

Church After Christendom

By Stuart Murray¹

Synopsis and Comments by William H. Gross – Colorado Springs CO 2006

The Church as we know it isn't going away like yesterday's news. And the postmodern world isn't overtaking us as quickly as some might fear. But the interaction between the existing Church and the changing world is never going to be what it was – it never has been. The Church must change its tune for a world that needs our lyric but has stopped listening to our music. This doesn't mean we need to “accommodate” the world, in the sense of adopting its thinking and its ways; but we do need to “adapt” our message in a way that takes them into account. We need to recognize the times (Matt 16:3), tailoring our language, form, and outreach to match what we see. But what are the signs, and how should we adapt to them? Murray proposes that there was a pre-Christendom world prior to the 4th century, an Age of Christendom that extended to the 18th century, and then a gradual metamorphosis into a post-Christendom world. What characterized Christendom was its cultural predominance – its universal expression in society and government, and the general membership of those who lived in Western culture.

This book identifies the cultural changes that have been taking place over several decades, ostensibly in England, but in America as well. It also examines the current “condition” of the Church. Murray raises a number of questions, and he brings to bear a number of relevant facts. He then presents a series of alternative approaches for our serious discussion and review. It's still a fresh millennium. We need to set some appropriate goals and develop a reasonable plan of action for this generation in which God has called us to arise. We need to do it corporately. We need to do it quickly, humbly, shrewdly, and biblically. We need to stop using worldly ways and return to our spiritual foundations. We need to stop making our churches ends in themselves. We need to rebuild them as a means of equipping the saints for works of ministry (Eph 4:12). These are Murray's primary points. While I disagree with some of his premises and a number of the solutions in this book, I wholeheartedly agree with the issues he raises. I'm also grateful for all the information he provides. So be cautious in what you take away from all this.

Part I - Shape

Believing, Belonging, and Behaving

Originally, the church asked seekers to believe before they could belong; once they belonged, they were expected to behave according to what they believed. With the rise of national churches, first in the Roman Empire and then in each political nation during the Reformation, belief was imposed on people as the price of citizenship. They belonged before they believed. It was an Age of Christendom. Despite the obvious waning of that age, we continue with “process” evangelism in which an invitation to attend is offered (belonging), an informational proclamation is presented from our pulpits each week (believing), and the attendees are asked at some point to nominally commit to that local church body (behaving). Membership, however, has become optional. Because it is nearly impossible to determine which attendees have committed to the beliefs of the church, behavior is often non-conforming and undisciplined.

¹ Murray, Stuart, *Church After Christendom* (Paternoster Press, Milton Keynes Eng., 2004) from the Christendom series.

During the Revivalist period beginning in the late 19th century, the church went through a period of “crisis” conversions. **Outrageous emotional appeals were made to get people to make a “decision for Christ” using mass evangelistic crusades, offering little information, and providing even less familiarity with Christianity itself.** It was assumed that the audience understood Christian beliefs and the nature of the church. **Such emotional belongings tended to be short-lived and repetitive.**² Today it can no longer be assumed that the world is familiar with the Church and its teachings. The modern world is biblically illiterate, and secularly biased against church institutions. Many people are leaving the church, often faster than new converts are coming in. We see “believing without belonging” and “belonging before believing” as dominant trends.

Some people do not belong to a church but identify themselves as Christians and hold beliefs that are more or less consistent with those who do belong (or vice versa). Others participate in church before they identify themselves as Christians or decide what they believe... Churches that have historically applied a ‘believing before belonging’ approach report increasing numbers wanting to ‘belong’ before believing... A key discovery of the Decade of Evangelism in the 1990’s was that many people journey to faith gradually rather than suddenly.”³ P. 10-11.

In postmodernity, people are suspicious of institutions and more interested in whether beliefs work in practice than whether they are theoretically true. In post-Christendom, because knowledge of Christianity is limited or biased, people need longer to understand and respond to the gospel. Exploratory participation is safer than making a definite commitment. P. 12

The Transition out of Christendom

In Christendom, everyone was required to belong to the church and believe what it taught. Dissent and non-attendance persisted for various reasons, but both attracted penalties. As Christian beliefs were familiar and mediated through multiple cultural symbols and an institution to which most belonged, churches gave less attention to catechesis. Rudimentary instruction, primarily dealing with liturgical and doctrinal issues, replaced the biblical and ethical teaching of pre-Christendom. Christendom’s version of Christianity was culturally conventional and imparted by osmosis rather than catechesis.

As Christendom unravelled, many still belonged out of loyalty, social convention, family connections, or inertia; but some no longer believed. They continued to attend for aesthetic or cultural reasons, but resisted theological or spiritual development. Some became biblically illiterate or were stymied in an adolescent belief system to which they could not seriously subscribe; other could not connect Christianity and the claims of modernity and retreated into

² See Rick Nelson, *How Does Doctrine Affect Evangelism? The Divergent Paths of Asahel Nettleton and Charles Finney*, an article in *Founders Journal*, <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ33/article1.html>

³ In Matthew 4:19, Jesus calls the apostles saying “come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” He does so well after he had met, talked with, and taught them. This type of introductory relationship is what we mean by “belonging before believing.” “Believing before belonging” was prevalent in pre-Christendom. Potential “novices” were considered outsiders until subscribing to Christian beliefs. So they were catechized one on one, and observed. This was to protect the rest of the church from arrest by “infiltrators.” Today we find this approach is still necessary in nations where Christianity is outlawed. Otherwise, evangelism has always been a courtship in which we proclaim the Gospel, invite and associate with those who respond (explaining in depth the content and implications of the Gospel), and then commit to one another in a covenantal relationship. This isn’t something we’ve newly discovered. We’ve simply re-discovered it after the Age of Christendom.— William Gross

dualism: they ensured their church attendance had no practical influence on the rest of their lives. P. 14-15

“Though 74% of people express a belief in the existence of some kind of God or “higher power,” 50% or fewer subscribe to the existence of sin, the soul, heaven, hell, or life after death – while the numbers having specific faith in Jesus Christ as the risen Lord are so statistically insignificant that opinion pollsters do not even ask the question.”⁴ P. 16

Believing without belonging is considered a virtue, a kind of “vicarious religion.” We should not equate church membership with Christian faith, but neither should we imagine there will be a ready supply of non-belonging believers waiting for refurbished post-Christendom churches to belong to. Those who do belong may only be nominal Christians, or “notional” Christians to whom the label “Christian” implies “[American](#)” or non-member of another religion. P. 17

In modernity, Christianity was regarded as an integrated and coherent system inviting whole-hearted belief or unbelief; but many in postmodernity affirm some beliefs but feel no obligation to accept everything. Belonging is no longer equated with believing, entirely. Others who believe but no longer belong find that belonging is no longer conducive to Christian discipleship! Still others belong intermittently, reluctant to take on regular responsibilities. They move between congregations and denominations easily and frequently. Process evangelism (and a sensitive and hospitable attitude towards “seekers”) has led to a large group of those who belong, and even participate, but do not believe. They are exploring Christianity. There is a temptation for us to downplay conversion and underestimate the necessary induction process. P. 18-22 [These seekers may continue to belong with no impetus ever to believe, losing out on their inheritance and joy by the church’s indifference to their beliefs. They become permanent explorers, satisfied by social belonging without spiritual union.](#)

Degrees of Alienation

There are several categories of those partially or fully alienated from the church:

- *Semi-churched* – they have some connection with a church and occasionally participate in church activities, but they don’t fully belong.
- *De-churched* – they have some familiarity with the church but do not generally find churches attractive or amenable.
- *Pre-churched* – they have no prior experience of church; church culture is alien and church language incomprehensible.
- *Post-churched* – for various reasons and often after years of involvement, they have decided to leave the church.
- *Anti-churched* – those with personal or ideological objections to church culture and maybe also to Christianity. P. 25

Boundaries of Belief

Related to belonging, believing, and behaving are the perimeters of belief: what set of truths must we believe in order to fully belong? Four boundary models:

⁴ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 4.

- *Bounded set* – has clear boundaries and maintains the integrity of a community by excluding any whose beliefs or behavior are unacceptable.
- *Fuzzy set* – has ill-defined boundaries and builds a more flexible community, although still ensuring coherence through boundary-maintenance.
- *Open set* – has undefined boundaries and welcomes all to join. Questions about belief and behavior are asked only in flagrant cases. It is wonderfully inclusive but undisciplined.
- *Centered set* – has a well-defined core of values with a fringe set of values that are open to debate and discussion.

