

# **"And If Not . . ."**

## **A Christian Manifesto For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

### **Introduction**

In the first lesson of this 12 part series (*"How Should We Then Live?: The Church In A Post-Christian Age"*) we examined the rise of our post-Christian culture and the need for the Church to respond as a counter-cultural witness. Based upon what we saw in that lesson I am convinced that the Church cannot expect to fight and win a "war of attrition" against our post-Christian culture in such areas as politics, economics, philosophy and the arts. In the words of Paul Weyrich (one of the architects of the culture war and the 'religious right'), *"That doesn't mean the war is not going to continue and that it isn't going to be fought on other fronts. But in terms of society in general, we have lost."* Those who claim that we can win the cultural war are more provocateurs of other agendas than they are agents of genuine spiritual change (which is what we eventually want to see take place).

One of the problems with waging a war of worldviews against our culture is that not only has our culture become post-Christian, but many of our Churches and denominations have become post-Christian as well. The "barbarians" are no longer outside the gates of our "castle churches." As we will see, they are in the pews and on the boards, and, sometimes, they are even in the pulpit.

Our loss of the culture war in the public arena has left many Christians disillusioned, angry and bitter. Then, to see a similar moral and spiritual collapse occur within the Church has only intensified our disillusionment and our anger. But here's the rub. You and I cannot build a new work or movement of God on a foundation of disillusionment, anger or bitterness. God doesn't want a disillusioned and angry people. That's a formula ripe for the Enemy and his spiritual and human provocateurs to exploit. God wants us to move from disillusionment and anger to brokenness and humility, because in the soil of broken and humble hearts He can plant the seed of a new vision. When we read or hear about the moral and spiritual collapse of our culture, or about the failings of our traditional church structures, our hearts should be broken and we should grieve like those who are reading the obituary of an old and dear friend.

### **Abandon Ship: How Spiritual Hodge Podge and Minimalist Christianity are Sinking The Church**

The overall percentage of Americans who identify themselves as "Protestant" (as opposed to "Catholic," Jewish, Moslem or something else) has fallen from 61% in 1980 to 55% in 1999. Overall church attendance in America has fallen to its lowest levels since WW2 with only 4 out of 10 American adults attending church on any given Sunday.

Surveys show that some 10 million born again believers have simply dropped out of the organized church. I believe that Christians are leaving the traditional institutional church for the same basic reasons they are leaving politics. They feel betrayed and let down. They don't see the church functioning and ministering like they envisioned that it should. They can see the difference between life in the contemporary church and life as it is portrayed in the church of the N.T., and they can't understand why we have settled for a shadow of that reality. Their expectations have been disappointed and their needs are not being met.

But the problem does not stop there. The church today appears plagued by an addiction to nominal and minimalist Christianity that demands little and affects even less. It is a faith that seeks the lowest common denominator for commitment by asking, *'What is the least I must believe to be in; what is the least I must do to be included.'* It is a faith devoid of any clear theology, where opinion substitutes for doctrine and good intentions pass for divine inspiration.

In the absence of either discipline or outward pressure to the contrary (i.e., persecution, national or personal disaster, etc.) the tendency of Christianity is to drift toward nominalism and minimalism. What is the least that I must do? In the generations since WW2 the Church in America (and in the Western nations generally) sensed no immediate outward threat to its existence or freedom; nothing out of the

ordinary. We even felt somewhat encouraged by the conservative political landslide of the 1980s. We sensed the possibility of cultural "victory" and the adoption of a conservative (if not specifically Christian) social agenda that mirrored our conservative moral commitments. But suddenly, more suddenly than anyone expected, it vanished like winter hoar-frost caught by the rays of the sun. We had failed to heed the warnings offered by Francis Schaeffer that the conservative landslide was not so much a vote for Christian moral values as it was a vote for better economic numbers. When the economic numbers turned sour the "conservative" agenda evaporated to be replaced with paganism in the form of a virulent political correctness.

This nominalist or minimalist approach to faith has produced disappointing results in the pews. In recent research done by George Barna and Mark Hatch they discovered that among "born-again adults":

68% believe the Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves (it doesn't!).

25% believe that Jesus committed sins while on earth (He didn't!).

30% believe Jesus was not physically resurrected (He was, or our faith is in vain!).

30% believe all religions teach the same basic truths (no, they don't).

Based on these research results it should come as no surprise that Hatch and Barna conclude that *"the church is rotting from the inside out, crippled by a-biblical theology."*

In a separate study of "born again" Christians sociologist Wade Clark Roof (see his book, *Spiritual Marketplace*) confirms that many people who describe themselves as "born again Christians" actually hold beliefs that are in conflict with historic, biblical Christianity. According to Roof, roughly 25% of his respondents believed in the possibility of communicating with the dead; some 30% believed in reincarnation and astrology; 50% said they believed in psychic powers, and mirroring Barna & Hatch's research, some 50% believed that the various religions of the world are "equally good and true."

