

Death of The Church

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Chapter 2

Last One Out, Turn Off the Lights

Today the tendency to withdraw into the status quo is stronger than ever, because change today bears two characteristics that make it more unsettling than social change of the recent past.

Today's social change occurs on a global scale. It is inescapable.

Second, the rate of social change moves at supersonic speed compared to the rate of change in the past.

How do we respond to the pressures of change?

One option is denial.

The first step is confession.

Second, we must learn how to do it differently.

Chapter 6

Changing Reality I: A Requiem for Modernity

In premodern society, reality is singular and all-encompassing. There is only one central belief system.

The Old Testament reflects a premodern society. In that premodern society, there could be no conflicting belief system. It was Yahweh or Baal, period. Only one faith was allowed in the land.

In premodern society, there exists a direct and reciprocal relationship between religion and political power structures. The state religion legitimizes the state.

Reformation, Inquisition and Counter-Reformation, Enlightenment, political and social revolution, industrial revolution, separation of church and state, human rights. All of these developed as people questioned the singular, Western, premodern view of reality that was controlled by the prevailing religious tradition.

Modernity and Religious Truth

As a general rule, the premodern person would not have questioned the "truthfulness" of the Bible.

But with the advent of modernism, the Bible for the first time had to defend its truthfulness under the scrutiny of reason.

The Breakdown of Modernity

Three Factors contribute to its demise

- Failure of epistemology to develop an unassailable (bombproof) certainty.
- Failure to develop a “grand narrative,” the “super story” that gives meaning to all other stories.
- The emergence of the global village, which brought ideas from other places and belief systems together at the time modern epistemology began to fail.

Accompanying the quest for a foundation for the certainty of knowledge was the quest for “the story,” the “grand narrative” that would tie all of the social and political structures of humanity together without the assistance of a particular religious tradition.

The quest for absolute certainty was replaced by a tendency toward radical relativism. If knowledge and truth cannot be absolutely affirmed, then no truth is absolutely true.

Chapter 7

Changing Reality II: A Reality for Every Occasion

We decide which is right. And which is an illusion? Welcome to the postmodern world!

Postmodern objectivists, unlike modernists, recognize that much of life is not black and white. A theory of knowledge must be able to account for this.

In the postmodern world, we are all required to make choices about our realities. You may select a life of experimentation, eternal shopping in the bazaar of culture and subculture. Or you may forego the giddy diversity of contemporary lifestyle swapping and fall into step with some ancient heritage: be an Orthodox Jew or a fundamental Muslim or a bible-toting Christian or a traditional native American. The range of such choices is enormous, but the choice is still a choice and requires an entirely different social consciousness from that of Jews, Muslims, Christians and native Americans who knew no alternative... We have to make choices from the range of different stories-stories about what the universe is like, about who the good guys and the bad guys are, about who we are- and also we have to make choices about how to make choices.

Chapter 9

Changing Structures II: When the Grand Story Fails

What kind of leadership do we have?

Leadership in America in general could be described as either well-meaning but directionless managers or power-hungry consumers driven by selfish ambition.

Chapter 10

Changing Players I: E Pluribus Pluribus

Persons between thirteen and thirty-three are significantly below the national average among every denominational group but the Southern Baptists.

- Across all denominations, there is a failure to reach the youngest generation.
- Methodist and Presbyterians are also failing to reach boomers.
- In contrast, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Evangelical Lutherans are overwhelmingly slanted toward the elderly population.

Chapter 11

Changing Players II: The Passing Actors-Builders and Silents

Builders – The Ozzy and Harriet Generation Birth Years 1901-1924

Ozzy and Harriet immortalize the vision of the builders. As powerful midlifers, the builders created the image of father and mother (in that order!) and smiling, accommodating children. A generation of groups, not individuals, the builders are known for their insistence on conformity. They expected the same camaraderie they felt as youth and as fighting young adults at war to continue as they built their families. Builder families epitomized the best of the now failing grand American story-the way it was supposed to be.