Christendom as a culture was a bounded set, maintained by strict control structures to ensure everyone within its boundaries believed and behaved correctly, and by political or military action it defended itself against those who did not belong. In the open set models, there was ensuing doctrinal and moral corruption which provoked dissent from outraged Christians. Without a strong center, it cannot foster attractive or sustainable community. The fuzzy set churches have not thrived either. It is an inherently unstable model, prone to develop either into the insipid and unsustainable open set, or to revert surreptitiously into the bounded set, excluding those who challenge its culture and assumptions. Intolerant liberalism is as unattractive as other forms of intolerance.

The distinctive features of a center-set church:

- It has a definite center comprising non-negotiable core convictions, rooted in the story which has shaped the community, and ultimately in Jesus Christ.
- This center is the focal point around which members of the community gather enthusiastically.
- Its core convictions shape the church and separate it from other communities in a plural and contested culture.
- The church expends its energy on maintaining the core rather than patrolling boundaries.
- Confidence in its core convictions frees the church to be inclusive, hospitable and open to others who are welcome to explore the community.
- Those who ‘belong’ are moving towards the center, however near or far away they currently are in terms of belief or behavior.
- This is a dynamic rather than a static model, suitable for communities living towards a vision and missional churches that anticipate constant interaction with others.

Centered-set churches can be as inclusive as open-set churches, as relaxed as fuzzy-set churches, and as committed to convictions as bounded-set churches. They encourage spiritual growth, theological investigation, intellectual honesty, receptivity to new ideas and new people, and a ‘journeying’ image of discipleship. But they have a definite center from which a boundary emerges automatically. While boundaries exclude people, core values invite people to include or exclude themselves. P. 26-30

Conversion

This is the point at which exploratory belonging *converts* into covenantal belonging. The word “conversion” connotes pressure to conform to particular beliefs and behavior; and it implies submission to the superior wisdom and righteousness of those already ‘converted.’ Historically,

it often meant an imperialistic and sometimes coercive demand for obedience to the institutions, creed, and ethical norms of a dominant church. This is an unhelpful legacy. Nonetheless, the language should not preclude the recovery of an authentic biblical emphasis on conversion.

Invitations to follow Jesus must be winsome rather than overbearing. They must imply an ongoing journey of discipleship for the inviter as well the one receiving the invitation. Conversion is a paradigm shift that stimulates new ways of thinking and living, not arrival at a predetermined destination. Conversion is multi-directional and life-long. This changes the tone and the content of evangelism. In Peter's encounter with Cornelius in Acts 11, the conversion was dual – Peter was as changed by the encounter as Cornelius. [The content of the gospel didn't change, but both parties were conformed to that gospel message.](#)

Behaving

In Christendom, as long as people demonstrated they belonged by reasonably frequent attendance, their behavior was investigated only if it became scandalous or socially damaging. Catechesis concentrated on doctrine and liturgy, not ethics. Whatever ethics were taught were based on the Old Testament rather than the life and teaching of Jesus. Christian behavior was equated with social conformity. Church after Christendom dare not ignore behavior. In a skeptical culture, faith must be lived if it is to be believed. This does not mean legalism or moralism. It means that counter-cultural churches will live out the attractive but provocative implications of the story they proclaim. One component may be a thorough induction process whereby converts learn to follow Jesus. *Catechesis is making a comeback.*

Post-Christendom catechesis will require more than induction courses – even courses that explore behaving in far greater depth than any course currently available. It will mean rehearsing the 'big story' and core values of the community so these are deeply internalized. It may include a form of "cultural exorcism": confronting the norms of a cynical, individualistic, patriarchal, consumerist culture, built on global injustice and sustained by institutional violence. And it will involve mentoring, apprenticeship, and accountability processes. P. 31-35

Reasons for Leaving

It won't help to bring in new believers if we don't figure out how to keep the ones we have. We need to know why they're leaving if we are to succeed in closing the back door. [From "exit polls" we have learned a number of interesting facts concerning leavers.](#)

- Some have lost their faith and walked away from Christianity as well as the church; but most have left because church no longer nurtures their faith by engaging with their questions and helping them mature as Christians.
- Some are unwilling to repent of their behavior which they acknowledge is sinful; but many have left because they could no longer stomach the sinful attitudes, destructive behavior, and nauseating self-righteousness of their church.
- Some have fallen out with people and have departed refusing to be reconciled; but many others have found the political maneuvering, back-biting, and institutional incapacity to handle conflict responsibly are more than they could stand.

- Some are disillusioned by the fall from grace of respected leaders; but many left because of how such situations were mishandled or covered up.
- Some allowed work, family, study, sports, hobbies, or other activities to intrude on and eventually replace church involvement; but others have left because church offered no resources for living as Christians beyond its narrow sub-culture.
- Some were embittered by trauma, divorce, or job-loss, the death or illness of family members, struggles with singleness or sexuality; but many found neither the pastoral support nor the simplistic theology of their church were adequate for their pain, loneliness, and questions.
- Some have carelessly abandoned church when moving home, changing jobs, or facing other new circumstances; others find the demands of the church unrealistic and burdensome; they left to avoid burn-out and preserve their sanity.
- Some left after years of struggle in a declining congregation that was making no impact on society; other felt betrayed by unrealistic expectations and unfulfilled prophecies for which nobody accepted responsibility. P. 46-47

There is no doubt that difficulties arise when Christians perceive a mismatch between the spiritual focus or maturity of their church and the stage they have reached on their own journey. Many churches do not encourage or provide resources for those who yearn to move beyond definite but simplistic answers and explore other approaches to worship, theology, ethics, or spirituality. Other leavers, however, are alienated by churches that are reluctant to move beyond open-ended questions to deeply held convictions, that abandon responsibility for mission in favor of meeting the spiritual needs of existing members. P. 51 [There is no progression from new believer, to adolescent, to mature believer. It tends to be a one-size-fits-all solution.](#)

[Can anyone “belong” to a mega-church? If someone left, how would the church know?](#) To the surprise of many leavers, nobody asked why they had left, even those who had been deeply involved for years. This pastoral failure exacerbates the pain the leavers feel and it confirms their decision. Churches that fail to follow up leavers within six weeks of leaving are missing an important opportunity. Christendom churches were often arrogant and assumed leavers were at fault. Post-Christendom churches will want to listen carefully and humbly to leavers, ready to learn from them and respond to their concerns. Many of those who left because they felt they weren't growing have reported significant spiritual growth since they left – deeper experiences of prayer, unexpected freedom in evangelism, and greater integration of faith and life! Many leavers do not want to return to church, but most recognize the need for some kind of belonging. This may mean conversations and shared meals with other leavers or with friends who are still involved in the church. “Post-church” groups are developing, similar to churches but usually simpler and with a different ethos. P. 53-54

Reasons for Staying

What kinds of churches might leavers rejoin – or not leave in the first place?

- Where God is at the center rather than the minister, program, or growth targets
- That nurture authentic friendships rather than insipid fellowship or institutional belonging
- That are self-critical, alert to destructive interpersonal dynamics, and working towards healthy community practices
- That treat adults as adults and encourage spiritual development rather than spoon-feeding their members

- That foster dialogue rather than monologue and participation rather than performance
- That welcome questions, eschew simplistic answers, and affirm the dimension of mystery in authentic spirituality
- That encourage expressions of doubt, anger, and lament as well as joyful certainty
- That are attuned to the pressures of daily life and do not place unrealistic demands on their members
- That engage creatively and sensitively with contemporary culture and social issues
- That equip members for the world of work and discipleship beyond the congregation
- That embrace a holistic understanding of mission and have realistic expectations as marginal communities in post-Christendom⁵ P. 55-56

Reasons for Joining

The *Alpha Course* in England has been very informative. The findings seem to show that the journey towards faith for many people is a lengthy process, not a sudden crisis, and it involves multiple factors. The crucial factors are normally personal rather than institutional: friends and family members are more significant than events (e.g. [Billy Graham style crusades](#)) or activities (e.g. [church plays and picnics](#)). An awareness of guilt is the precipitating cause of conversion for only a minority of those who have found faith in recent years. These findings challenge event-oriented models of evangelism that rely on guilt-focused messages, rationalist apologetics, and crisis conversions.