In a culture people (whether Christians or not) live out what they think, and in the church individuals live out what they profess to believe. Culture, whether in the Church or in the outside world, is an expression of the heart and the values of a people. If we want to change the outward product then we must labor to change the inner producer. The crippling effect of such a-biblical (or un-biblical) theology can be readily seen in the lives of those born-again people who attend these churches. If God helps those who help themselves, then hard work on our own behalf will come before prayer for God's intervention. If Jesus committed sins while on earth, how could he die for my sins or provide forgiveness for my sins or cleansing from my guilt? And if God didn't have the power to raise Jesus from the dead, how could He have the power necessary to answer my prayers or heal the brokenness of my life? And if all religions teach the same basic truths, where is the absolute truth I need to guide me through the maze of moral and spiritual decisions I must make in my life? And if there is no absolute truth, why should I be absolutely committed to Christianity and biblical values if the same basic truths can be found (with less requirements) in other religions. According to Dr. Barna's research these theologically bewildered born again adults are more likely (27%) to experience a divorce than are non-born again adults (24%). Only 8% of them will tithe (give 10% or more of their income) to their church, and 16% will give no money at all to their church during the year. Born again adults spend 7 times as much time on entertainment as they do on spiritual activities. And in a nationwide survey of born again adults, ***none of those interviewed*** said that the single, most important goal in their life is to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ.

It appears that "being born again" just doesn't mean what it used to mean. Not only has the current generation of believers abandoned the historic Creeds and Confessions and Doctrinal Statements which have historically set the boundaries of orthodox belief, contemporary Christianity has become a theological "bean bag chair" that each person adjusts and reshapes until they are "comfortable" and to fit whatever beliefs they choose to hold, regardless of how un-biblical they may be.

The purpose of good theology is not to create a theological box or straight jacket from which there is not escape or variation, but to create a solid and lasting foundation upon which to build a house glorifying to God, Christ Jesus being the Chief Cornerstone. And to have a practical standard by which to judge and discern truth from error.

In 1904 during the Welsh Revival Evan Roberts said, "Bend the Church, save the world." His meaning was plain and simple. If the Church is bent to the will and purposes of God the result will be that God will use such a renewed and obedient Church to redeem the world. We need to renew his cry by declaring, "Renew the Church, transform the world." The Church renewed in both its spirit and its structure is the world's only hope to avoid the judgment of God in our generation and its only hope for cultural transformation.

### **"And If Not . . ."**

I believe we are engaged in one of the greatest spiritual conflicts of this present age. Whether or not this spiritual battle is preparing us for the End of The Age, only God knows. But great spiritual conflicts tend to characterize times of great transition. If God is indeed calling out and raising up His end-time church then we should not be surprised at the intensity of the conflict. And in the midst of this battle we should seek to remember and to learn from great battles of the past.

In early 1940 the British and their allies sent a force of some 350,000 men into the low countries of Europe to stem the tide of German advance into France, Belgium and Holland. Caught in a brilliant pincer movement by the invading German forces the beleaguered British Expeditionary Force was pushed back to the beaches of the small Belgian town of Dunkirk. To everyone's surprise the Germans halted their advance to regroup. As England and the world waited for what appeared to be the sure and certain annihilation of 350,000 men a three word message was transmitted from the besieged army at Dunkirk. It read simply, "*And if not.*" The British people understood the biblical import of the cryptic message. It was a reference to the Old Testament book of Daniel, where Daniel and his friends chose death rather than worship an image of the pagan king, "*If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. **But if not**, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up*" (Daniel 3:17-18). The British Expeditionary Army, surrounded, cutoff and on the brink of destruction was declaring to Britain and to the world that even in apparent defeat they were, in fact, victorious. The message, more eloquent than a sermon delivered in St. Paul's Cathedral, galvanized the British people. In a matter of hours thousands of boats of every description headed across the dangerous waters of the English Channel and, at the risk of their own lives from enemy fire, began the evacuation of the heroic but beleaguered army in what historians now refer to as "the miracle of Dunkirk."

The situation of the present-day Church in America and the West is not unlike that of the British Army at Dunkirk. The evangelical Church has been surrounded by a post-Christian culture bent on ridding itself of this religious nuisance. It rejects absolute truth and offers in its place an equally absolute and politically correct ideology of tolerance toward all views, except Christian ones. Christian values (such as abstinence and fidelity) are rejected and Christian speech (expressed through public prayer, art, political action, etc.) is censored or deemed "unconstitutional." And Christian "faith-based initiatives" are welcomed only if they come wrapped in generic, non-religious packaging. You can offer a cup of cool water, so long as you don't offer it in the name of Jesus (it is unclear who will be offended, the thirsty man or the government watchdog).