During their powerful midlife years, the builders built everything big that we now see crumbling as we pass out of the twentieth century. They built the big businesses, the big unions, and the big government. Moreover, they build the big cold war-the forty-year standoff between the two big empires-that fueled much of their other big accomplishments (that is, businesses, unions, and government).

They built one other “big” institution. Remember that during outer-directed eras, religious traditions that focus on cooperative “doing faith” emphases prosper. Consistent with this thesis, the builders were responsible for building up the big denominations and their big agencies through the fifties and early sixties. Builder pastors built big, “tall-steeple,” mainline

churches. They managed the largest expansion of mainline denominational churches in the twentieth century. “Build it and build it BIG” was the motto of this generation that provided the collective infantry of the last BIG war.

With the youngest builder seventy-six years of age by the year 2000, their future is one of retirement.

“Stable” is the word that best depicts the builder and his or her faith.

The Silent Generation – Birth Years 1925-1942

Throughout their adult lives, they have pursued safe lifestyles, being careful to always do the right thing as defined by the builders.

My generation has always lacked creative ideas. We have worked long and hard, and we can't be faulted for lack of loyalty. But the world is changing, and for survival, corporations are looking past us to the creative energy so typical of boomers. And we resent it. We feel caught between the builders who built and the boomers who insist on rebuilding it. I notice among many within my generation anger and a growing stubbornness. We are becoming blockers. Out of fear that the systems we have faithfully served will pass us by, we have begun digging in our heels and using our skill as processors, stopping forward progress. Ironically, we rode the system the longest and received the most from it. Now we are afraid the ride is over, and we don't know what to do. So we block. Change is the enemy.

The silents in their elder years will find themselves watching the activity from the sidelines, as if the world simply forgot they were here.

Following the lead of the builders, the silents are also characterized overall as stable.

The builders had created a concrete world, and the silents had been raised to faithfully serve in that world. Then, halfway through their careers, that world changed. At the end of their careers, many silents feel lost and disoriented. The world they began with is not the world they are ending with. They have been caught in the squeeze. An anger and a growing stubbornness is resulting in progress-blocking behaviors.

Chapter 12

Changing Players III: The Imminent Actors-Boomers, Survivors, Millennials

The Boomers Birth Years: 1943 to 1960

Boomers are idealists in the generational cycle. As children, they were indulged. Boomers were able to get away with much more than would have been possible for the two earlier generations.

Strauss and Howe make the point that idealist in their midlife years come out of their period of narcissistic self-indulgence as raving moralists.

For example, consider the abortion debate. If you are a “pro-choice” person, it is a moral issue of a woman’s right (rights are always moral issues for idealists) to choose what happens with and to her body. However, if you are a “pro-lifer,” it is a moral issue of murdering a living being. Both positions are completely polarized around their “absolute truth” stance. Generally, no one in the public debate is allowed to construct a moderate position without becoming the target of the righteous zeal of both parties.

The cover of the November 1994 issue of *Newsweek* announced, “In Search of the Sacred: America’s Quest for Spiritual Meaning.”

Great! Are the boomers finally going to come to their senses and return to the church? Don’t hold your breath.

We like boutique faith, not superstores.

Boomers have a rare role to play: namely, we can set a trajectory that will influence generations yet to come. This can be positive or it can be negative. It depends upon what we as boomers collectively envision. This is a story yet untold.

The Survivors Birth Years 1961-1981

Referred to as “Generation X”

If one were to judge today’s young adults by the articles, books, and movies about them, one would likely label them the “dis...” generation – disenchanted, dissatisfied, disenfranchised, disgruntled, disillusioned, discomfited, and disconnected.

Because they suffered as children from neglect, they will become the more conservative and protective parents of the young millennial generation.