Instead, many come to faith via spirituality rather than doctrine, persuaded by spiritual experience rather than apologetics, searching for identity rather than truth. This doesn't preclude the significance of persuasive events within the process of coming to faith, or the validity of encouraging a decision without undue pressure. But listening to individuals and their cultural context is crucial if evangelism is to engage with the questions and issues that concern people.⁶ Four components of *Alpha* seem especially significant compared to regular church patterns:

- Friendship – those who participate are generally invited by friends and the course works well if a group gels and friendships develop
- Food – the intimacy and enjoyment of a shared meal enhances relationships and provides a relaxed and congenial setting for conversation
- Dialogue – despite lengthy monologue presentations, there is no pressure to respond and there is opportunity for debate, questions, and disagreement
- Spiritual Experience – the *Holy Spirit weekend* is the pivot of the course, when apologetics gives way to spiritual encounter

⁵ The wording in this bullet is a bit misleading. The idea is not that we should have limited expectations of success, and so be willing to live on the margins of society. The idea is that, if we're counter-cultural, we'll live on the margins: we're going to be swimming upstream rather than being popular. There is no Roman Empire to force Christianity on everyone. Even so, I had a pastor once who said that we are not so much *homo sapiens* as *homo religioso* – religion is in our genes. It's just a matter of whom or what we're going to worship: the One True God or something else. Evangelism is mostly a matter of getting folks to the point where they have sufficient information to make an informed choice as to the proper object of their affections and worship. We have no reason, in my opinion, whether it be biblical, sociological, or psychological, to expect predominant failure in evangelism if the Church is true to New Testament standards. We haven't been, and I think that's why we're struggling.

⁶ Consider that what people are looking for may be the wrong thing, given the postmodern culture they live in. Simply because they are looking for "identity rather than truth" doesn't mean we should offer them a role to play without any biblical foundation for it. The Emergent Church is saying exactly that: don't be so arrogant as to think that postmoderns are wrong and need to be corrected (Kimball, *The Emerging Church*).

The problem occurs when the people who thoroughly enjoyed *Alpha* are plugged into the church, where the things that made *Alpha* successful are notably absent. P. 58-60. [We cannot separate evangelism from discipleship, the promise from the reality. If evangelism were the marketing department of a corporate enterprise, and discipleship were the manufacturing plant, we must not promise what we cannot deliver. The sample must match the actual product. If it does not, then it isn't the promise of the Gospel that has to change.](#)

The Many Faces of Church

The fragmentation of the church that began with the Reformation continues at a rapid pace today despite the ecumenical movement. As a result, the church is expressing itself through many faces, some of which are building-centered, and many of which are not. Those that are building-centered tend to have mission activities welded onto the side. The church needs to be mission-centered. This paradigm shift requires wholesale ecclesial restructuring.

- *Seeker-oriented church* restructures church around the needs of seekers, those who may become joiners. The style and content of “seeker services” are performances through which enquirers can encounter Christianity without participating. Belonging before believing allows anonymous attendance. Converts join midweek believers’ services.
- *Purpose-driven church* restructures church around five ecclesial purposes: worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, and ministry. A comprehensive strategy is designed to draw people into church and encourage them to grow as disciples. The church’s mission is related to five concentric circles: the community, the crowd, the congregation, the committed, and the core.
- *Cell church* operates as a network of small neighborhood churches that meet weekly as cells and join together for corporate celebrations. Cells engage in relational evangelism, expecting to grow and divide. Core values include the centrality of Jesus, the expectation that members will participate and mature, the development of honest, loving community, and growth by multiplication. The cell *is* church, not a peripheral or secondary group.
- *G12 cells* are similar to cell churches, but there is a different structure and ethos. The model develops groups of twelve, each of which forms further groups of twelve. Cells are homogeneous with groups for men, women, young people, and children. The model is hierarchical but affirms the leadership potential of every Christian.
- *Minsters* are large churches with multiple staff, skills, and resources that can resource churches with missional responsibility for larger areas, providing centers of support, training, and strategic coordination for smaller churches [[may also be called “flagship” churches in America](#)].
- *Clusters* are more flexible and mission-focused than congregations, but larger and less homogeneous than cells. They are congregation-sized communities that are not full fledged churches. They have a clear missional identity, but its members are involved in celebrations and cells, offering a broader church experience and yet greater intimacy.
- *Café-style church* is a practical restructuring. The normal meeting place is café style with groups of chairs around small tables. They have a similar philosophy to seeker-oriented churches. The format may be a presentation or interactive with a welcoming atmosphere.
- *Café church* actually meets in a café, rather than café-style. The focus may be post-churched or pre-churched people with an emphasis on the arts and alternative worship.
- *Workplace church* finds relationships with Christian colleagues more authentic and sustaining than a neighborhood church.
- *Pub church* hires a room to hold services similar to those in church buildings. Others organize special events to entertain and challenge those who participate. Still others are integrated into the pub community; they run open events which pub regulars accept as part of pub life.

- *Club culture church*: They share more of an affinity with those who love dance, music, and clubbing than those they work with or live near. Their members participate in the clubs, building relationships, and inviting friends to church activities.
- *Enterprise church*: involves building relationships through shared projects and enterprises. The relationships are the context for faith-sharing and indigenous faith communities; they are rooted in local culture rather than imposed from outside.
- *Cyber church*: the center of community is the Internet. Various groups are forming web-based congregations, with or without physical meetings.
- *Network church*: What members have in common is not where they live or work, but who they know and why. Their constituency is defined demographically, not geographically.
- *Culture-specific church*: it emerges in various subcultures such as Goth, sci-fi, rave, techno, and other underground music subcultures.
- *Youth Church*: the ecclesial forms are appropriate for young people, whether neighborhood or network based. It can be cell or celebration based, but it is about empowerment. Young people themselves shape and lead these emerging churches.
- *Young adult church*: when young people reach the upper age limit of youth church they either join adult church, or they create an emerging young adult church.
- *Children's church*: rather than integrate children into churches designed for adults, these churches are designed for children. Most often adults lead these churches, but some empower children to help shape church.
- *Church for marginalized groups*: churches for the deaf, homeless, recovering alcoholics and drug abusers, sex-offenders, pedophiles, New Age travelers, mental health problems, etc. These are specialized to the needs of those who attend.
- *Indigenous neighborhood churches*: authentic churches emerge from interaction between the gospel and different contexts. [Urban churches are unlike suburban churches, and both are different than rural churches.](#) Whatever the neighborhood context, the church reflects the needs and experiences of those to whom it reaches out.

In addition there are midweek churches, project-based churches, 7-day churches, table-churches that meet in homes after a shared meal to encourage laughter and conversation, household churches limited by the size of a home to ensure small-scale church, social and economic action churches based on Liberation Theology, organic churches in pursuit of simpler forms of church, post-church communities to meet the belonging needs of those who left institutional churches, mono-ethnic churches who desire to use their native heart-language in worship, shared-purse churches, boiler-room churches, and new monastic orders. [There is an endless variety of form and context for those who are drawn together in the name of Christ.](#) P. 79-92

Decline and Fall of the West

The Church is not the Western church or even the Northern-hemisphere church. The center of gravity is not in the West, but in the South. Even if the Western church were virtually eradicated, it would not jeopardize global mission. We need a sense of perspective. Western churches expect a continued dominance in their expressions of spirituality, theology, and normative ethics. Their hegemony in global denominations, mission agencies, and Christian organizations is becoming obnoxious. We need to transcend our white, Anglo, postmodern, post-Christian subculture.

Emerging churches are a Western phenomenon responding to post-Christendom and postmodernity. They need greater ethnic diversity before they can speak to the wider church.

