

The High Calling

a bimonthly publication of The Francis Asbury Society

Toxic Church

By Stan Key

Where would you say is the riskiest place one could be to catch a life-threatening infection? An African jungle? A crowded New York subway? A kindergarten classroom? Think again. Scientific studies consistently tell us that the most dangerous place one can be to catch a deadly disease is the hospital! Statistics show that hundreds of thousands of patients each year catch a disease while *in* the hospital that is unrelated to the disease that brought them there in the first place; and 99,000 actually die![†]

Now, where would you say is the riskiest place one could be to acquire a soul-threatening spiritual infection? Las Vegas? Wall Street? Hollywood? Harvard? Think again. The place where one is most in danger of contracting a deadly spiritual virus is the church! Yes, it's true. Becoming part of a religious community

[†] "Health care-associated infections: fact sheet," www.who.int/gpsc/country_work/gpsc_ccisc_fact_sheet_en.pdf (accessed 23 January 2017).

means you are exposing yourself to deadly spiritual germs. In fact, the spiritual diseases lurking inside the church sometimes are worse than those outside.

Such awareness, however, should not keep you away from the body of Christ. Just as a hospital is designed for the sick, so the church is designed for sinners. But those who attend need to be careful. Don't be naïve. Be alert and wash often!

This issue of *The High Calling* is devoted to the topic of toxic church. While it may be fashionable to pretend that

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In Flood Time, Build an Ark!

By Rod Dreher



Concluding that the "culture war" is over and Christians lost, Dreher calls us to a much deeper engagement with the world around us. How we understand "church" is central to his thinking. This article is taken from Chapter One of Dreher's important book, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 7–20.

I had the privilege of helping victims of the flood that hit south Louisiana in August 2016. Serving jambalaya to hungry and dazed evacuees, one heard the same story over and over: *We have lost everything. We never expected this. It has never flooded where we live. We were not prepared.* Louisiana's Great Flood was a thousand-year weather event, and nobody in recorded history had ever seen this land underwater.

We Christians in the West are facing our own thousand-year flood—or if you believe Pope Benedict, a fifteen-hundred-year flood: in 2012, he said that the spiritual crisis overtaking the West is the most serious since the fall of the Roman Empire near the end of the fifth century. The light of Christianity is flickering out all over the West. By God's mercy, the faith may continue to flourish in the Global South and China, but barring a dramatic reversal of current trends, it will all but disappear entirely from Europe and North America. This may not be the end of the world, but it is the end of *a* world, and only the willfully blind would deny it. For a long time we have

downplayed or ignored the signs. Now the floodwaters are upon us—and we are not ready.

The storm clouds have been gathering for decades, but most of us believers have operated under the illusion that they would blow over. The breakdown of the natural family, the loss of traditional moral values, and the fragmenting of communities—we were troubled by these developments but believed they were reversible and didn't reflect anything fundamentally wrong with our approach to faith. Our religious leaders told us that strengthening the levees of law and politics would keep the flood of secularism at bay. The sense one had was: There's nothing here that can't be fixed by continuing to do what Christians have been doing for decades—especially voting for Republicans.

Today we can see that we've lost on every front and that the swift and relentless currents of secularism have overwhelmed our flimsy barriers. Hostile secular nihilism has won the day in our nation's government, and the culture has turned powerfully against traditional Christians. We tell ourselves that these developments have been imposed by a liberal elite, because we find the truth intolerable: The American people, either actively or passively, approve.

The advance of gay civil rights, along with a reversal of religious liberties for believers who do not accept the LGBT

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Rethinking Church

By Francis Chan



Bestselling author and former megachurch pastor Francis Chan has turned away from traditional ways of doing church and is now giving leadership to a house church network that is planting churches in Northern California. His new book, *Letters to the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2018), tells of the revolution that has occurred in his thinking.

The article below is a slightly edited abridgment of various sections of the book (69–72, 81–83, 86, 92–93, 181, 189, 194).

We live in a time when people go to a building on Sunday mornings, attend an hour-long service, and call themselves members of the Church. Does that sound shocking to you? Of course not. This is perfectly normal. It's what we grew up with. We all know good Christians go to church. But have you ever read the New Testament? Do you find anything in Scripture that is even remotely close to the pattern we have created? Do you find anyone who "went" to church? Try to imagine Paul and Peter speaking like we do today:

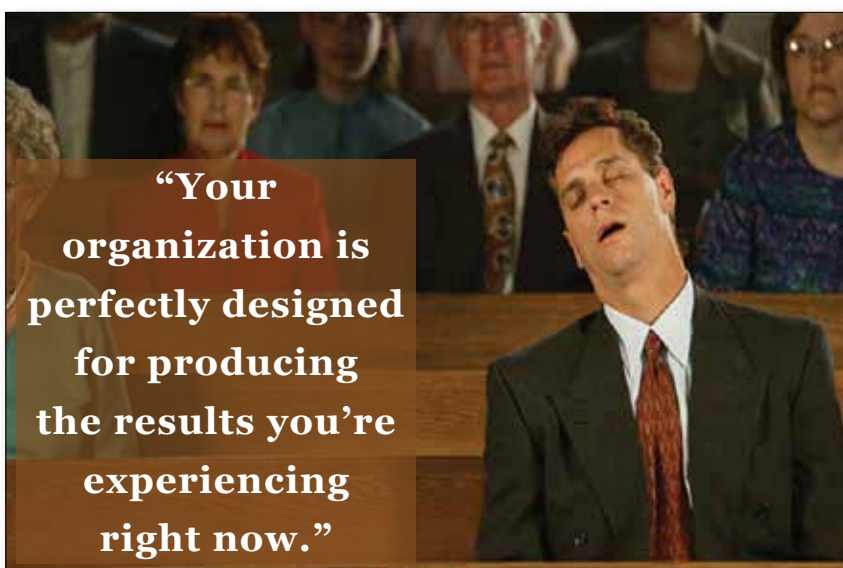
"Hey, Peter, where do you go to church now?"