A review of their religious preferences reveals two traits, one that they share with boomers and one that makes them distinct from boomers. What they share is diversity. But unlike the boomers, survivors are more likely to prefer traditions that are more theologically conservative. So while 8% of boomers have a nondenominational preference over 10% of survivors do. They will prefer more conservative traditions such as the Adventist, Mormon, or Pentecostal.

If boomers are the initial visionaries of the Information Age, survivors are the technical geniuses who will wire the vision and make it work.

The Millennials Birth Years 1982 – 2003

Called millennials by Stauss and Howe.

Chapter 13 **Changing Faith I: The Insiders**

The Loyalist Profile

Loyalist are generally white (90%) and on the older side, with an average age of forty-seven. They are likely to be married and relatively educated. While both boomers and survivors are underrepresented, both silent and builders are over represented.

Loyalist indicate a growing dissatisfaction with their current faith environment – both their spirituality and the church itself.

For every two loyalist who have increased their activity, three have decreased.

Whereas the slipping are *moving away* from the church, the stable are more inclined to be *looking for* a good church as well as spiritual teachings.

The Switcher

Loyalty is less important than the desire for something that meets their needs.

It is the nondenominational preference wherein the significant net growth has occurred.

While the switchers overall are looking for a good church and spiritual teaching, the slipping switcher is looking for a slightly different focus. Spiritual teaching is not their desire, nor is a good church. They are looking for life directions.

Newcomers are twice as likely to be survivors. They are also heavily oriented toward boomers. They are less likely to be either silents or builders.

Newcomers are looking for life direction and spiritual teaching.

The real winner again is the nondenominational preference.

This scenario will be repeated time and again. Persons having had a life-changing encounter with God subsequently encounter the church. This second encounter may be disastrous. Because they have no long-standing loyalty to the church, an encounter with the dark side of the church may estrange them all over again.

Chapter 16

The Decision

- We must accept that the traditional place of the institutional church in American society is dying, and with it the institutional church itself.
- We must be willing to let our traditional forms and structures that are the foundation of the institutional church die.

Chapter 17

What must die?

1. The Expectation of a Favored Position in the Mainstream of Culture
Accept the inevitable that, unlike in the past, in the twenty-first century the church will no longer enjoy the place of significance in the eyes of the culture.
2. The Model of Theological Education That Primarily Emphasized Theological Method
In the future, ministerial training must teach sociological method as well as theological method.
The unspoken assumption has been that pastors know the people and their needs. This is true no longer. The diversity is simply too great.

3. The Denominational Expectation That the Local Serves the Regional, Which Serves the National, Which Serves the International
In the emerging postmodern era of religious pluralism, mission is next door and across the street. The only future for denominational structures is in adjusting their priorities to serve the local congregation.
4. The Obsession with Bombproof Certainty of Truth
A rigid commitment to an unassailable worldview, such as is typically the case in more conservative circles, increasingly runs the risk of shattering all faith-needlessly. We believe that the future lies in abandoning modernist foundationalism and adopting an epistemological position based on the principle of unsurpassability- and in learning to live with relative confidence and a certain level of faithful agnosticism.
5. The Radical Relativism That Has Allowed the Essence of the Gospel to Be Reduced to a Mere Religion Indistinguishable from All Other Religious Ideas
This means reestablishing the role and authority of the Bible over matters of faith.
6. Authority Based upon Position Alone
In a postmodern world, authority is granted to those whose exemplary life message, and work carry a high level of moral authority. It will not be enough, and indeed will most likely be counterproductive to claim authority based upon position. Leadership of the church will increasingly be subject to the same evaluation as any other enterprise. Pastor of local congregations will be scrutinized for their performance.
7. The Attitude That Says the Church Is for Us
8. The Entrenched Gatekeepers
The first are the formal gatekeepers, who function in most churches as an administrative board guiding the direction and setting policy. The second king of gatekeeper is more insidious and ultimately more powerful. They are the informal gatekeepers who decide what will really happen.
We have had enough of the denominational gatekeepers who strategically place themselves in positions of power to further their own agendas regardless of what would be best for their denomination. Denominational leaders must demonstrate the courage and clarity of vision to neutralize these negative efforts.
9. The Perception That the Culture Is the Enemy
Such a viewpoint inevitably sees real people as the enemy.
10. The Gospel As Religion

We believe that our rendition of the story, with all of the traditional and cultural trappings we have added, is the Gospel. When this happens, we have turned the Gospel into our own religion.