White Christians alone cannot incarnate the gospel in multi-ethnic post-Christendom. There are inherent barriers to their effective interaction with multi-ethnic communities, [a heritage of exploitation that silences their witness and undermines their work \(see p. 16 below\)](#). Perhaps conversations between mono-ethnic, inherited ([traditional](#)), and emerging churches might foster creative strategies for incarnating the gospel in particular communities that embody both cultural diversity and ecclesial unity. P. 121-122

Symbiosis

Post-Christendom churches are not the same as pre-Christendom churches. There is too much history between the two, and too many changes in technology and culture. [Human nature hasn't changed, but human habitat has](#). Post-Christendom churches are not emerging; they are evolving. The past has many lessons for us, but not necessarily answers. The emphasis needs to be on new ways of *being* church, not new ways of *doing* church. A church's ethos ([its core values](#)) affects its shape, and its shape expresses and reinforces its ethos. But the temptation is strong to focus on models and styles rather than core values. A church's shape may deter or attract some potential joiners; but its ethos is more significant for retaining the allegiance of potential leavers. It's also critical for nurturing counter-cultural discipleship, and creating missional communities to incarnate the gospel creatively and winsomely in a strange new world. P. 122-126

Part II – Ethos

Eph. 4:1-16 is a remarkable description of the processes by which churches grow to maturity.⁷ It is a wonderful and inspiring picture of a fully functioning and loving community where the gifts of each member are valued and contribute towards the development of a mature, healthy, and Christlike church. Unity is expressed through glorious diversity. This community is neither static and moribund, nor unbalanced and lurching from one idea to another. It grows spiritually and relationally. Truth is spoken in love and peace binds people together. It is Christ-centered, Spirit-energized, and it shares in the work and mission of God.

Part II considers which aspects of church life that were distorted or marginalized during the Christendom era might be rediscovered. The Charismatic movement and the recovery of apostles and prophets didn't lead to a new age in the church, as had been hoped. Instead these churches fell into the same hierarchical and disempowering structures and processes as any inherited model. They gradually reverted to conventional Christendom patterns with new labels. Thus, Ephesians 4 functions neither as a blueprint for church after Christendom, nor as the basis for a painless and speedy transition to post-Christendom. But it does undergird many of the issues involved and which will be discussed. P. 129-133

⁷ It's actually a remarkable passage on how *believers* grow to maturity, and churches grow toward unity.

Institutional Incapacity

The church was originally a missional church. Over time it became institutional. The drawbacks to an institutional church are many:

- It regards mission as one of many functions rather than its defining center
- It prioritizes maintenance and designates mission to specialized agencies rather than equipping all members as missionaries
- It interprets its mission as preservative not provocative, confirming rather than challenging the status quo
- It expects everyone to know its language and accept without demur its cultural norms
- It speaks and acts authoritatively and is discomfited when people choose not to belong, believe, or behave in approved ways – P. 135-136

Such attitudes and practices will disable post-Christendom churches, hindering their essential reformation as a marginal mission movement. Three paradigm shifts are necessary. We need to move from maintenance of our legacy to mission; from clergy-centered church to community; and from [worship services to worshipful service](#).⁸

1. From Maintenance to Mission

Many churches are emphasizing mission again, but it may be motivated more by a desire to maintain control over their legacy than a sincere desire to become mission-centered. Some emerging churches disdain mission in reaction to the heritage of imperialistic Christendom. And inherited churches are holding onto their heritage, unwilling to make the necessary paradigm shift. They are focused on *maintaining* the status quo, and their church buildings. “Missional church” is not about bolting mission onto an institutional church. It is about a fundamental re-orientation of church. Mission originates in the character and creation-wide purposes of God, not in the church. It doesn’t mean embracing mission more enthusiastically but encountering afresh the missionary God. Missiology in post-Christendom precedes ecclesiology, but missional theology precedes both. Mission is not an agenda item; it *is* the agenda.⁹

Post-Christendom churches need a missional *ethos*, not just a missional language. It must be expressed in their core values and nurtured in their corporate life.¹⁰ This begins with inducting newcomers into a missional mindset by, for example:

- Introducing them to the missionary God and the scope of *missio Dei*
- Teaching them to interpret Scripture with a consistent missional hermeneutic
- Equipping them to participate first in God’s mission, and secondly in church activities
- Developing a process whereby they engage in missional activities and reflect on these with mentors

⁸ Murray suggests moving away from focused stage *performances* (entertainment) toward broad congregational *participation* acted out in a number of ways, not just a Sunday morning event. He enlarges the meaning of worship to include an array of worshipful activities.

⁹ In other words, the Church is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end, and that end is mission. We’ve taken our eye off the ball.

¹⁰ David Wells points out that we have moved into therapeutic theology in which all we nurture is the self (*No Place for Truth*).

But without processes in place to sustain their missional ethos, newcomers and churches will revert to what is familiar and comfortable, to the default Christendom maintenance orientation. These processes might include:

- A pattern of corporate prayer that constantly confronts the church with the broad agenda of God's mission, the needs of its local community, the systemic violence and injustice that causes global suffering, the groaning of creation, and the commission to make disciples of all nations.
- Regular opportunities to reflect theologically about vocational, cultural, and ethical issues, to learn to think biblically about work-related matters, and to prepare God's people for works of service throughout the week.¹¹
- Infusing corporate worship with songs and prayers from the world church, it has laments which prevent worship from becoming anemic or escapist; its contextual liturgy grounds the church in its own community, and its testimonies celebrate signs of God at work.
- Regular conversations about finance that differentiate money spent on mission from money spent on maintenance: that identify priorities, that set limits on expenditure on maintenance, and that monitor progress towards increasing expenditure on mission. P. 136-138

From Institution to Movement

Denominational churches can become missional in the sense of a movement if they are willing to make wholesale changes in the way they operate and think. For example:

- They can subsume other departments under their mission department, or abolish the distinction between home mission and overseas mission, and reassign staff to the mission department.
- People with pioneering and strategic gifts, who are mission-minded, visionary, risk-taking, and able to manage change, can be appointed to trans-local roles.
- They can use strategic church planting as a catalyst to pioneer fresh expressions of church on behalf of the denomination, offering pioneers the freedom to experiment and be supported.
- They can introduce a church pruning strategy to encourage unhealthy churches to close, ones that are discrediting the gospel and deflecting resources from mission.
- They can set a goal that over half of denominational funds will be spent on missions, recognizing that this redistribution will reshape the denomination; finance is a measurable indicator of progress towards a paradigm shift.
- They can create a monitoring process whereby representatives of other denominations participate regularly in conversations to review progress on these issues.¹² P. 139-140

Teaching Resources for Mission

There is a Christendom mindset in our theological colleges and seminaries that will scuttle missional progress unless they too embrace this paradigm shift. This might mean:

- Disavowing their favoritism towards pastors and teachers who dominated the Christendom era, concentrating instead on apostles, prophets, and evangelists.
- Adapting their selection processes to ensure they recruit mission-oriented students with the character and skills for ministry in post-Christendom.

¹¹ One church displays photographs of members dressed for work as reminders of their daily mission context; another lays hands on anyone starting a new job thus commissioning them to this ministry.

¹² Which also facilitates inter-church cooperation and accountability – it is a visible manifestation of the unity portrayed in Ephesians 4.

- Revising the curricula: not just adding mission modules or specialist courses, but teaching *all* subjects from a missional perspective and training *all* students for cross-cultural mission.
- Retraining graduates who were trained under the old paradigm, especially those moving from local to trans-local roles.
- Developing partnerships with local congregations to help “prepare [all] God’s people for works of service.”¹³
- Offering emerging churches and church leavers opportunities and resources for theological reflection.

Parachurch Organizations as Models

Parachurch organizations can model missional movements, having re-energized the church in the Christendom era. Originally viewed as subsidiary to the institutional church, they have since become independent sources of knowledge and skill in missional activity. They have pioneered initiatives, often in partnership with congregations, and have helped many potential church leavers rediscover vision and purpose. “Church” should be used as a verb, not a noun, to signal the transition from institution to movement. It sidesteps endless discussions about structures and makes obsolete the term “parachurch.” We should accept parachurch groups as authentically ecclesial [rather than competitors for the energies of our congregations](#). P. 141-142

Skepticism

There are those who will say that changing from maintenance to mission, from institution to movement, are impossible ideals. Every movement will fall back into institution, into bureaucracy and stagnation. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try, or that such a shift isn’t worthwhile. Rediscovering pre-Christendom mission orientation is crucial in post-Christendom, [or we will simply whither and blow away](#). How we read Ephesians 4 reveals our orientation towards maintenance or mission. On the surface it contains little that is missional. With the exception of “evangelists” and perhaps “apostles” it concentrates on building a healthy church. In Christendom, this interpretation was natural. But this letter was written to participants in a marginal mission movement. Once we acknowledge its proper context, we cannot interpret it [to be a prescription for maintenance mode](#). It presupposes that those receiving these instructions are engaged in mission.