"I go to The River. They have great music and I love the kids' program."

"Cool. Can I check out your church next Sunday? I'm not getting much out of mine."

"Totally. I'm not going to be there next Sunday because little Matthew has soccer. But how about the week after?"

"Sounds good. Hey, do they have a singles' group?"



It's comical to think of Paul and Peter speaking like this. Yet that's a normal conversation among Christians today. The fact that we have reduced the sacred mystery of Church to a one-hour service we attend is staggering. Yet that's the way I defined it for years! I didn't know anything different.

Something God designed to function as a family has been reduced to an optional weekly meeting. How in the world did we get here? Most churches are *not* like families. In many, you have about as much of a connection to the people who are supposedly your spiritual family as you would to someone who visited the same movie theater as you.

It's sad that our churches today look nothing like the churches mentioned in the New Testament. What I see today is many people choosing to opt out of the Church. Claiming a continued love for Jesus, they have decided that the Church only gets in their way. It's a sad time when those who want to be close to Jesus have given up on the Church.

The truth is, there are many in our churches who aren't interested in living out loving family relationships through

the church. I'm going to say something that might be hard to hear: What if we let them leave? I know that goes against all the wisdom of modern church-growth strategies, but it's exactly the kind of thing Jesus would do. Jesus called people to count the cost from the very start (Lk 14:25–35). He didn't expect his followers to be perfect, but he did demand that they be committed (Lk 9:57–62).

What if we followed God's design for the Church and in doing so allowed the Church to be pruned down to only those who wanted to obey his command to "love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12)? We might actually find that a pruned tree would bear more fruit (Jn 15:2). We might discover that the branches that weren't bearing fruit were actually sucking all the life out of the tree.

ARE WE PRODUCING SAINTS?

It's no secret that most people who attend church services come as consumers rather than servants. Week after week, the same faces show up with little to no change in their lives. Insanely,

we just keep doing the same thing, hoping it will yield different results. Every week, same small talk, same "Good sermon," same "See you next week." If there's no fruit, isn't it time for change? I recently heard someone say, "Your organization is perfectly designed for producing the results you're experiencing right now." It may be time for a serious shift.

At the end of the day, it's about what we produce. We can get so focused on getting people through our

doors that we don't think about what goes out. The Church's purpose is not just to exist. It's to produce. Are we producing mature disciples who imitate Christ by constantly serving others? Are we developing communities that are so deeply in love with one another that the world marvels (Jn 13:34–35)? If this is not being produced, why do we exist?

IS IT TIME FOR A CHANGE?

I believe God is leading a movement in this country toward simple, smaller gatherings, and I long to see this movement gain greater traction. I get so excited when I dream about the Church spreading in small, invigorating expressions that look and feel like the early church. My goal is to get you dreaming about this as well.

From the very beginning, the Church has always needed pruning. We've always needed reformers and reformations to speak with the voice of the prophet, to call us back to what we were meant to be. Church history is full of reformations of all sizes that have pulled God's people closer to God's intention for his Church. ✠

The Temptation to Be Relevant

By Henri Nouwen (1932–1996)



Writing especially to Christian leaders, Henri Nouwen warns of the seduction of being cutting edge, trendy, relevant. The following article is a slightly edited abridgement taken from Nouwen's book *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 15–32.

Nouwen shares personally how his transition from the academic setting of Harvard to working with the mentally handicapped at the L'Arche communities of Toronto taught him the irrelevance of being relevant in Christian ministry.

The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done until then. Since nobody could read my books, they could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my twenty years at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction. My considerable ecumenical experience proved even less valuable.

Not being able to use any of the skills that had proved so practical in the past was a real source of anxiety. I was suddenly faced with my naked self, open for affirmations and rejections, hugs and punches, smiles and tears, all dependent simply on how I was perceived at the moment. In a way, it seemed as though I was starting my life all over again.

This experience was and, in many ways, is still the most important experience of my new life, because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—that self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.

I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. That is the way Jesus came to reveal God's love. The great message that we have to carry, as ministers of God's word and followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life.

Jesus' first temptation was to be relevant: to turn stones into bread. Oh, how often have I wished I could do that! When I worked in Lima, Peru, where children die from malnutrition and contaminated water, I would not have been able to reject Satan's suggestion. Aren't we priests and ministers called to

help people, to feed the hungry, and to save those who are starving? Are we not called to do something that makes people realize that we do make a difference in their lives? Jesus faced this same question. But when the devil told him to prove his power as the Son of God by the relevant behavior of changing stones into bread, he clung to his mission to proclaim the word and said, "Human beings live not by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (see Dt 8:3; Mt 4:4; Lk 4:4).

Before Jesus commissioned Peter to be a shepherd he asked him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?" He asked him again, "Do you love me?" And a third time he asked, "Do you love me?" (see Jn 21:15–19). We have to hear that question as being central to all of our Christian ministry because it is the question that can allow us to be, at the same time, irrelevant and truly self-confident.



The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? The Christian leader of the future is the one who truly knows the heart of God as it has become flesh in Jesus. Knowing God's heart means consistently, radically, and very concretely to announce and reveal that God is love and only love, and that every time fear, isolation, or despair begin to invade the human soul this is not something that comes from God. The desire to be relevant and successful will

gradually disappear, and our only desire will be to say with our whole being to our brothers and sisters of the human race, "You are loved."

It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch God's incarnate Word, and to taste fully God's infinite goodness?

