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Part 1: The Collapse of the Church Culture.

By Maurice Goulet

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Having traveled the four corners of this country, I have witnessed firsthand, the imminent demise and the collapse of the unique culture in North America that has come to be called church. This church culture has become confused with biblical Christianity, both inside the church and out. A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith. Not only do we not need God to explain the universe, we don't need Jesus Christ to operate the church. It's written in the word that in the last days of this age Christ is outside of the Church knocking and looking for anyone who is willing to let him in. Many operate like giant machines, with church leaders serving as mechanics. The Lord doesn't have to show up to get done what's being done. People no longer want the powerless God of the modern church.

Some are asking, how Do We Do Church Better? All the effort to fix the church misses the point. You can build the perfect church and they still won't come. People are not looking for a great church. Most of the growth of mega churches represents people transferring from small fishing boats to cruise ships. The real question should be, how Do We Deconvert from Churchianity to Christianity?

I have observed that there is a spiritual awakening occurring in America. However, it is not informed by Christian theology, and it's not happening in the church. God is pulling end runs around the institutional North American church to get to people in the streets. God is still inviting us to join him on this quest, but it is the invitation to be part of a movement, not a religious club.

The Church Growth Movement that began in the 1970's had both some things that were right and some things that were wrong. Here's one of the wrong things: Unfortunately, it fell victim to an idol as old as the Tower of Babel, the belief that we are the architects of the work of Christ. As a result, we have the best churches men can build, but are still waiting for the church that only Jesus Christ can get credit for. I say this because I hear the wrong question asked frequently. How Do We Grow This

Part 1: The Collapse of the Church Culture.

Church? How Do We Get Them to Come to Us?

In their quest to be attractive to potential congregants, churches added staff, added programs, added buildings (including full health clubs), all to improve their market position. And it worked! A study released in 2002 found that one-half of churchgoers attended churches in the top 10 percent of church size.

Keep in mind all of this has been done with what results? Diminishing returns! In other words, overall church attendance continues to decline. We can keep on this track just to watch even more dismal results, or, we can change our focus to: How Do We Transform Our Community? How Do We Hit the Streets with the Gospel?

The Pharisees' evangelism strategy sounds eerily familiar. Their approach to sharing God was, "Come

and get it". Jesus' evangelism strategy directly challenged the Pharisees' approach. Instead of "Come and get it" it was "Go get'em".

Jesus' strategy was to go where people were already hanging out. This is why he went to weddings, parties, and religious feast day celebrations. Taking the gospel to the streets means we need church where people are already hanging out. We need a church in every mall, every Wal-Mart super center, every Barnes and Noble.

Bottom line: we've got to take the gospel to the streets. This is the only appropriate mission response to the collapse of the church culture. I am not talking about short forays into ports off of the cruise ship. I am speaking of an intentional 24/7 church presence in the community.

We need to go where people are already hanging out and be prepared to have conversations with them about the great love of our lives. This will require our shifting our efforts from growing churches into transforming communities. They're not coming to us. We've got to go to them.

The first Reformation was about freeing the church. The new Reformation is about freeing God's people from the church (the institution). The original Reformation decentralized the church. The new Reformation decentralizes ministry.

The historic Reformation distinguished Christians one from the other. The current Reformation distinguishes followers of Jesus Christ from religious people. In India and other places these people are called "Great Commission Christians" to distinguish them from mere pew sitters.

Today, ministry is being defined largely in church terms and lay people often being viewed as functionary resources to get church work done. The collapse of the church culture and the emergence of kingdom growth as a paradigm for renewal spell the end of an era of church members playing support roles. Many clergy just don't get this. They view the recruitment difficulties they are experiencing as a motivational issue rather than understanding the significant shift in how people are making decisions about how they will spend their lives.

I propose that we begin studying the culture of the people we are ministering to. North American

Part 1: The Collapse of the Church Culture.

culture is increasingly postmodern. The church in North America is thoroughly modern (i.e., out of touch with its surrounding culture). The result of the modern church's form of spirituality is a North American church that is largely on a head-trip. This is at the heart of why the lifestyles and values of people in the church mirror so closely the lifestyles and values of people in the larger culture. We have a rational faith. The test for orthodoxy typically focuses on doctrinal stances, not character and spiritual connectedness to Christ and others.

In keeping with modernism, Christians in North America practice their faith in a segmented approach, separated from other parts of life (business, family, and so forth). This is why we go to "church" to do our spiritual activity. This is why we don't do spiritual formation at home. That's what the church is for. After all, spiritual "education" should be left to the professionals who have the training and credentials for it.

The end result is parents unable to talk to their kids about God, church members who take their teenagers to church (believing that this activity inoculates them against the influence of a pagan culture) but don't talk about life implications of faith, couples who are embarrassed to pray together – the list goes on and on. True Christianity starts in the home and is built upon the following three truths.

First, God is no respecter of persons. Everyone in the church is an integral part of the Body and is no more or less important than any other. Second, every Christian home can become a center for fellowship. Neighborhood fellowships build strong communities and become centers of outreach for those who are seeking spiritual nourishment, but do not have a church of their own to attend. Third, every Church building with a local pastor should be a training center to support the home fellowships. This approach will give the local pastor the time to work with those who have the ability to minister to small groups and at the same time build unity within the church.