Mission-oriented interpretation insists that the “works of service” for which the community is “prepared” are mainly missional; the gifts each has received are for use beyond as well as within the community; and those who are being prepared, not those who are preparing, are on the front line. This missional thrust was reversed by the Christendom paradigm where the laity supported the clergy as they performed ecclesial and ritual “works of service.” This is a Christendom *toxin*, powerfully present especially in larger churches; it is deadly, and it needs purging from the system. P. 145-146

¹³ This might also cure the seminaries of their nasty habit of condescension, of speaking to the academy instead of to the church, using language that is all but incomprehensible to laymen, the very ones who need instruction from those who have been specially gifted to teach them.

From the Center to the Margins

As in pre-Christendom, church after Christendom will operate on the margins. Many resist the implications of this shift. Acknowledging or welcoming the move to the margin prompts accusations of defeatism. Confidence is already low in many churches, sapped by decades of declining numbers and declining social influence. Some sustain the hope that revival will restore the church's fortunes and reputation, an illusion that nothing has really changed. The numbers tell a far different story.

Acknowledging it is a matter of honesty, not defeatism. Welcoming it is a matter of judgment, not despair. The end of Christendom marks the collapse of a determined but ultimately futile attempt to impose Christianity rather than inviting people to follow Jesus. The fourth century decision to transfer from the margins to the center is one enormous leap for power resulted in coercive but nominal Christianity. It also deflected a missional movement that had, from the margins, made extraordinary progress during the previous three centuries. Subversive but effective 'mustard seed' and 'yeast in the dough' strategies gave way to top-down religion. The marginality of post-Christendom churches holds out the enticing prospect of recovering the power and appeal of subversive Christianity and getting the missional movement back on track.

Identifying the Center

We need to know what we are moving away from. Some have said it is Liberal secularism. But over the past twenty five years others have challenged this view. There is a counter-trend of spirituality, of de-secularization. They suggest that spirituality in multiple forms will thrive in post-Christendom.¹⁴ There is widespread enthusiasm for and diffuse experiences of spirituality. There is a burgeoning market in all things spiritual (films, magazines, songs, games, etc.). Young people in particular are interested in it. But we see a pervasive influence of New Age spirituality, paganism, and Eastern religions *rather than Judeo-Christian spirituality. Indeed, within the church there is confusion over the nature of true, biblical spirituality. There is a penchant for immanent rather than transcendent spirituality – personal experience and self-focus are pursued through meditation that is designed to withdraw and release, not to draw near and embrace.*

Which is the center from which we move? Secularization or spirituality? Is the spirituality we see only among white middle-class Westerners? Is it only temporary, or limited to Gen-Xers? Is it merely a symptom of designer-driven consumers, but not actually engaging them at depth or impacting their core beliefs, values, and priorities? Is it post-Christian or anti-Christian? Does it only satisfy private spiritual needs without challenging secular values at the core of society? If so, then we should take advantage of whatever spiritual interest presents itself, but not base our post-Christendom missional structures on what may turn out to be a continuing fad. Instead, we should presume that secularization continues unabated as the center. P. 149-153

¹⁴ Murray is saying that both traditional beliefs and secularism are being pushed to the margins as non-descript spirituality moves to the center. If we accept our move to the margin, then we are better able to confront that spirituality or "designer religion" as David Wells calls it. We cannot attack it from a position of superiority, tradition, and positional authority. Instead, as fellow journeymen on the road to 'spiritual experience', we come alongside those who have been attracted to spiritual things, and lead them gently to Christ as the proper object of their faith. The challenge is immense in a postmodern world that rejects truth, authority, and accountability – and especially a world that reacts negatively to the heritage of Christendom. We need to "correct the record" as to what true Christianity is and is not. Unfortunately none of this is addressed by Murray.

Post-Christendom implies that Christian beliefs and values are no longer accepted as the metanarrative of Western culture, but an alternative metanarrative is not yet apparent. Our society is diverse, and it requires diverse ecclesial and missional responses. Spiritual searchers are only one of seven categories that John Drane¹⁵ identifies in answer to the question, “whom are we trying to reach?” The challenge is to find appropriate ways of incarnating the gospel among all of these groups. P. 153

A common postmodern view is that there is no center in contemporary culture. It is a jumble of fragments without a definable center or metanarrative. If this is so, there can be no margins if there is no center. [Christianity becomes just another fragment in a pictureless puzzle](#). But there are serious problems with this analysis. It overplays the discontinuity between inherited and emerging culture. There are radical differences between modernity and postmodernity, but there is also continuity and reinforcement. The forces that shaped modernity persist in postmodernity.¹⁶ It also ignores the dynamics in society whereby power and wealth dominate and marginalize others. Rejecting the idea of a center plays into their hands.¹⁷ The Christendom church colluded with the power-brokers at the center; we dare not do the same. P. 154

Mission from the Margins

Becoming a marginal mission movement means rejecting many attitudes and assumptions inherited from Christendom. The invitation is to return to our roots and recapture the subversive dynamism that turned the world upside down from the margins. Repositioning our churches on the margins is essential. We are not “at home” as we were in Christendom.

- We need to assume there is less knowledge of Christianity.¹⁸ Christianity has gradually lost its status as a lingua franca and has become a localized language of Christians.
- We need to anticipate longer journeys towards faith. The process of evangelizing is going to have to be extended before discipleship can be taught; [more milk before meat](#).¹⁹ And discipleship will take longer as well. [There is no biblical foundation on which to build. That foundation must be laid before it can be built upon.](#)
- We need to allow others to set the agenda. Most process evangelism courses set the agenda for discussion. They may allow participants to ask other questions, but organizers assume they know which issues are most important, and so they refocus conversations on these. Such imposition demands less of the organizers, but it is inappropriate if we are “playing away” as Leonard Sweet describes our position. [We’re playing on their field](#).²⁰ Engaging with the agenda of others and “discovering gospel connections” is more authentic. P. 155-156

¹⁵ Drane, John, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity, and the Future of the Church* (London, Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2000), P. 55-84

¹⁶ These would include economism, consumerism, individualism, militarism, technological dependency, globalization, scientism, etc.

¹⁷ See Jerry Mander: *Four Arguments for Eliminating Television*.

¹⁸ I was reading *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* to my 7 and 9-year old grandchildren recently. I asked them if they knew who Adam and Eve were, because the character Lucy is referred to as a “daughter of Eve.” Neither one knew.

¹⁹ Both in a small group and in a Sunday School class last year, I asked the participants to give me a statement of the gospel. Only one out of twelve was able to articulate it beyond “I accepted Jesus into my heart.”

²⁰ Playing away and allowing others to set the agenda does not require collusion with dependency or a therapeutic culture. Fn P. 159

Tinkering with invitational strategies is inadequate. The church must not only be inviting but infiltrating. Process evangelism and seeker-sensitive events represent advances on old-style evangelistic events or guest services, but they are still invitational rather than incarnational. The demise of Christendom requires a *missional* rather than *evangelistic* strategy. We need to engage people in their own context which is often in a networked society, not where they live, but where they work or relax. [We need to move away from organization and toward organism.](#) P. 156-157

We begin in the *vocational* domain where they work or relax and establish a relationship. We then move to the *foundational* domain where we encourage people to build their confidence in the possibility of God, of an enduring reality, and in the non-material aspects of life. From here we can move into the *explicit* domain in which they are prepared to hear the story of Jesus. The foundational domain is a new field for evangelism that has come into being because of the demise of a Christian culture. P. 158

In the vocational domain, when Christians partner with others in the struggle for justice and the transformation of individuals and communities, behaving may stimulate believing and belonging. [It is our witness of the goodness of the Law of God; it attracts others by demonstrating the love of Christ instead of using empty words.](#) It also removes power dynamics from the equation, as Christians become fellow strugglers rather than sources of superior knowledge or virtue. P. 159

Starting Further Back

Mission in post-Christendom actually starts further back than mission in pre-Christendom. The church had no heritage to live down. In post-Christendom its legacy is ambivalent and its reputation is sullied. Its language, symbols, and history may have negative connotations. We must engage creatively, sensitively, and courageously with the pre-churched and anti-churched. Many of the latter are not opposed to Christianity, but to its expression through imperialistic Christendom. Thus, mission from the margins will include humility, contrition, repentance, and honest acknowledgement that the church has not consistently incarnated the gospel.²¹