Dealing with burning issues without being rooted in a deep personal relationship with God easily leads to divisiveness because, before we know it, our sense of self is caught up in our opinion about a given subject. But when we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft, and true witnesses without being manipulative. ✦

A Nation of Heretics

By Ross Douthat



In his book *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), Ross Douthat, a columnist for *The New York Times*, describes how American religion has gone astray. Provocative and hard-hitting, Douthat's book helps to make sense of what has happened to the church in America. The following article is a slightly edited abridgement of the Prologue (1–16).

Many today believe America has lost her way because she has fallen away from the faith of her fathers or perhaps been bullied into apostasy by secular elites. The more simplistic version of this argument insists that the United States was founded as an explicitly “Christian nation” and, like Israel of old, has lost God’s favor by straying from this covenant. In more recent years, however, an alternative story is being told. A growing chorus insists that the United States is in decline because it’s *excessively* religious. On issue after issue, these critics make Christian belief the problem in and of itself.

Sometimes this argument is couched as an attack on the so-called theocracy that Christian conservatives are supposedly bent on setting up. At other times it takes the form of a straightforward assault on belief in God, advanced by atheists who share Christopher Hitchens’s sweeping assessment that religion “poisons everything.”

These two visions seem mutually contradictory—but both contain an element of truth. That’s because America’s problem isn’t too much religion or too little of it. It’s *bad* religion: the slow-motion collapse of traditional Christianity and the rise of a variety of destructive pseudo-Christianities in its place. Since the 1960s, the institutions that sustained orthodox Christian belief—Catholic and Protestant alike—have entered a state of near-terminal decline. The churches with the strongest connection to the Christian past have lost members, money, and authority; the elite that was once at least sympathetic to Christian ideas has become hostile or indifferent; and the culture as a whole has turned its back on many of the faith’s precepts and demands.

The United States remains a deeply religious country, and most Americans are still drawing some water from the Christian well. But a growing number are inventing their own versions of what Christianity means, abandoning the nuances of traditional theology in favor of religions that stroke their egos and indulge or even celebrate their worst impulses. These faiths speak from many pulpits—conservative and liberal, political and pop-cultural, traditionally religious and fashionably “spiritual”—and many of their preachers call themselves Christian. But they are

increasingly offering distortions of traditional Christianity, not the real thing.

The real story is what’s happening in that part of America where papal encyclicals rarely penetrate and the works of Richard Dawkins pass unread. That’s where you’ll find the reality of contemporary religion, and the roots of our present crisis. It’s an America that remains the most religious country in the developed world; a place where Jesus Christ is an obsession, God’s favor a birthright, and spiritual knowledge an all-consuming goal. But it’s also a place where traditional Christian teachings have been warped into justifications for anti-intellectualism and utopianism, selfishness and greed.

In this America, the ancient Christian teaching that the Scriptures are simultaneously divinely inspired and open to multiple interpretations has become an either/or choice instead. You’re either a rigid fundamentalist who believes that dinosaurs just missed hitching a ride on Noah’s Ark, or a self-consciously

progressive believer for whom the Bible is a kind of refrigerator magnet poetry, awaiting rearrangement by more enlightened minds. As a result, the Jesus of the New Testament has been replaced in the hearts and minds of many Americans with a more congenial figure—a “choose your own Jesus” who better fits their own preconceptions about what a savior should and shouldn’t be.



“Religion becomes a license for egotism and selfishness, easily employed to justify what used to be considered deadly sins.”

Likewise, in this America the traditional Christian attempt to balance the belief that God desires human happiness with the reality of human suffering has been transformed into the simpler teaching that God wants everyone to get rich—that your house or car or high-paying job was intended for you from before the foundation of the world, and that the test of true faith is the rewards that it reaps for believers here on earth.

In this America, the Christian teaching that every human soul is unique and precious has been stressed, by the prophets of self-fulfillment and gurus of self-love, at the expense of the equally important teaching that every human soul is fatally corrupted by original sin. Absent the latter emphasis, religion becomes a license for egotism and selfishness, easily employed to justify what used to be considered deadly sins. The result is a society where pride become “healthy self-esteem,” vanity becomes “self-improvement,” adultery becomes “following your heart,” greed and gluttony become “living the American dream.”

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The Marks of the True Church

By Thomas C. Oden (1931–2016)



In his important three-volume systematic theology, Thomas Oden asks the question: “By what evidences is the church recognizable?” In this issue of *The High Calling*, devoted to “toxic church,” it is helpful to remind ourselves about the marks of the true church. The following article is taken from Chapter 8 of Volume Three. It is abridged and slightly edited (*Life in the Spirit*, San Francisco: Harper, 1992:

299–303).

Classical Protestant teaching commonly cites three attributes or outward signs by which one may discern whether a community of faith is truly a church: Word, Sacrament, and Discipline.

FIRST: PREACHING OF THE WORD

The most crucial sign of the church in the Protestant tradition is the pure preaching of God’s Word. The surest mark of the true church is that in it one hears the pure gospel proclaimed. In his farewell to the Ephesian elders, Paul said, “I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27).

SECOND: DUE ADMINISTRATION OF SACRAMENTS

Because intentionally instituted by the Lord, there can be no church without a fitting sacramental life. From the outset, those who have confessed Jesus as Christ and “who accepted his message were baptized” and were immediately found devoting themselves to “the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:41–42). Word is logically and theologically prior to sacrament in the Reformed tradition, for the essential efficacy of the sacraments is the Word that enlivens.



The most crucial sign of the church . . . is the pure preaching of God’s Word.

THIRD: DISCIPLINED CHRISTIAN LIFE

Where no attention is being given to daily walking the way of holiness, we have no right to expect the true church. The exercise of church discipline to combat sin remains today a sign of the true church, which includes the pastoral care of the members of the church, the preserving of the pure doctrine through the exercise of spiritual discipline, and the opposing of false doctrines.

