem to be the logical avenue for increasing engagement and reaching more people with the Good News. Intuitively, it seems as if this would lead to recovering or reestablishing in some way the prominence the church has lost. But the exact opposite tends to be the outcome.

When the church is merely a platform and when church leaders are merely trying to attract an audience, the primary message and purpose of the church is obscured. The church appears as merely a reflection of the many other institutions that exist in our society. When there's no difference, there's no reason to pay attention. Social trust continues to decline, the loss we experience and the *ressentiment* it elicits are exacerbated, and the reactionary effort to stem the loss only causes further damage and pain, leaving the church and its servants more deeply mired in the conditions we sought to escape.

RESIGNATION: THE OPPOSITE OF AIMING FOR RELEVANCE

If seeking relevance is a problem because it eclipses the Gospel, the opposite problem is when the church resigns itself to the decline in participation, attendance, and social influence.

The first step toward resignation, unwitting as it may be, often comes through complacency. More than once when my family and I have visited churches, looking for a place to worship after moving to a new area, we have had the experience of feeling unwelcome. We've ended up departing after the service without having been engaged by a single person the entire time. While likely unintentional, we got the impression that everyone was "all set"—they had their friends and seemed uninterested in welcoming guests or making new friends at church. Experiences like this, if common, generate for visitors a negative perception of the church and puts a church at risk of stagnation in terms of Kingdom growth. If this posture toward visitors becomes a habit, it will not only be harder for the church to overcome but will also make it easier to resign to shrinkage when it occurs.

Complacency also leads to resignation when people notice an issue like decline and recognize that it's not good but don't believe it is *their* problem. In fact, recent research has shown that in the last quarter century, Christians in America have less and less readily identified sharing their faith as part of their calling as members of the royal priesthood.⁷ Rather, American Christians seem to think this work belongs to the institutional leaders of the church—the professionals—and not to those included in the priesthood of all believers. As the thinking might go, if the decline of the church is not my problem, I don't have to do anything about it. And when a problem is someone else's, I can easily become complacent about it, even to the point of eventually ignoring it altogether. We may end up resigning ourselves to decline because we don't think we are able to address the concern in a meaningful way.

7 See the report *Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age: How Christians' Approach to Sharing Their Faith Has Changed in 25 Years* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2018).

Resignation can also take a more insidious form, one that, in essence, denies that decline is a problem at all.

Theologian Oswald Bayer has an excellent little book on the idea of justification—a central theme within Protestant churches. Bayer begins the book by examining a common feature of fallen humans: the need for justification. He gets going creatively with that analysis by pointing out that justification is a feature of our everyday interactions.⁸

He pictures it like this: Someone challenges us about why we said or did something (or neglected to do or say something). Perhaps they wonder aloud why we didn't do otherwise, presumably signaling there was a better, wiser thing we should have done. This kind of confrontation demands an answer. Most often, we try to defend ourselves, and not just defend ourselves but make ourselves appear to have done or said the right thing. Critical for Bayer is the observation that we simply want to be "right"; we want the confrontation to turn back on the accuser, effectively undoing the accusation itself. If we're successful, we make ourselves out to be right and reveal that the accuser has no grounds for making the accusation.

From our earliest days, we start practicing techniques for justifying ourselves—showing ourselves to be right. As small children, it starts off with blaming others, such as our siblings or classmates. "I didn't do it. He did it." We also quickly learn to lie, or at least bend the truth far enough to make our actions seem good and in line with expectations. As we get older, our tactics for justifying ourselves get more complicated and effective.

8 Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 1.

If every human is good at it, I suggest that Christians—particularly those with substantial training in the study of Scripture and theology—are better at it than most everyone else. We are the ones who ostensibly know what God expects of us. And we can use and abuse that knowledge, along with our knowledge of what the Bible says and the applications of sophisticated theological arguments, to demonstrate that not only are we right, but we are also morally upright and holy according to Christian standards.

It is this sort of argumentation that comes into play when the church resigns to the fact that it is shrinking in the various ways noted above. The argument tends to go like this: There may be fewer and fewer people who are attending worship and actively participating in the life of this congregation, but that's only because those who are here are the true faithful. Those who no longer attend church with us were probably not real Christians anyway. We are the faithful remnant.

For lack of a better term, let's call this remnant theology. Don't let the language confuse you, however. We're not discussing a remnant in the sense of God's people returning from exile, like we see in the book of Nehemiah. Rather, we're discussing an insidious theological justification from God's people, and particularly its leadership, for ignoring the church's mission to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God and call to repentance those who have ears to hear.