Those who run evangelism process courses assume their task is to help others embrace perspectives which they themselves already have, rather than engaging in genuine dialogue through which all can learn and grow. Acknowledging our limited understanding, our capacity to be wrong, and our “solidarity in sinfulness” transforms our attitudes with which we evangelize. P. 160-161

²¹ The Marxist bent of England is showing itself in Murray’s theology. It imposes the crimes of the institution even on those who have opposed that institution since its inception. If Murray is willing to say that the true church is not comprised of all those who attend, why does he include those who committed crimes in the name of Christ? Jesus said, “Away from me you evil-doers; I never knew you.” We may do better to side with church detractors and denounce these infamies along with them, distinguishing between what Christ commanded and what was done. Otherwise our listeners may conclude that Scripture is either a lie or an unrealistic fantasy; it is subject to abuse by the same people who would abuse government and social authority. For far too long, we have failed to “clean house” and exercise biblical discipline. This is clear from what the Roman Catholics did with their pedophile cases, and the evangelical churches did with their finances. In other words, outrage at these abhorrent acts is more appropriate than contrition. I deny that the true church of Christ was involved. The civic churches that held Inquisitions and Crusades were no more of Christ than a satanic cult. We should decry every unholy alliance between church and state – but we don’t. Like Israelites in the desert, we long to return to Egypt to vicariously flex political muscle and enjoy worldly prestige. God help us. Murray goes on to advocate the same contrition in our presentation of the gospel, acknowledging our “limited understanding” as we evangelize. Again, what this conveys is that our “capacity to be wrong” and our “solidarity in sinfulness” as he puts it, suggest that the gospel we present may not be accurate, or it isn’t what it purports to be; we’re implying that it has probably been corrupted by the evangelist for personal gain. That ends the conversation right there. I think Murray may be making a false assumption here, and his recommendation should be considered cautiously.

We're also reluctant to re-examine the nature of the gospel. The gospel cannot be detached from the cultural context if it is to be "good news" to *them*; we must retranslate the story of Jesus into every subculture of a pluralistic society like post-Christendom. What has been the challenge whenever the church operates as a marginal mission movement, is holding in creative tension *faithfulness* to our founding story, and *flexibility* in how we tell this story – using language and images that resonate with the current context.

When the church becomes a powerful institution, a particular way of telling the story solidifies and attains normative status, over-riding alternative versions. It can also function as a control mechanism, enhancing the church's status. In Christendom, the story was told using images of penal substitution, forensic justification, and everlasting torment. The Christendom gospel addressed the issues of guilt and life after death, offering forgiveness and eternal life, dispensed by the church as Christ's representative.²² It pushed aside other aspects of the story that might be socially disruptive: good news to the poor, a kingdom of justice and peace, and the hope for a new earth.

In post-Christendom, the culture is less concerned about guilt and more interested in life before death than afterwards. Images rooted in feudalism, legal processes, and retributive violence are anachronistic and unattractive. Marginal churches can "reassess this version of the gospel and recover marginalized or distorted aspects of the story." The Christendom legacy is oppressive, with accusations of heresy awaiting any who dare challenge the inherited version. But marginal mission movements can be more sensitive to their context, more courageous in their translation of the story, and more discerning about the resonance and dissonance between the story and the cultural setting in which it is told. "If the gospel is truly good news to the poor, we have not been preaching the gospel, for the rich and powerful have not found it disturbing and the poor have not found it liberating." P. 161-162

2. From Clergy to Community

In the 1980's, the church attendance was rapidly declining. Many asked how churches could *grow*. Therefore, they welcomed programs and strategies that promised to deliver numerical growth, and success was easily measured. In the 1990's, many asked how churches could *multiply*. Therefore church planting and cell churches were promoted because they are designed for multiplication. Some insisted that quality was more important than quantity; they began to ask what *kinds* of churches were important, but the drive for numbers silenced their concerns. In the 2000's, some are asking how churches can *survive*. What *kind* of churches we need is back on the agenda. What other dimensions of growth are crucial?

Many suspect that size matters, and that small-scale churches, [like small-scale schools](#), may be healthier than large ones, and less prone to impersonal organization, power politics, and institutional inertia. Some are finding, however, that size alone is not the answer. They believe that those who create a dichotomy between quantity and quality are ignoring the possibility that quality may stimulate quantity. Others are suggesting that the two are independent factors. One does not affect the other. There are toxins in our churches that drive many to leave. Growth will not prevent this exodus, and detoxification alone will not stimulate growth. P. 165-166

²² This is certainly true of Catholicism, but not Protestantism. And it is the Bible, not Christendom, that presents a forensic view of the cross.

Christendom Toxins

The healthy post-Christendom church model in Ephesians 4 is one in which all members of the body participate, discern what is helpful or harmful to the community, and they speak truth to each other in love. What then, in Christendom churches, inhibits these healthy characteristics?

- The laity is disempowered by clerical dominance. They are not allowed to take initiatives on ecclesial matters or participate in shaping the church as community. They are to be attenders and spectators, limited to pre-defined support activities
- Therefore, the churches provide no training for the laity to exercise such responsibilities. Initiation processes are minimal. Everyone is expected to know the Christian story, and to learn what to believe through a combination of liturgy, sermon, and symbols. They are expected to learn how to behave through a combination of pastoral admonition, custom, and the approval or disapproval of the community.
- Historically, church discipline, when applied at all, dealt only with gross and outrageous behavior or with heresy. It was exercised by powerful clerical leaders, often backed by state authority. It lacked pastoral sensitivity, and it was often oppressive, brutal, or lethal. Then and now, damaging attitudes, debilitating practices, and broken relationships go unaddressed, and they have infected future generations with a legacy of bitterness.

The emergence of new denominations and an increasing tendency towards unaffiliated churches solved some of these issues, but enhanced participation does not automatically produce healthy churches. Churches that encourage greater congregational participation have been slow to recognize the need for training and disciplinary processes. Without these, the Christendom toxins are not flushed out. This is evident by the love-hate relationship many churches have with members' meetings. P. 169-171

Building Healthy Churches

This raises again the issue of induction. Induction into post-Christendom churches will require more than the most introductory courses offer. Those who join churches will increasingly be pre-churched rather than de-churched. They will be starting "further back." Many will be biblically, doctrinally, and ritually illiterate. They will need thorough induction into the biblical story, Christian beliefs and values, spirituality, and discipleship in an alien culture. They will also need to learn how to participate in the community to which they now belong. They need to imbibe the community's ethos and core values and learn skills for healthy interaction. P. 172 Perhaps being "values-shaped" is more essential than being "purpose-driven."

Church Discipline

There are pro's and con's to church discipline. It has a negative history because of its abuse by ecclesial courts, and the unholy alliance that existed between church and state. Church discipline sounds institutional, threatening, legalistic, and punitive. Here are some of the perceived con's of church discipline that derive from this legacy of abuse, and the attitudes of a postmodern culture:

- Western culture is individualistic, liberal, and tolerant of everything except intolerance.
- People already perceive churches as moralistic and intolerant.
- Many people have had bad experiences with church discipline or have heard of abuse.
- The relationship between believing, belonging, and behaving in post-Christendom poses questions about how church discipline might operate.
- Church discipline isn't easy. Speaking the truth in love involves confrontation.
- Church discipline is hard to apply with consumer-based theology, absent orthodoxy, and optional membership in a local body. Offenders simply move to another church.
- Church discipline reduces numbers instead of increasing them. It is “unattractive.”

On the other hand, there are number of pro's to consider:

- Jesus promised to build a church the gates of Hades cannot withstand, and he prescribed a process of loving confrontation to sustain the church: Mat 16:18; 18:15-17
- Guidelines for and examples of church discipline permeate the New Testament
- Churches are imperfect communities with wayward disciples who need restoration
- Fudging loving confrontation when it is needed damages the church and individuals
- Waiting until a crisis without first teaching the principles of discipline risks chaos
- Church leavers often cite mishandling of ethical and relational issues as their reasons
- Inadequate accountability has damaged some emerging churches
- In post-Christendom and postmodernism, we need each other's help and support to live faithfully and distinctively
- Churches that avoid loving confrontation become dysfunctional, dishonest, and missionally ineffective.