Another way to summarize the marks of the true church, which dates from the fourth century and is equally valid, is to emphasize her unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. In Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox teaching, the discussion of the reality, identity, and mission of the church has usually been organized around these points, which are found prototypically in the Nicene Creed.

- *The church is one*, finding its oneness in Christ. This unity cannot be empirically observed except by sharing empathically in the life of proclaimed word, the enacted sacrament, and the lived-out discipline.
- *The church is holy*, set apart from the world to mediate life to the world and bring forth the fruits of the Spirit amid the life of the world.

- *The church is catholic* in that it is whole, for all, and embracing all times and places.

- *The church is apostolic* in that it is grounded in the testimony of the first witnesses to Jesus’ life and resurrection, and depends upon and continues their ministry.

If any of these marks should become permanently obscured, that is an indication that the church needs to be reformed.

The Significance of One

By Charlie Fiskeaux, Special Assistant to the President for Development

How many times in life do you encounter “one:” one person, one speaker, one message, one more soul, one lost sheep, one lost coin, one meeting, one dollar, one transaction, etc. The list could be endless, since life consists of a series of one-time events, persons, and items. Even most complex events can be broken down into a series of single events.

While ministries like the Francis Asbury Society may appear to be an interwoven complex of activities and persons, in reality they are a collection of single persons, events, activities, and items. Specifically, our speakers ministry takes place by one speaker delivering one message to one congregation consisting of a number of individual persons. Our publishing ministry takes place with one book being read by one individual at a time. Discipleship ministry occurs

in one setting with a group of persons consisting of one or more individual persons. Support for these ministries of the Francis Asbury Society involves prayer, contributions, and events; all of which consist of a composition of one prayer, one contribution, or one participation in an event.

Think of your personal involvement with FAS. Your prayer, your contribution, and your involvement are important to the success of our ministry. Your support enables the proclamation of the Scriptural message that we can be “wholly devoted to God.” Thank you for supporting the ministries of FAS: the “significance of one” makes a difference.

Details for various methods of giving are available on the website francisasburysociety.com/support

Can You Be Christian without Being Christlike?

By Dallas Willard (1935–2013)



Writing from a “spiritual formation” tradition, Willard laments that church people today are often no different from the unchurched. This article is a slightly edited abridgment of chapter 13 taken from his book, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002) 238–40, 249–50.

Let’s be honest; Christians today are often mean and angry. This is not just a perception of secular culture; sadly, it is often true! But why? Well, there actually is an answer to that question. And we must face this answer and effectively deal with it or Satan will sustain his stranglehold on spiritual transformation in local congregations. Christians are routinely taught by example and word that it is more important to be right (always in terms of their beloved tradition) than it is to be Christlike. In fact, being right licenses you to be mean, and, indeed, *requires* you to be mean—righteously mean, of course. You must be hard on people who are wrong, and especially



if they are in positions of Christian leadership. They deserve nothing better.

Now I must say something you can be mad at *me* about. A fundamental mistake of the conservative side of the American church today, and much of the Western church, is that it takes as its *basic* goal to get as many people as possible ready to die and go to heaven. It aims to get people into heaven rather than to get heaven into people. This of course requires that these people, who are going to be “in,” must be *right* on what is basic. You can’t really quarrel with that. But it turns out that to be right on “what is basic” is to be *right* in terms of the particular church tradition in question, not in terms of Christlikeness.

Now, the project thus understood and practiced is self-defeating. It implodes upon itself *because* it creates groups of people who may be ready to die, but clearly are not ready to live. They rarely get along with one another, much less those “outside.” Often their most intimate relations are tangles of reciprocal harm, coldness, and resentment. They have found ways of being “Christian” without being Christlike.

As a result they actually fall far short of getting as many people as possible ready to die, because the lives of the “converted” testify against the reality of “the life that is life indeed” (1 Tm 6:19). The way to get as many people into heaven as you can is to get heaven into as many people as you can—that is, to follow the path of genuine spiritual transformation or full-throttle discipleship to Jesus Christ. When we are counting up results we also need to keep in mind the multitudes of people (surrounded by churches) who will *not* be in heaven because they have never, to their knowledge, seen the reality of Christ in a living human being.

But is there another way for local congregations to go? Yes! We simply need to focus upon the application of Matthew 28:19–20. This is God’s plan for the growth and prospering of local congregations as well as of the church at large.

As you go throughout the world, make apprentices to me from all kinds of people, immerse them in Trinitarian reality, and teach them to do everything I have commanded you. [the author’s paraphrase of Matthew 28:19–20]

Notice the three stages of application that Jesus mentions:

1. *Making disciples—that is, apprentices—of Jesus.* It is these of which the local congregations consist. The New Testament does not recognize a category of Christians who are not apprentices of Jesus Christ in kingdom living now, though it clearly does recognize “baby” apprentices.
2. *Immersing the apprentices at all levels of growth in the Trinitarian presence.* This is the single major component of the prospering of the local congregation: the healing and teaching of God in the midst.
3. *Transforming disciples inwardly, in such a way that doing the words and deeds of Christ is not the focus but is the natural outcome or side effect.* This is what “teach them to do everything I have commanded you” amounts to. It is clearly the main, ongoing function of the local congregation.

We must flatly say that one of the greatest contemporary barriers to meaningful spiritual formation in Christlikeness is overconfidence in the spiritual efficacy of “regular church services,” of whatever kind they may be. Though they are vital, they are not enough. It is that simple.