Let's look more closely at this remnant theology. Resigning ourselves to decline signals a disconnect with the urgency of the church's call to share the Gospel and make disciples. Practically speaking, fewer people in churches means fewer bodies to manage congregational life and fewer dollars flowing into the church's budget to keep the lights on and pay the salaries of church workers. Despite

all this, the decline is reframed and characterized as a good thing. And not just any kind of good thing, but a theologically good thing—a phenomenon that supposedly reveals a congregation's faithfulness most directly.

The issue here is not whether a declining congregation is faithful. It may or may not be, and that is for God to judge. Rather, the problem occurs when it is argued that such shrinkage is a positive thing. To defend this phenomenon is at odds with the church's mission. To understand why, and to get a sense of just how sophisticated we fallen humans can get when it comes to defending ourselves, we need to consider one of Luther's earliest arguments.

Luther made a distinction between a theology of the cross and a theology of glory. This distinction appears in several places throughout his work, but it is most famously found in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518.

The theology of glory is all about success and growth, "winning" at the Christian life, experiencing God's favor. God is presumed to be responsible for all these things, but Luther pointed out that this theology of glory has no place for suffering. In a theology of glory, God is seen as a champion on the side of sinners; once we become disciples, all things will go well for us. Even if we have a bad experience or two, it will only last for a moment because God will do something about it. Of course, the real trouble comes when those moments of suffering extend longer than anticipated. At that point, we might begin questioning the sufficiency of our faith. Do I really believe? Am I believing hard enough? God Himself is called into question. Does He really exist and is He really good? And if so, is He really powerful enough to deal with this situation?

By contrast, there is the theology of the cross. There is no winning here, for the true nature of taking up one's cross and following

Jesus means the very opposite—that we are beggars burdened by our sins and failures, desperately in need of a Savior. We cast our future upon the suffering of another, Jesus, who bore the burden of our sins on His own cross, dying for them yet emerging victorious from the empty tomb.

Suffering has a place of prominence in the theology of the cross because suffering constitutes the Christian life of repentance. No one likes to admit they are sinners, but this is bad news about ourselves that we must nevertheless accept. We see the theology of the cross in Paul's confession about the "thorn" in his side, which he had asked God to remove several times. Yet God did not act to do so, saying to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:7, 9). We see Job respond similarly. Despite all the suffering that came his way, Job's faith did not wane, and he nevertheless proclaimed, "I know that my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25).

And paradigmatically, Jesus Christ did not come as some kind of philosopher-king who kicked out the Romans from occupying Israel's territory to establish His reign according to worldly standards. The way the Messiah came did not meet the expectations of God's people. Instead, He came quietly to people who did not know Him or accept Him, and His reign was established by His being killed, raised from the dead, and seated at God the Father's right hand (Acts 2:36).

The theology of the cross rightly reveals that our suffering is hidden in Christ. The theology of glory, on the other hand, cannot fathom suffering. We can use Luther's distinction to analyze what remnant theology argues—that decline and shrinkage is a mechanism for revealing the faithful, the remnant in which the true Body of Christ is known. Remnant theology makes a sophisticated argument that ultimately suggests that churches experiencing growth do not

matter (contra the entire book of Acts, which indicates that church growth does matter). Rather, it is the shrinking church that reveals what it means to win at the Christian life. To be in decline, it is argued, indicates God's work of whittling down church membership to the truly faithful.

We must identify what this argument really amounts to: taking a form of suffering (decline in participation, shrinking in congregational size and Christian social influence) and arguing as if we know God's true motivation and therefore reinterpreting something bad as something good. Yet Luther said in his Heidelberg Disputation that only "a theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil" (Thesis 21). He continues, arguing that humans are mistaken when we claim to perceive what God is actually up to, saying, "That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened" (Thesis 22).⁹ Humans cannot fully know why things happen. As Isaiah clearly teaches us, God's ways and thoughts are higher than our own (Isaiah 55:8–9).