Post-Christendom churches, if they are to be honest and healthy, dare not allow unresolved conflicts to fester, or condone moral compromise. But the goal is restoration – inclusion and not exclusion. P. 174-177

Biblical Discipline

Go to your brother or sister that you think has offended you. If you cannot resolve it between you privately, take one or two brothers along. If it is still unresolved, tell it to the church publicly. And if it is still unresolved, “treat them as pagans or tax collectors.” The aim throughout is to “win over” the brother or sister, to achieve restoration and reconciliation. There is no mention of church leaders. It is an expression of reciprocal pastoral care for one another. The attitude with which we approach every stage of the process excludes being arrogant, judgmental, or intolerant. Loving confrontation is exercised with sorrow as a painful necessity (1Cor 5:2); we do it gently and humbly, aware of our human weakness (Gal 6:1); we do it in love, not hostility, as an expression of commitment to each other (2Thess 3:15); we “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3).

There are two responses that are held in creative tension when dealing with those who will not be reconciled. Those who contravene the core values and resist loving confrontation do not “belong” within the community. But this judgment is always provisional: “pagans and tax-

collectors” are not written off. The community longs for their restoration. Churches that sweep problems under the carpet, fudge moral issues, tolerate unresolved conflicts, and avoid loving confrontation, become not only unhealthy, but unattractive. [This is the exact opposite of our fear that exercising church discipline is unattractive.](#)

To make it work, churches need clear, agreed upon, and deeply owned core values. The need to work out how it will operate. They must induct newcomers into this shared understanding. They need to be realistic about the struggles that individuals and communities face. They must strive to foster deep, gracious, forgiving, and patient friendships. They must develop a community life so rich that having any who no longer belong will provoke soul-searching and changed attitudes.

There is one other criterion: they must not be unhealthily dependent on leaders. *The absence of leaders in Mat 18:15-17 is crucial.* In Christendom, church discipline was imposed by leaders on their congregations as an exercise of clerical power. The process works better and builds stronger communities if leaders neither intervene too early, nor encourage others to pass the buck to them. Centered-set churches are more suited to this process than others. P. 180-184

Harmonious Churches

There are a number of factors that stimulate a rich community life: interactive learning rather than reliance on monologue sermons; multi-voiced worship rather than front-led performances; reciprocal economics rather than centralized tithing; and empowering leadership rather than disempowering clericalism. P. 185

These are not easy to attain for a number of reasons.²³ Most tries at multi-voiced ecclesiology have reverted to mono-voiced practices. This is due not only to Christendom toxins, but to the sheer complexity of administering them. The benefits that are sought are worthwhile. People want the opportunity to ask questions and participate in discussion, but monologues limit and direct the discussion. So emerging churches are moving toward “communal hermeneutics” and group preparation for events; they affirm artists and poets, photographers and sculptors, and they value the contributions of those on the margins. Gift-oriented lay ministry distributes the load and the responsibilities. But this requires an equipping process to prepare God’s people for works of service, involving apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Eph 4:11-12.

Leadership Dependency

Are these offices listed in Eph 4 necessarily church leaders? The assumption that they are is widespread in inherited and emerging churches, but the text of Ephesians doesn’t mention it. Do they require leadership status [and formal credentials](#)? Leadership as a gift is listed alongside other gifts (Rom 12:4-8) rather than being a requisite in order to exercise the others. One of the toxins of Christendom is the belief that the emergence or evolution of post-Christendom churches depends *primarily* on church leaders. P. 186-188

²³ Multi-voiced ecclesiology is dealt with at length in another book. [It is distinguished from pluralism and diversity by the fact that the various “voices” of personal experience, marginal doctrine, worship style and content, are all under the same roof. Each expresses itself to enrich the understanding and experience of all. That’s the theory. In practice, it turns out looking and sounding like the “Rainbow Coalition” of the American Democratic party: chaos trumps variety and tolerance becomes intolerable – each constituency curries group acceptance and favor.](#)

As a result, our churches have become “professional” in their administration with managers and field specialists of every kind. We have youth leaders for young people, evangelists to enlarge congregations, worship leaders to ensure inspired worship, [and an army of specialists in HR, finance, pastoral care, facility management, procurement, maintenance, etc.](#) Where we cannot [afford separate positions](#), we place the entire burden on the pastor who is already overburdened with sermon preparation, [funerals, marriages, counseling, planning, etc.](#) Leaders are made the scapegoat for their church’s failure to adapt to a changing context.

The recovery of apostles, prophets, and evangelists is critical for the emergence of a missional church. Apostolic leadership in particular is prone to hierarchical and patriarchal expressions; specially gifted men are hailed as quasi-messianic figures who will lead churches towards growth, social influence, and revival. [That makes for a pastor-centered instead of Christ-centered church. It makes it personality-dependent instead of mission-dependent. And it undermines any attempt to diversify the gifts by equipping the saints.](#) If missional churches are to emerge, then we sorely need lightweight networking arrangements to replace cumbersome hierarchical structures. An apostolic model cannot deliver this. Controlling leadership stifles creativity, stunts innovation and imagination, forces uniformity, and silences dissent. P. 188-190

Emphasizing gifted leaders rather than multi-gifted communities, and assuming that such leaders are “on the front line,” is nothing more than a revamped Christendom approach. Leith Anderson comments wryly, *“Frankly we have had many years of church history in which the leaders of the church have seen the church as the end and the people as the means.”* In post-Christendom churches, leaders should be operating accountably in a team context with others whose gifts and perspectives are different. Their role is to empower rather than perform, and to develop processes to sustain the community and equip those who really are on the front line. P. 190-191.

Those who select and train leaders need to look for a different skill set. Networkers, community theologians, team-builders, spiritual directors, mentors, coaches, and trainers who equip others may be more valuable than public performers. Some emerging churches neither can nor wish to support full-time paid leaders so that responsibilities are more widely shared. Some use rotating leadership, with people exercising leadership in more functional and less formal ways. Many reject professional and hierarchical models in favor of more relaxed, relational, and consensual leadership. Most value the leadership gifts of women and reject patriarchal models. Many need leaders whose primary gifts are not preaching or public leadership but networking and equipping others. Some replace worship leaders with “worship curators” or apparently leaderless worship. If post-Christendom churches are to become multi-gifted communities and mature, then training for all (not just leaders) is essential. P. 192-193

3. From Worship Services to Worshipful Service

Worship may have predominated in Christendom, to the detriment of mission and community, but no one is suggesting that it receive less attention. Worship must be seen in a broader range of activities. At issue is the relationship between worship in its narrow sense of a corporate meeting and worship as it is exercised in other aspects of Christian discipleship. [“Whatever you do, do it as for the Lord.”](#)

Values of Emergent Church Worship:

- *Both diversity and unity:* multi-congregational and menu-churches offer diverse expressions of worship tailored to particular groups of worshippers, but they hold these together within one church community. It is a determined attempt to be culturally sensitive without abandoning unity. Mono-ethnic churches and those developing a contextual liturgy prioritize their diversity. We might discover and express our unity among diverse groups more effectively through shared mission or shared meals than by shared worship.
- *Both centered and de-centered:* alternative worship is a struggle for visitors who cannot identify who is leading them, or even which way to face. This is intentional. They are multi-directional, individualized, and de-centered, having an aversion to front-led events with worship as clerical performance.
- *Both culturally attuned and counter-cultural:* in a diverse and changing culture, cultural attunement is the initial stage in missional engagement. The path to counter-cultural worship runs *through* culturally attuned worship. True worship is profoundly counter-cultural, calling worshippers to embrace an alternative vision, “deviant” values, and a different metanarrative, with implications for both mission and community. “Jesus is Lord” is a profoundly political statement making all other sources of authority relative.
- *Both creative and sustainable:* the time and energy devoted to preparing for worship events in emerging churches is remarkable, as is the creativity that shapes them. They involve many people, and require diverse gifts. But it must be sustainable. Where there are limited resources, and constant innovation, it may not be sustainable. It deflects time and creative energy from building community and engaging in mission. P. 197-200