Individuals and local congregations must discover and effectively implement whatever is required to bring about the inner transformations of those who have really become apprentices of Jesus and who really do gather in immersion in the Trinitarian presence. In doing so they will have put in place the principles and absolutes of the New Testament churches, and they will certainly see the corresponding fruits and effects. Jesus did not give us a plan for spiritual formation that will fail, and he has the resources to see to it that it does not. ✠

Becoming Christian-ish

By Kenda Creasy Dean



Kenda Creasy Dean wanted to understand why American teens were so positive about Christianity and at the same time so apathetic about genuine religious practice. The result of her study is the book *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford University Press, 2010). This article is a slightly edited abridgement of the first chapter (3–14).

Let me save you some trouble. Here is the gist of what you are about to read: American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school. One more thing: we’re responsible. Why? Because the religiosity of American teenagers must be read primarily as a reflection of their parents’ religious devotion (or lack thereof) and, by extension, that of their congregations.

There is a theological fault line running underneath American churches: an adherence to a do-good, feel-good spirituality that

has little to do with the Triune God of Christian tradition and even less to do with loving Jesus Christ enough to follow him into the world. One gains the impression that many American congregations (not to mention teenagers themselves) are “almost Christian”—but perhaps not fully, at least not in terms of theology or practice. To be sure, this is hardly an original position. During the Great Awakening in England, both George Whitefield and John

Wesley preached (different) sermons titled “The Almost Christian,” based on King Agrippa’s reaction to Paul in Acts 26:28, “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (KJV). Both sermons took aim at the half-hearted spirituality of the realm, especially the inclination of Christians to obey church commandments without loving God and neighbor “as Christ loved us.”

This book focuses on Christian adults and congregations as well as on teenagers themselves. We are the ones charged with “handing on” the good news of Jesus Christ to the teenagers on our watch, but the reports from the front are not encouraging. We have successfully convinced teenagers that religious participation is important for moral formation and for making nice people, which may explain why American adolescents harbor no ill will toward religion. Many of them say they will bring their own children to church in the future (a dubious prediction statistically). Yet these young people possess no real commitment to or excitement

about religious faith. Teenagers tend to approach religious participation as they do music and sports, as an extracurricular activity: a good, well-rounded thing to do, but unnecessary for an integrated life. The faith most teenagers exhibit is something some are calling “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”

For most of the twentieth century, we studied the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents in order to answer the question, “How can we keep young people in church?” Today, our question is more pressing: “Does the church *matter*?”

The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people focused primarily on “folks like us”—which, of course, begs the question of whether we are really the church at all.



“Teenagers tend to approach religious participation as they do music and sports, as an extracurricular activity . . .”

What if the blasé religiosity of most American teenagers is not the result of poor communication but the result of excellent communication of a watered-down gospel so devoid of God’s self-giving love in Jesus Christ, so immune to the sending love of the Holy Spirit that it might not be Christianity at all? What if the *church* models a way of life that asks, not passionate surrender but ho-hum assent? What if we are preaching moral affirmation, a feel-better

faith, and a hands-off God instead of the decisively involved, impossibly loving, radically sending God of Abraham and Mary, who desired us enough to enter creation in Jesus Christ and whose Spirit is active in the church and in the world today? If this is the case—if theological malpractice explains teenagers’ half-hearted religious identities—then perhaps most young people practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism not because they reject Christianity but because this is the only “Christianity” they know. ✠

GUIDING BELIEFS OF MORALISTIC THERAPEUTIC DEISM[†]

1. A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

[†] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (Oxford: University Press, 2010), 14.

the problems facing our nation today can be blamed on Washington, Hollywood, Harvard, and Wall Street, the truth is far different. As the church goes, so goes the nation. Until we wake to the reality of the great need for reform and revival in our own local churches, the crisis in our nation will only grow worse. But if we are hard on the church, please don't misread our motives. We find no joy in bashing pastors and the congregations they lead. We are not anti-church. *Au contraire!* It is our *love* for the church that compels us to talk candidly about her flaws and dysfunctions.

Jeremiah lived in a day when organized religion was toxic. The situation was so bad he preached one of his most



famous sermons while standing on the steps of the temple in Jerusalem, warning those going to worship of the poison inside! His sermon (see Jer 7:1–8:17) alerted people to the fact that the germs inside the temple were more dangerous than those outside.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: “Stand in the gate of the Lord’s house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this

place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” . . . Behold, you trust in deceptive words . . .” (Jeremiah 7:1–4, 8)

Jeremiah told the worshipers that the real problem facing the nation was not to be found in external threats: Babylon, pagan religions, corrupt governments, and so on. The real problem was not “out there” but in the very temple of the one true God!

At the heart of Jeremiah’s message was a warning *not* to trust the “deceptive words” (Jer 7:4, 8) of the popular preachers of the day. Their sermons were toxic. One of the homiletical skills these false prophets had perfected was the use of repetition. These preachers knew how to manipulate their audience by repeating soothing words over and over.

- “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord” (Jer 7:4).
- “Peace, peace” (Jer 6:14; 8:11).
- “I have dreamed, I have dreamed” (Jer 23:25).

People love this kind of preaching, especially when the government is impotent, barbarians are at the gates, and things are falling apart. It reassures them that things are going to be okay. But Jeremiah knew that pious platitudes and happy promises are not sufficient for such times. “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer 8:11).

But the problem was not just in the pulpit. Jeremiah’s sermon also exposed the hypocrisy in the pew! “The prophets prophesy falsely . . . and my people love to have it so” (Jer 5:31). These people came to church because they wanted to be comforted *in* their sins rather than finding deliverance *from* them.

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are delivered!”—only to go on doing all these abominations? (Jeremiah 7:9–10)

CHARACTERISTICS OF A TOXIC CHURCH

Jeremiah’s sermon can be summarized by highlighting five characteristics of a toxic church. While the temple in Jerusalem was perhaps the most famous example of a poisonous spiritual environment, it is certainly not the only one.