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A person who claims to be a follower of Jesus Christ claims to have a relationship with him. This means they know him, not just about him (this was Paul's claim in Philippians 3:10). Yet we have

Part 1: The Collapse of the Church Culture.

turned our churches into groups of people who are studying God as though they were taking a course at school or attending a business seminar. We aim at the head. We don't deal in relationships. And we wonder why there is no passion for the Lord and his mission? It's because, in our effort to disciple people, we've been barking up the wrong tree.

We have made following Jesus all about being a good church member. We are training people to be good club members, all the while wondering why our influence in the world is waning. The truth is, the North American church culture extracts salt from the world and diminishes the amount of light available to those in darkness who need to find their way.

In the modern world, how would we typically approach the spiritual learning objectives we've just identified? We'd write a curriculum, produce a conference, convene a class, create a study course, recruit a teacher or other expert, sign people up, teach the material to the students, and pass out completion certificates. Then we would wonder what would happen or change as a result of the experience. The truth is that we have very little evidence that academic or conferential learning changes behavior. I submit that there has never been more teaching or Christian education in the history of the world than there is in the US today. And yet, one survey indicates that only 9% of people who say they are 'born again' have a Biblical worldview. The question we should be asking today is how Do We Develop Followers of Jesus Christ?

The academic model for the last several hundred years involved an expert (teacher) who had information and disseminated it to less-informed people (students). This was the basic plot that developed into millions of episodes of death-by-lecture.

Students can now obtain more information over the Internet overnight than a teacher can deliver in lecture form in a month's time. The issue now is learning, how to make sense out of the information that is available. The agenda is more and more being set by the learner. Another way to say this is that we have grown up with a Greek approach to education in the modern world. We are now returning to a Hebraic approach that is much closer to what we see Jesus using. One aspect of this is that the learner/disciple determines the curriculum.

In the modern world, it is believed that spiritual formation is accomplished by taking a student through a prescribed group of texts that addressed topics in a curricular approach. This is so deeply ingrained in us that we approach almost any learning experience in the church this way. In the world that is dawning, the curriculum approach to growing people is increasingly viewed as a supplemental strategy to the primary approach: learning agendas driven by life issues and informed by life experiences. Jesus facilitated spiritual formation in his disciples by introducing them to life situations and then

helping them debrief their experiences. He taught them to pray. He did not lead them in a study course on prayer. He took them on mission trips; he didn't read books to them on the subject of missions.

The consistent challenge I run into when discussing small groups is the prevalent notion that small groups should function primarily in a curriculum mode (a bible study, text-driven experience). This is why groups can move from one curriculum piece to another and never experience any real growth. In pre-modern and postmodern cultures the home was and is the center for spiritual formation. Consider

Part 1: The Collapse of the Church Culture.

this quote from Marvin Wilson: "Foundational to all theory on the biblical concept of family is the Jewish teaching that the home is more important than the synagogue. In Jewish tradition, the center of religious life has always been the home" (Marvin R. Wilson, "Our Father Abraham", p. 214, 216.)

I am amazed at how our best church families have no clue as to how to have conversations at home about spiritual subjects. Churches are so busy getting people involved at the church that they've neglected this fundamental agenda of spiritual formation. The typical church family leaves spiritual stuff to what happens at the church, thereby delegating spiritual formation to the institution. And the institution encourages it!

What if youth ministers spent as much time with the parents as they did with their children? This would be a shift for most church expectations of staff. We typically hire children's and youth ministers to run programs for children and young people. In fact, this approach by the church may do more to decimate the home as a spiritual center than anything coming into the home on television or the Internet.

As a youth, I grew up in the surfing culture. As a surfer, I never planned a single wave, but I did prepare to ride the waves when they came. God is making waves all around the North American church. Some churches are going to get to ride them. These are the churches that are prepared to get in on what God is up to."

Typical approaches to the future involve prediction and planning. The better and biblical approach to the future involves prayer and preparation. The Apostles sitting in the Temple on the day of Pentecost were not engaged in a strategic planning retreat to plan the birth of the church and the early stages of the Christian movement. Not in their wildest dreams would they have scripted three thousand converts on Day One nor would they have predicted the leap of the Spirit to the Samaritans or to the Gentiles? Apparently not, based on their responses to both developments. Would they have recruited the rising star of Judaism to become the ultimate leader of the movement? Hardly. God does the planning; we do the preparing. He does not say, "I am waiting for you to develop plans I can bless."

Spiritual preparation has the goal of getting God's people in partnership with him in his redemptive mission in the world. The five elements of a spiritually prepared architecture are vision, values, results, strengths, and learning. The question we need to begin asking is, how do we cultivate vision? Vision is discovered, not invented. Jesus Christ said, "I will build my Church". He is the one with the vision for our lives and the church. It is our job to discover what he has in mind, not to invent something he can get excited about.

I learned the following lesson early in life and it has eased my heart tremendously. God is always at work in every situation before I show up. As the reality of this fact sunk in, I realized that my job was not to analyze the situation really well and then to figure out a way to make something happen but rather to see what God is already doing and ask if I had a part to play.

We need to listen to people in our church, we need to look at our town or neighborhood and we need

to talk with our leaders. But as we do that we must be focused on the question: What is God already doing here? Jesus models this kind of approach in John 5:19 when He says, "I do nothing on my own

Part 1: The Collapse of the Church Culture.

initiative. I only do what I see the Father doing. Further, the role of a leader is to help his people ask the question: What do we see God doing here? This is the starting point for the visioning process.

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