Post-Christendom Worship

*For whom do churches design their corporate worship?*²⁴ Worship-oriented churches may not be indifferent to those who do not belong, but many are concerned primarily about designing worship that is congenial to existing members. Some mono-ethnic churches want people from other ethnic groups to join them, but few will adapt their worship style to accommodate them. Those who favor alternative worship insist that authenticity, not accessibility, is critical. They

²⁴ I believe where we’ve gone wrong as to how we draw people to the church, is that we are designing our worship services as the primary means of evangelistic outreach. Instead of *evangelism then worship*, we have created *worship-as-evangelism*. It makes no biblical sense, and it has no biblical foundation. How can those who do not know God, and have not acknowledged Christ, worship in Spirit and in truth? Do we honestly believe that by observing worship, non-believers will want to worship? We have failed to proclaim the gospel clearly and completely through believer-based evangelism, and so we’ve pushed the responsibility onto a pastor-evangelist. What ought to be believer-worship has been turned into seeker-worship, and believer-worship has been pushed to Wednesday nights, or into small groups. The church building has become a draw in itself for those who think it’s somehow “proper and fitting” to attend a church in the traditional Christendom sense. We’ve been substituting entertainment and an array of social and psychological services for the truth of Christ as the “main attraction.” We’re tailoring our music and our message in hopes of evangelizing those within our walls. And those within our walls are not being evangelized because they don’t know they aren’t saved. We’ve convinced them that attendance and participation is the mark of a Christian, not belief. And so we’re finding increasing numbers of nominal Christians who haven’t heard, and do not understand, the gospel of Jesus Christ. They cannot subscribe to what they have not heard; thus they cannot commit to it. Likewise, the church doesn’t commit to train those who do attend, and cannot get anyone’s commitment in return. There is no relationship, only association – hence we find the same isolation and abandonment in the church that we find in the world. It’s a take-it-or-leave-it life. There is no sense of mission, of where we’re headed and how we intend to get there. We’re not adequately equipping believers for the journey. Without specific goals to which all believers may subscribe, there is no sense of corporate identity. Nor is there a sense of personal identity, because there is no observation of each believer by the elders in the local body, no identification of his or her giftedness and where each fits into the mission picture. Mega-churches seemingly make that impossible – but I think that’s why the bible specifies leaders of tens, hundreds, and thousands. Moreover, there is no crucible in which each of those who commit may be tested – no sending out of the seventy. There is only aimless activity. It’s sad that the only ones who seem to grasp the biblical process are cults and street gangs – William Gross.

design it for those who already belong. Some mission oriented churches suggest worship should arise from interaction with people beyond the church; if it is rooted in their culture, they may be more likely to own it. Other church planters intentionally use an indigenous worship style that is not congenial to the planters but contextually appropriate. If belonging continues to precede believing, and spirituality is a doorway to Christian faith,²⁵ post-Christendom churches must design their corporate worship to balance the needs of present and potential members. P. 200-201

Re-integrating Worship and Daily Life

Many church leavers disembark because what happens on Sunday is unrelated to the rest of their lives. In 321 AD, the Roman emperor Constantine made Sunday a day of rest. This released Christians from the demands of work; they no longer needed to worship together early in the morning or after work. But it also disconnected worship and work.²⁶ Workplace churches are an attempt to reconnect these elements. Midweek worship incorporates worship into existing community groups or shared activities. New monasticism integrates personal and corporate spiritual rhythms into daily life. Some substitute their missionary or community work for their worship time. Seven-days-a-week churches don't differentiate between those who worship together and those who participate in other aspects of church life. Parachurch groups either attend local congregations for their worship, or it is optional. P. 201-202

Church Beyond the Congregation

Many Christians are confident that they can survive and even thrive without participating in corporate worship. Some report new opportunities, time, and enthusiasm to engage in mission or various community initiatives now that they are disengaged from the demands of church. But it's too soon to judge whether those who have left churches can survive and thrive long-term without corporate worship. Is the relaxed and congenial experience of eating and talking with friends enough to sustain worship? Is corporate worship alongside those who are different actually essential for spiritual growth? What about their children? P. 202-203 Although Australian Jim Thwaites is a strong advocate of non-congregational church, Christians who live on the margins will not be able to sustain kingdom-oriented social transformation without the flawed but vital witness of distinctive Christian communities. P. 204-206

The Rhythms and Resources of Tradition

There are a number of practices that churches have always had which enhance the missional and communal dimensions of the worshipping congregation: corporate bible reading, praying the Psalms, corporate songs, passing the peace through hugs and handshakes, corporate intercession, communion, transcultural liturgy using songs, prayers, stories, and rituals from other times and places – all of which affirm that we are one Body in Christ. P. 211-212

²⁵ And yet these are the very issues in dispute. Such assertions demonstrate a radical Arminian and Liberal bent. They suggest that association is the primary component of conversion and of church life, that we can *socialize* people into Christianity, and that the worship service is a spiritual Field of Dreams. If we build it right, they will come and want to play ball with us. At best it is naïve; at worst, it is unbiblical and unwarranted.

²⁶ And yet the OT prescribes one day in seven as a Sabbath in which no work is to be done. There is an astounding lack of dependence on the Scriptural model as Murray examines every other conceivable model. Eph 4 is seen as the end we want, without a Scriptural means to get there; so we experiment until we get it right. Ironically, he is returning to a Revivalist audience-focused model: it's just another form of seeker church. Our story is consumer-driven, not Christ-driven; our ways are their ways with a dash of spirituality. The more familiar it looks to them, he suggests, the more likely they'll join our team – no activity of the Spirit, no proclamation of the truth of Christ; this is *not* counter-cultural.

Simplicity without being Simplistic

Institutional Christendom churches are too complex, too busy, too distracted, and too large to do the mission for which they exist. Their congregations and leaders are exhausted after years of carrying responsibilities in an apparently insatiable institution, punctuated at regular intervals by new challenges, strategies, visions, and programs. They simply cannot sustain the pace any longer. The work demands precipitate a crisis, and the questions become unanswerable. What is church for? How does it relate to the rest of my life? Why am I doing this? What would happen if I just stopped? The paraphernalia, expectations, and activities that even churches at the center of a sacral society cannot sustain, are inappropriate and burdensome for a marginal missionary movement. We not only need to do things differently, we need to do fewer things. Simplicity in worship frees up our resources for mission and community.

Talk of simplicity raises fears that church might become simplistic. This is why many people leave church. They find unpalatable its superficial relationships, infantile ethos, dependency culture, facile biblical interpretation, and crass comments on social and cultural issues. This is not the kind of church envisioned in Ephesians 4. We are no longer infants, easily deceived or impressed by clever talk. Perhaps communities as well as individuals can achieve mature simplicity. It is not a ‘back to basics’ approach that entrenches inherited ways of doing things. It won’t excuse us from engaging with the complex plurality of postmodern and post-Christendom culture. The diversity of our responses will likely increase rather than decrease. Nor can we evade moving beyond our homogeneity to crossing cultural boundaries expressing unity through diversity. But sustainable responses to these challenges may need to be relatively simple. We want to remove the “clutter” and live more simply as a community.

Simplicity is attractive when we do simple things well: loving each other, practicing forgiveness, confessing our sins, living our faith by kindness, sincerity, and neighborliness, and not being anxious about tomorrow. When we look at things that divide human society, the diligent practice of such virtues becomes quite impressive. Graham Tomlin argues that churches must first provoke questions by the way Christians live and congregations operate, rather than answer questions that people have no incentive to ask. Gracious but counter-cultural behavior, healthy and honest relationships, and worship that is both authentic and accessible may provoke such questions. Simple and ordinary Christian living is attractive and effective in all cultures. Simple grass-roots involvement in the local community will do more to restore the church’s tarnished image and commend the story it tells than anything churches can say or do at the national level.

Church after Christendom is a community that sustains hope. Modernity and postmodernity both lack hope. Modernity anticipated progress towards a utopian future, but this future had no sense of purpose or ultimate meaning. Postmodernity is deeply skeptical about progress and meaning. But can human beings live without hope, without a story? This is the primary task of the church – to offer hope: humbly, graciously, gently, and winsomely. Hope must be realistic, not fantastic. It is hope rooted in the story of Israel and culminating in the story of Jesus – a story that we must commend with sensitivity and integrity, confident in God’s future.²⁷ P. 225-232

²⁷ The assumption throughout this book is that God’s word is a powerful story, but it is not an effectual agent of change in itself. Curious.