1. Words Divorced from Truth

A toxic church is a place where “deceptive words” (Jer 7:4, 8) are preached by the clergy as well as believed by the people. The problem is not that the words are false but rather that they are misleading. A half-truth is more dangerous than a lie. When preachers think their job is to make people happy rather than holy, then barbarians are at the gates. When the clergy works to reassure people *in* their sins rather than announce deliverance *from* them, then the church is toxic indeed.

I never sent these prophets, but they ran anyway. I never spoke to them, but they preached away. If they’d have bothered to sit down and meet with me, they’d have preached my Message to my people. They’d have gotten

Continued on page 9

them back on the right track, gotten them out of their evil ruts. (Jeremiah 23:21–22 MSG)

2. Worship Divorced from Obedience

In a toxic spiritual environment, people may claim to have intense worship experiences and yet be living in willful, habitual patterns of sin (Jer 7:8–10). Church becomes a place where people hide from the light of God’s holiness rather than allowing it to expose the truth. The goal of worship is focused more on entertaining the goats than feeding the sheep! Such an environment does more harm than good. God loathes such religious gatherings.

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21–24)

3. Life Divorced from Reality

When the pulpits of the land are filled with people-pleasers rather than prophets of God, truth dies (Jer 7:28). The culture no longer has a moral compass pointing to true north. Without such a fixed point, people simply cannot find their moral bearings in a stormy sea. Consequently, people begin to do what is right in their own eyes (Jgs 21:25). The result is cultural chaos. Good is called evil and evil is called good (Isa 5:20). Saints are vilified as sinners while sinners are lauded as

saints. Life has become disconnected from reality. Welcome to La-La Land.

4. Clergy Malpractice

Jeremiah warned the people not to listen to the popular preachers or believe in what they say. He didn’t want them to fall for phony piety and soothing messages of peace. Jeremiah emphasized two criteria that are helpful in discerning true prophets from false ones:

1. *Their character.* In Jeremiah’s day—as in our own—two sins were prominent: greed for money (Jer 8:10) and sexual immorality (Jer 23:14; 29:21–23).
2. *Their message.* Though their oratorical skills were impressive, their sermons were simply the product of their own imaginations. They promised peace and happiness while completely unaware that the judgment of God was about to fall.

5. The Church Does Not Know It Is Toxic

The most dangerous hospital is not the one with germs lurking in the building but rather the one that *does not know* it has germs lurking in the building—or pretends such germs are not present! Ignorance can be fatal. The problem in the church today is not sin in the church. The problem is when we pretend such sins are not present. “But I have this against you,” Jesus said to the church in Thyatira, “You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants . . .” (Rv 2:20). When sin in the church is tolerated, then the church becomes toxic indeed! ✠

The Malling of the Church

By Os Guinness



Few people write with greater insight on cultural issues than social critic and author, Os Guinness. This article is a slightly edited abridgment from the introduction to his book *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993, 11ff.). Guinness warns

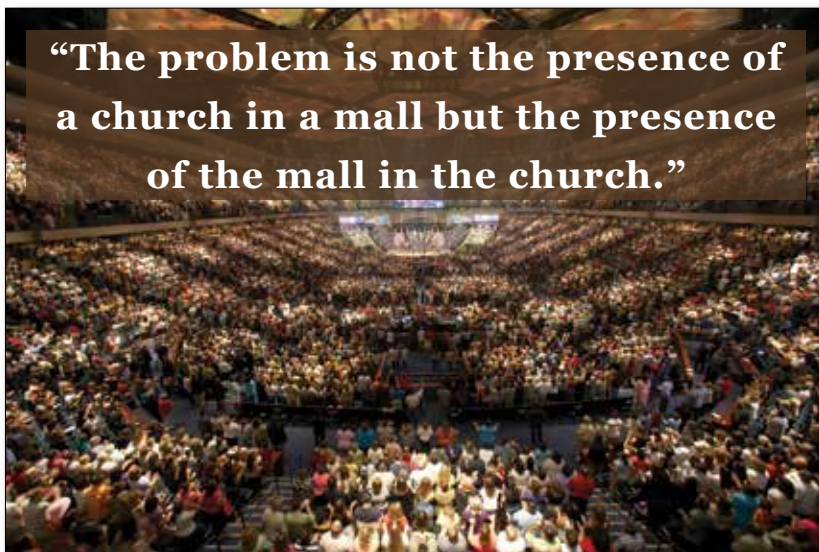
Christians of what can happen when we use the methods of the world (marketing, management, etc.) uncritically.

When the Mall of America opened in Minneapolis in August 1992, enthusiasts hailed it as one of the seven wonders of the modern world. It boasted enough floor space to fill eighty-eight football fields. It hired twice the number of workers employed by the city of Minneapolis. It anticipated 40 million annual visitors—nine times the population of Minnesota—and its first-year budget was twice that of the city of St. Paul.

But the strongest attraction of the new Mall of America was the “special services” that came with its four hundred shops. These included “Camp Snoopy,” a seven-acre amusement park complete with a roller coaster, an eighteen-hole

miniature golf course, numerous customer services, and the ultimate special service—a church service in the rotunda between Bloomingdale’s and Sears. “A Sunday Mallelujah!” cried the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* as six thousand flocked to the opening service organized by Wooddale Church of Eden Prairie.

Many people were enthusiastic. The service was one of the most enterprising and innovative they had ever seen. But others were shocked. A worship service no more has a place in a shopping mall than in a bar or nightclub. My own view lies with the former, but both reactions missed a deeper point:



The problem is not the presence of a church in a mall but the presence of the mall in the church.