Many Christians today are praying and looking for revival, renewal and awakening as the solution to church renewal and cultural transformation as happened in England in the 1700s as a result of the Evangelical Awakening.

Perhaps God will send an awakening that will renew the church and transform our post-Christian culture.  
**And if not . . . ?**

Perhaps God will send an awakening that restores absolute truth to a confused church and to a truth-starved culture? ***And if not . . . ?***

Perhaps God will send an awakening that will reverse the theological rot that eats away at the heart of the institutional, organized church. ***And if not . . . ?***

Perhaps God will send an awakening that transforms our culture, that puts an end to abortion, homosexuality, racism, violence, materialism, drugs, alcoholism, internet pornography, B-grade movies, radical environmentalism, new age globalism, UFO delusions, human cloning and a host of other ills, and unravels the mountain of debt that threatens to collapse western economies. Perhaps. ***And if not . . . ?***

### **What We Need: A New Christian Manifesto For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

As Christians now living in the context of a post-Christian culture that is at best tolerant of biblical values, and at worst is openly hostile towards them, it is time for us to recognize and embrace what we are: an underground Church and a counter-cultural witness to a formerly Christian culture, now in the fading twilight of its former greatness. What light remains is not the dawn of anew age, but the light thrown off by fading embers of what once burned brightly.

What is needed now is a new and strategic game plan to resist the encroaching paganism, to organize God's people into networks of home & cell churches, to encourage one another in the long-term task of counter-cultural witness and to insightfully critique our culture and its institutions, rather than to be critiqued and marginalized by them.

***We need to become God's confessing and underground church.*** As we become God's confessing underground Church, a counter-cultural witness to the collapsing culture around us, we may soon find it necessary to adopt the tactics and techniques of classic underground resistance movements. For this reason, it should come as no surprise that, in the Providence of God, the past 20 years has seen the worldwide emergence of the home and cell church movement.

***We need to re-assert our absolute dependence upon resurrection power.*** It was in this power that our Lord Jesus Christ lived and ministered, that was promised by Jesus to the Church, that was demonstrated in the daily life of the New Testament Church and that was the life-long prayer of the Apostle Paul. Much of the visible Church today has lost touch with the power of the Resurrection, caught up instead in fruitless debates regarding Pentecostalism vs. non-Pentecostalism. As a result, we're no longer a "resurrection power people," having come to rely instead upon methodologies, resources and strategies.

***We need to reaffirm our belief in the existence of absolute truth*** in all of its manifestations as revealed in Scripture and as taught in the historic Creeds & Confessions of the Church, and that such truth is not culturally limited, but is binding upon all men at all times and in all places and is the standard by which the laws of nations and the actions of men are to be judged.

***We need to recapture a biblical sense of authentic Christian community.*** We need to network our families in home and cell churches to encourage and protect each other's families and marriages. We need to affirm that it is more important that we gather in our homes in groups of 10-20 to fast and pray and worship and to share our lives with one another as a witness to unbelievers, than it is to gather 10,000 people together in an arena.

***We need to recognize that we are the objects of a full-court press.*** There is a spiritual battle underway in which Satan seeks to blind the minds of our generation with peace & prosperity while bankrupting them morally and spiritually. And where he cannot bankrupt them spiritually he seeks to delude them or dilute their testimony.

***We need to renew our biblical commitment to fight debt and economic slavery.*** We have been sold a "bill of goods" to believe that we could transform Vanity Fair into a Christian destination resort. But we

awoke one morning deeply in debt and wondering how we got here. We need to realize that the mark of the beast system is here and has been for some time. It is a system that seeks to control your thoughts and your actions. We need to reject Vanity Fair as our operative model for Christian living or ministry. We've accommodated ourselves to the world, and turned Vanity Fair into a Christian destination resort.

***We need to recapture our sense of being eschatological communities.*** These are communities of believers who live their lives in the shadow of our Lord's return. Churches today are increasingly fragmented. We are no longer "eschatological communities" of like-minded and committed believers, bound together by our commitment to the gospel and our belief in the Lord's soon return.

***We need to recognize that the promise of revival, renewal and awakening is the only hope for the renewal of the Church and the transformation of our culture.*** For this reason we commit ourselves to be a people of fervent intercession and regular fasting, imploring God that the River of the Water of Life of Ezekiel 47 might flow in new depth and fresh power in our generation.

***And if not?***

To receive our feature articles via e-mail type SUBSCRIBE in the subject line of a blank e-mail and send it to [administrator@parousianetwork.com](mailto:administrator@parousianetwork.com)

<http://www.parousianetwork.com/>