In contrast to a theologian of glory, "a theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is" (Thesis 21). It's time to call remnant theology what it actually is. It is a heresy that demands repentance. In the language of Luther's distinction, it is a version of the theology of glory. That is, it confidently interprets the church's suffering as a sign of God's favor. But such confidence is merely speculation. We do not know the mind of God, after all. This speculation, then, is no more than a sophisticated move of self-justification. If I argue that my declining church reveals God's favor for us, the obvious conclusion is that my leadership must be exactly right, so I'm going to keep doing what I've been doing. Resignation to the

9 *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, pp. 40–41.

church's decline in this manner is simply unfaithful. We cannot defend decline when the church's very calling is to "go . . . and make disciples of all nations" and to proclaim the Gospel "to the end of the earth" (Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8).

RESISTANCE: THE CHURCH IN FIGHT MODE

The third common response to the church's new situation—marginalized, shrinking, with minimal social influence—is to mobilize against the perceived cause of our present circumstances.

Journalist Mónica Guzmán tells the story of the ongoing interaction she has with her parents. Guzmán describes herself as a progressive, liberal person. Her parents, on the other hand, are conservative. There is a great deal of discussion in both our country and our church about the differences between people who identify using these categories. A cartoon in *The New Yorker* depicts a father telling his son that he and his wife are separating because he wants what's best for the country but the child's mother, who sits disgruntled on the other side of the room, does not.¹⁰ The cartoon captures well what is happening to many relationships across our society. They are breaking down because of disagreements over things people hold sacred, and such things are often political.

While Guzmán often vehemently disagrees with her parents (and they with her), her story is surprising because she finds it implausible that their association with one another would be called into question because of disagreements. There is no chance the relationship would break down because they cannot agree. Far from

10 Frank Cotham, "A Father Explains to His Son," *The New Yorker*, August 15, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/cartoon/a15905> (accessed April 15, 2024).

it. Guzmán deeply enjoys and values her familial relationships, especially with her parents. And despite the disagreements, she exudes a deep sense of joy about what she learns in conversation with them.¹¹ The differences between them tend to make her more curious, prompting her to ask questions and dig deeper to better understand their alternative perspectives. Perhaps it's her journalistic instincts, but rather than shy away, she leans in to learn more.

We're not used to this kind of behavior. We're more likely to resonate with *The New Yorker* cartoon and the tendency to break relationships because of disagreement. In fact, we're so used to the fracturing, splintering, and fighting over our differences that we seem to have lost sight of why we're divided at all. As Levin aptly puts it, "The list of controversies is endless, but the parties to them are remarkably constant and durable. Individually, these fights sometimes touch on genuinely vital questions. Yet seen together they appear as a vast sociopolitical psychosis. They are all one fight, *and the fight is the point.*"¹² Perhaps the "fight is the point" because, as we'll discuss further in chapter 3, having something or someone to be against binds us together with others in solidarity and thus offers us a strong sense of identity and belonging.

For conservative Christian churches that feel under threat, that feel the sense that not only have they lost something but that there are forces at work actively trying to take something away, the fight tends to take a particular shape. James Davison black helpfully describes what this looks like for conservative or right-leaning churches.¹³ He observes that such churches tend to see the problem

11 Mónica Guzmán, *I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times* (Dallas: BenBella, 2022).

12 Levin, "How to Curb the Culture War," *Comment Magazine* 40, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 7–17. Emphasis mine.

13 James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility*

in general terms, referring to it as “secularization.” Secularization refers to the bygone academic argument that as a society modernizes, antiquated things like religion will slowly decline and disappear altogether. Most thinkers who thought secularization would happen have recanted.¹⁴ In fact, they observe, Western societies are as religious as ever. However, the language of secularization is still useful for Christians because their churches continue to experience decline in numbers and influence. For them, this *is* secularization. Their experience sometimes includes feeling a sense of hostility from the wider society. Some Christians see themselves as engaged in a kind of moral combat on behalf of Judeo-Christian values. Both responses—hostility and combat—presume an us-versus-them dichotomy, where those outside conservative churches (especially progressives) are imagined to be the enemy, while members of such churches are on the side of good and righteousness.