Whatever criticisms of the megachurch movement need to be raised, this point is beyond dispute: The movement is extraordinarily influential and significant within American churches today. At its best, it should be applauded. Where it is not at its best, it requires criticism so that it might be. ✠

The Sons of the Prophets

By A. W. Tozer (1897–1963)



A. W. Tozer was able to be critical of the church because of his deep love and commitment to the church. His words are strong because he yearns for the church to be all that the Lord intends it to be. This article is a slightly edited abridgement of the first chapter of the book *Voice of a Prophet: Who Speaks for God?* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2014, 15–24).

One of the greatest passions of my heart is the church of Jesus Christ, particularly the evangelical church. Because I love the church, I feel the need to address certain problems that have been developing for several generations. I saw one church advertise that they were “Not your father’s church.” They promoted it as though they were proud of that expression. What I want to know is this; if they are “Not your father’s church,” whose church are they? The problem, as I see it, is that we have lost the vision the fathers had of what we refer to as the New Testament church.

One of the main factors of the New Testament church is the prophets. They were used of God to keep the church strong and pure during tumultuous times. Throughout history we see that the church was successful when they listened to the voice of the prophets. When they turned a deaf ear to that voice, the church quickly sank into heresies.

As I look at the contemporary church, my heart cries out in desperation. What we need today are prophets! But where are they?

Where are the prophets to guide the church through the quagmire of heresies around us?

The voice of the prophet today is seldom heard, not because there are no prophets but because the noise and clatter of our culture have so invaded the church that they have drowned out that voice. What has brought the church to this point?

I believe one explanation for the current state of affairs is that the prophets have been replaced by *the sons of the prophets*. Even though these sons have a connection with their fathers, they do not seem to be like them. They have only a vague connection with the past, yet these sons of the prophets are now running the church! Today, it is quite popular to distance yourself from the past. But when the church turns her back on the past, she has no sense of her future. She is like a ship without a rudder, floundering in a vast sea of uncertainty.

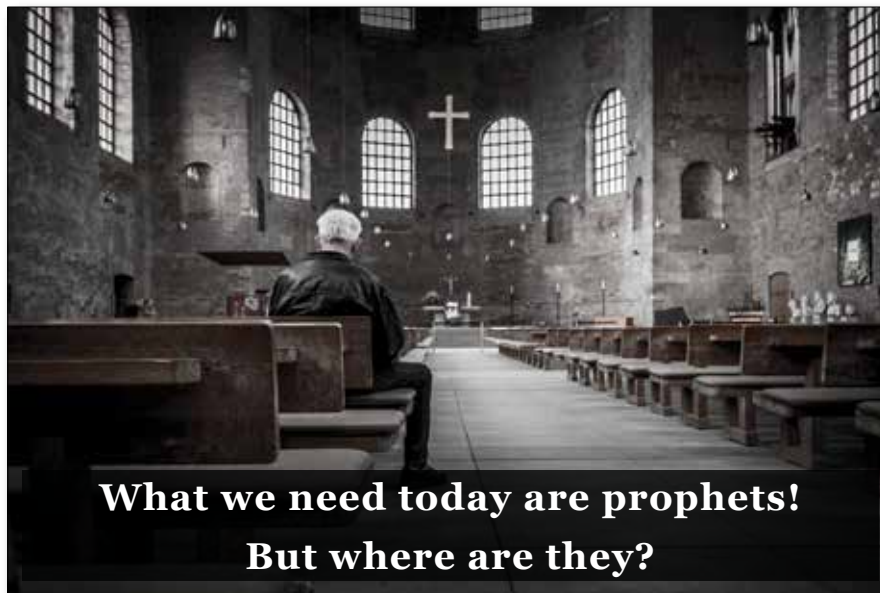
Several characteristics of these sons of the prophets concern me, and because of my great love for the church, I need to speak out. At the top of my list is the awful truth that these men are not message oriented. They place more emphasis on

marketing and performance than on the message. The message takes second place to the *presentation* of the message.

A second troubling characteristic of these sons of the prophets is their passion to be relevant. They go to great lengths to prove that the message fits in nicely with the culture around them. I think G. K. Chesterton was right when he said, “It is the paradox of history that each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most.” Yes, to understand the message is to understand how devastating the message is on the culture of any generation. The message contradicts our culture in every respect!

It seems that the sons of the prophets today have three favorite methods of disguising the authentic gospel message:

First, they make it *sensational*. But when we sensationalize the gospel, we turn it into something else. There was nothing sensational about the crucifixion! To turn it into entertainment is about as blasphemous as you can get.



**What we need today are prophets!
But where are they?**

Second, they make it *emotional*. I have seen some of these sons of the prophets stir up an audience emotionally and control them. We used to see this in the circus; now we are seeing it in the pulpit. Can anything be more blasphemous than that?

Third, they make it *entertaining*. For some reason, the sons of the prophets go to Hollywood to get their authority. If they can only package the message in an acceptable

manner that will entertain the most numbers of people, they count that to be successful.

All of this is contrary to wholesome spiritual development. The sons of the prophets have created a generation of pseudo-Christians that bear little or no resemblance to those early Christians who died for their faith. In all of this, the sons of the prophets are careful to leave out any offensive parts. They are very selective about the truth they present. What they present is true, but what they leave out is devastating. Conviction of sin has lost its place, and nobody is calling the church to repentance. There is nothing to repent for anymore. We are God’s happy, happy little children, dancing our way into heaven. What a pathetic description.

When will we come to the point of repentance, throw all the excuses out the window and fall on our faces before God and an open Bible? When will we repent of our sin and allow the Holy Spirit to do whatever the Holy Spirit wants to do? The time has come to hear once again the voice of God through his prophets.

agenda, had been slowly but steadily happening for years. The U. S. Supreme Court's *Obergefell* decision declaring a constitutional right to same-sex marriage was the Waterloo of religious conservatism. It was the moment that the Sexual Revolution triumphed decisively, and the culture war, as we have known it since the 1960s, came to an end. The public square has been lost.