Chapter 18

The Road to Life

First, to make sense to modern, unchurched people, we need to hear what they are asking.

The second clue is: We must speak the Gospel-the unsurpassable story-in language that answers their questions, not ours.

The primary unit of mission as we move into the twenty-first century must be, indeed will be, the local congregation.

The individual members of the local congregation are the primary agents of mission.

The church of the twenty-first century must shift its focus from an institutional orientation to a community orientation.

The most likely generation to provide leadership in this revisioning period is the idealists-that is, the boomers.

Memo to the Builders:

We are grateful for your faithfulness, but the structures you build and maintained so faithfully are choking us to death. We would ask that you let go. It is time to accept their death. But death, whatever form it takes, does not have to be a repudiation of your efforts. Death accepted as the forerunner to resurrection is worthy of humble celebration. Just as when a saintly loved one departs there is grief with joy, so also you must consider the end of much of what you have built as a cause for grief with joy. Such a response will be your final act of faith. However, if you cannot do this, if you cannot let what you have built die where necessary, you have simply condemned it to death anyway without the joy that comes from the hope of resurrection. This is the face of the defining moment for you as a generation.

Memo to the Silents:

We would plead that you not allow us boomers to push you out of the way in our moralistic zeal. The best hope we have that boomers will provide the kind of gift to the church that is most needed is if we are kept in check. We must mature a few more years. But this is a tall task for the silents, for we outnumber you significantly. The challenge you face is exacerbated by

our own fears. As indicated earlier, you have enjoyed a long ride on the coattails of the postwar economic boom engineered by the builders. As that world passes away, you will find yourselves watching the activity from the sidelines, as if the world simply forgot you were there. If your pain and anger continue to manifest themselves in blocking behaviors, you will only intensify the pressure to push you aside. The challenge will be to move through your anger and accept that it has been a good ride but the ride is over-let emerge what must. If you silents can do this, then you will be in a position to mitigate some of the boomer zeal and perhaps even mentor us in the ways of graciousness that we will need in our elder years.

In reality, while the defining moment for the builders is in letting it go, for you it will be in making sure the letting go happens in the most gracious and humane way. In some ways, the pain of this death will be greater than the pain the builds will experience. For you will have to participate in the killing.

Memo to the Boomers:

To the boomers, we say, "Let's keep our heads, folks." As a generation, we have always felt that we had a key role to play in the great scheme of things. Frankly, most of that may be an overly inflated sense of self-import. But we do have an important role at a very important point in the history of the church. It is not just the normal role all idealist play in the generational cycle. It is the role of revisioning the church for a new age. But we are not ready yet. We must be about the business of learning, of listening and of building relationships. We must fight against our natural inclination toward self-righteousness and look for ways to positively contribute to the communities where we are. And especially, we must love the survivors and stop the criticism. The defining moment for boomers will require coolheadedness and careful compassion. It will require us to step out of our fragmented and hostile polarizations and find in the Gospel a common vision. The difficulty of this for us is the face of our death.

Memo to the Survivors

Avoid burning yourselves out while learning to make it work. Be warned against the tendency to build your young lives around anti-boomerism. In the end, it will be you that gets hurt, not the boomers. Most of all, recognize that you too have an appointed role to play in the very near future of the church. This will be the defining moment for you. Initially it will include making sure we boomers don't do something exceedingly crazy. Later you will be called upon to build the new superstructures of the revisioning effort that must occur. While it is likely that your future selfless service will go relatively unrecognized, please know that it is essential and that the church needs you to provide it.