Hunter’s argument works quite effectively in light of new and surprising research revealing that modern Christians in the West tend to choose their religious affiliation based on their political affiliation. We often presume that once a person settles into a proper Christian worldview (conservative or progressive, respective to the formative theological environment in which they are immersed), they will adopt a correlated set of political values. Instead, what is observable for at least the last half century is that our politics have begun to dictate our religious beliefs. Thus, people are affiliating

of Christianity in the Late Modern World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 99–175. Copyright © 2010 Oxford University Press, Inc. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

- 14 The most famous of these is probably the late Peter Berger, one of America’s most revered sociologists of religion. Berger’s recantation is most helpfully captured in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999). See also his *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston: DeGruyter, 2014).

with churches whose views and values align with their own political perspective.¹⁵

This shift makes many of us uncomfortable; it seems out of order with how we think things should be. But we must reckon with the observable practices of modern Christians and church bodies that suggest there is often a deeper commitment to certain political values, parties, and leaders than there is to Jesus Christ. Such allegiance is often justified by casting it as an answer to this question: “What would Jesus do?” Yet it often goes unrecognized just how far short worldly politics falls compared to the actual Kingdom politics of Jesus. The true citizenship of a Christian not only supersedes but transcends the concerns of worldly politics. Only in light of the ways of God’s kingdom can Christians account for their own weakness and the ineffectiveness of worldly politics at bringing about the kind of society Christians envisage. To say it another way, because Jesus is Lord of all, earthly politics, as Christians have long known, are but a parody of the ways of the Kingdom.

When we live as if our religious commitments (e.g., that Jesus is Lord of all) are secondary—which the data indicates is the case—we rely on politics as a means of power to force others to live according to our worldview. Each side perceives some threat of harm to the country and feels driven to action. This fear over the future of our country signals just how closely the modern Christian imagination tracks with politics. Conservatives and progressives alike attempt to pull the levers of government and legislation to establish shared moral norms and ethical values across society and mitigate the perceived threat. According to Hunter, conservatives see secularization as the threat and thus seek to reverse America’s course.

15 For a helpful discussion of this phenomenon over the last few decades, see Michele F. Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and Political Environment Shape Religious Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Because country, culture, and faith tend to hang together as one for conservative Christians,¹⁶ when one element is perceived to be under attack, all elements are considered under attack. A sense of injury in one place affects all the others.

As a response, an effort is made to change the country, to “take it back,” as it were, restoring it to its proper Christian roots. The way forward is typically formulated in a two-pronged plan of action. Conservatives call on Christians, first, to pray for our country and, second, to take the fight for our future to voting booths and courtrooms.¹⁷ Troubling for Hunter is not the plan itself—for it is arguably good that Christians of all stripes pray for our society and participate as citizens in the political processes appropriate for them—but rather the character of their engagement. Hunter observes, similarly to how he did when he first identified the so-called “culture wars,” that conservative Christians harbor a deep-seated intention to regain and maintain a dominant position of political and therefore cultural influence.¹⁸ To have such control is to ensure Americans are legally coerced to conduct themselves on Christian terms.¹⁹ In other words, the goal in this war is winning.

To get a sense of how far off course Christians in America have gone, especially as it concerns their coextensive relationship with politics, it is worth citing Hunter at length. His analysis shows how our response to the deep and legitimate feelings of resentment, loss, and injury has been to lean more and more on politics to accomplish the church’s goals. Many of the greatest concerns of the Christian life as it relates to society—fairness, equity, liberty,

16 See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 118.

17 See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 121.

18 See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 124.

19 See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 124.

justice, decency, morality, hope, marriage, family, and children—have become meaningful only on the political field of battle and thus lack the distinctive theological depth that has long characterized them as the inheritance upon which Western society was made possible. Hunter considers it ironic that the American church, in its attempts to secure its own existence, has given away the possibility of its renewal by seeking to achieve its goals via worldly power. The church, he argues—whether of conservative or progressive stripes—has unwittingly given up its unique role in American society; by engaging so fully in political power plays, the church has lost the position from which to hold society accountable by critiquing the politics that organize it.²⁰

Hunter goes on to render a sharp criticism of the American church, saying that “the consequence of the whole-hearted and uncritical embrace of politics by Christians has been *in effect*, to reduce Christian faith to a political ideology and various Christian denominations and para-church organizations to special interest groups.”²¹ This is a tragedy that has resulted from a distorted theology—especially of the distinction between church and state, or more to the point, of Luther’s doctrine of two kingdoms—and a failure to learn from history.