Not only have we lost the public square, but the supposed high ground of our churches is no safe place either. Well, so what if those around us don't share our morality? We can still retain our faith and teaching within the walls of our churches, we may think, but that's placing unwarranted confidence in the health of our religious institutions. The changes that have overtaken the West in modern times have revolutionized everything, even the church, which no longer forms souls but caters to selves.

Don't be fooled by the large number of churches you see today. Unprecedented numbers of young adult Americans say they have no religious affiliation at all. If the demographic trends continue, our churches soon will be empty. Even more troubling, many of the churches that do stay open will have been hollowed out by a sneaking kind of secularism to the point where the "Christianity" taught there is devoid of power and life. It has already happened in most of them.

Nobody but the most deluded of the old-school Religious Right believes that this cultural revolution can be turned back. The wave cannot be stopped, only ridden. With few exceptions, conservative Christian political activists are as ineffective as White Russian exiles, drinking tea from samovars in their Paris drawing rooms, plotting the restoration of the monarchy. One wishes them well but knows deep down that they are not the future.

American Christians are going to have to come to terms with the brute fact that we live in a culture in which our beliefs make increasingly little sense. We speak a language that the world more and more either cannot hear or finds offensive to its ears.

Could it be that the best way to fight the flood is to . . . stop fighting the flood? That is, to quit piling up sandbags and to build an ark in which to shelter until the water recedes and we can put our feet on dry land again? Rather than wasting energy and resources fighting unwinnable political battles, we should instead work on building communities, institutions,

and networks of resistance that can outwit, outlast, and eventually overcome the occupation.

If believers don't come out of Babylon and be separate, sometimes metaphorically, sometimes literally, their faith will not survive for another generation or two in this culture of death. We must recognize that politics will not save us. What is needed is a new generation of Christians who, drawing on the authority of Scripture and gaining wisdom from the ancient church, know how to embrace "exile in place" and form a vibrant counterculture. Rather than panicking or remaining complacent, these new Christians recognize that the new order is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be lived with. It will be those who learn how to endure with faith and creativity, to deepen their own prayer lives, focusing on families and communities instead of on partisan politics, and building churches, schools, and other institutions within which the orthodox Christian faith can survive and prosper through the flood.

This is not just about our own survival. If we are going to be for the world as Christ meant for us to be, we are going to have to spend more time away from the world, in deep prayer and substantial spiritual training—just as Jesus retreated to the desert to pray before ministering to the people. We cannot give the world what we do not have. If the ancient Hebrews had been assimilated by the culture of Babylon, it would have ceased being a light to the world. So it is with the church.

The reality of our situation is indeed alarming, but we do not have the luxury of doom-and-gloom hysteria. There is a hidden blessing in this crisis, if we will open our eyes to it. Just as God used chastisement in the Old Testament to call his people back to himself, so he may be delivering a like judgment onto a church and a people grown cold from selfishness, hedonism, and materialism. The coming storm may be the means through which God delivers us. ✦



**“Quit piling up sandbags
and . . . build an ark”**

Like a Mighty Tortoise

By George Verwer

*Like a mighty tortoise, moves the church of God;
Brothers, we are treading where we've often trod;
We are much divided, many bodies we,
Having different doctrines, not much charity.*

*Sit here then ye people, join our useless throngs:
Blend with ours your voices, in a feeble song.
Blessings, ease and comfort, ask from Christ your King,
With our modern thinking, we won't do a thing.*

Finally, in this America, the Christian view that God desires justice but that it's wrong to expect utopia in this lifetime has given way to a more optimistic vision, in which the spread of democracy is part of the divine plan, the doctrine of American exceptionalism is a kind of Eleventh Commandment, and political leaders are expected to achieve an approximation of heaven here on earth. The results: an overreaching foreign policy under both Republicans and Democrats, a domestic government that tries to be all things to all people no matter which party is in power, and a polarized mood in which the two political coalitions oscillate between messianic delusions and apocalyptic fears depending on whether or not they control the levers of government.

This is the real story of religion in America. For all its piety and fervor, today's United States needs to be recognized for what it really is: not a Christian country, but a nation of heretics.

Today's heretics are all eminently American, the heirs of Jefferson and Joseph Smith, Emerson, and Eddy, the Victorian prosperity preachers and the religious intellectuals of the Progressive Era. Pushing Christianity to one extreme or another is what Americans have always done. We've been making idols of our country, our pocketbooks, and our sacred selves for hundreds of years.

What's changed today, though, is the weakness of the orthodox response. A sign of this weakness is the extent to which the very terms *orthodoxy* and *heresy* have become controversial in today's religious conversation—either dismissed as anachronisms, or shunned for their historical associations with bigotry and persecution.

But however blurry matters may get at the periphery, a Christian center still exists—one that dates to the earliest centuries of the faith and that's still shared by most of the divided churches of Christendom today. There still exists what Thomas Oden calls "the consensus of the early church."

Heresy has always been orthodoxy's grumpy but indispensable twin. The Christian faith needs heresy, or at least the possibility of heresy, lest it become something rote and brittle, a compendium of doctrinal technicalities with no purchase on the human soul. Indeed, like flying buttresses around a great cathedral, the pull-and-push of competing heresies may be precisely the thing that keeps the edifice of Christian faith upright. ✦

The High Calling—May–June 2019

The High Calling is a bimonthly publication of The Francis Asbury Society to serve as a link between FAS and its constituents, building loyalty and awareness so that the teaching and experience of Christian holiness may continue to be lived and proclaimed throughout the world.

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