The cost to the church is an exceedingly weakened identity, since “an identity rooted in resentment and hostility is an inherently weak identity precisely because it is established negatively, by accentuating the boundaries between insiders and outsiders and the wrongs done by the outsiders.”²² Acting from a place of resentment,

20 See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 172.

21 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 172. Emphasis in original. Copyright © 2010 Oxford University Press, Inc. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

22 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 173. Copyright © 2010 Oxford University Press, Inc. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

“many of the most prominent Christian leaders and organizations in America have fashioned an identity and witness for the church that is, to say the least, antithetical to its highest calling.”²³ To put it plainly, Hunter relentlessly seeks to make his case, saying,

The tragedy is that in the name of resisting the internal deterioration of faith and the corruption of the world around them, many Christians—and Christian conservatives most significantly—unwittingly embrace some of the more corrosive aspects of the cultural disintegration they decry.²⁴

One could argue that the harm the church has done to itself by embracing the mechanics of politics is worse than any harm we have suffered from our changed society. As an institution, the church’s social (not theological) function is to mold and shape its members to live *as* Christ in the world and thus witness to the presence and future coming of His kingdom. Christians formed in this way would inevitably contribute to the greater flourishing of all members of American society.

Yet because of the politicization of the church’s values and its simultaneous dedication to an amalgam of country, culture, and faith, the church has abandoned its own responsibilities, seeking power via the established political mechanisms that it ought to be holding accountable. In so doing, the church has foregone its role as an institution that models and witnesses to the politically alternative ways of the Kingdom or that can prophetically call into question the values of society.

23 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 175. Copyright © 2010 Oxford University Press, Inc. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

24 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 175. Copyright © 2010 Oxford University Press, Inc. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

The result is that society has lost trust in the institution of the church. Our reputation is like a dumpster fire within the theater of American public life, making it easy for outsiders to simply look, shake their heads, shrug their shoulders, and move on. We are irrelevant and ignorable, and we've done it to ourselves.

STILL, THERE IS HOPE

The preceding analysis of three major ways the church responds to its feelings of resentment, loss, frustration, and injury may seem too big of a challenge to overcome. Furthermore, it is a difficult message to swallow because it clearly indicates that we have been complicit in our own decline. Yet, if we do not recognize our part in creating the situations from which we are trying to pivot, we will continue, however unwittingly, to undercut our own efforts.

Christians who gather regularly for worship experience weekly moments when they are invited to repent. Part of that invitation includes considering sins of omission—the things we didn't do but should have. This chapter has tried to point out some sins of omission that perhaps until now we didn't know we had to confess. Nevertheless, the blood of Jesus is just as ready to cover these sins as every other sin. So let us receive God's gracious absolution and stand with confidence that He will empower us to seek and embody even greater faithfulness.

Our witness before the world need not be limited to who we have been; instead, we can reflect who Christ is molding and shaping us to be in spite of our past. He does not erase our past but rather preserves the memory of it for our benefit. We know now what not to do. We know now the cost of these errors. And we also know the God who brings something out of nothing, who can redeem

the most broken and bruised because He raises the dead to life. Let us proceed, then, in this newness of life, leaving behind the bitter *ressentiment*, seeking the leadership of the Holy Spirit to help us meet the urgent hunger of the world around us to know the same redemptive hope we have. The rest of this book will explore what a resilient witness can look like in our dark and unfamiliar times. Together we pray that God will use each of us frail, feeble, fickle human beings (not too different from Jesus' disciples we meet in the Gospels) to introduce the people we know to the only One who can quench their thirst for true life.

The next chapter will explore how we came to live in such a time as this, one in which we experience the deep loss and *ressentiment* that engendered these reactions. Parts 2 and 3 will illuminate spaces where the church can live faithfully, adjusting its behaviors and habits to align with the kind of witness we are called to have in the world. To the extent we can do that, we can slowly regain public trust, which will open new spaces for us to proclaim the Gospel.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Answering these questions might tempt us toward finger-pointing and blaming others. However, as you consider these questions, seek with fortitude to reflect first on yourself.

1. What are some examples of well-intentioned attempts at relevance that ended up eclipsing the Gospel message?
2. What are some successful strategies to draw people in to hear the Gospel?

3. What primary goal has been communicated through attempts at relevance? While gaining a hearing was the intended goal, what was communicated instead (e.g., entertainment, the “cool kids” go here, affirmation)?
4. Complacency was given as one example of resignation. What are other examples of the church’s resignation to decline, distrust, or seeing a lack of cultural relevance?
5. With religion and politics intermingled, what does winning look like? In what ways has “winning” caused distrust toward the church? In what ways, if at all, do political wins equal a win for the kingdom of God?
6. Take a moment to recognize the ways in which you or your church have participated in the three Rs of this chapter (relevance, resignation, resistance). Reflect on the outcomes. Ask the Lord for forgiveness when these things have been detrimental to the church’s mission. What are some current practices you could change moving forward?