

It's the End of the Church as We Know It, and I Feel Fine
Three Responses of the Church to the Tidal Wave of Change

Chuck Swindoll tells a modern parable of the church. There was once a dangerous seacoast notorious for shipwrecks. Every year hundreds of bodies and wreckage would wash up on the shore. A small group of locals decided to do something about it. They bought a lifeboat, and build a crude lifeboat station to put it in and to help those they rescued.

The few devoted members kept a constant vigil over the turbulent sea. With little thought for themselves, they would go out day and night tirelessly searching for those in danger. Many lives were saved by this brave band of rescuers who faithfully worked as one out of the lifesaving station. As more and more people were saved, word spread about their efforts.

Some of those who had been saved as well as others along the seacoast wanted to be a part of it. They gave their time and energy and money to support its cause. New boats were purchased. New crews were trained. The little ramshackle lifesaving station began to grow.

Some of its members, though, were unhappy that the station was so unattractive and poorly equipped. They felt a more appropriate place should be provided. Emergency cots were replaced with lovely furniture. Rough, handmade equipment was discarded and the latest in modern tech was installed. The hut, of course, had to be torn down to make room for new, state of the art facilities.

After completion, the new lifesaving center became a popular gathering place, but its purpose began to change. It was now a sort of clubhouse, an attractive building for public gatherings. There were more yachts moored outside of the center than lifeboats. Saving lives became secondary.

Sure, lifesaving motifs still dominated the center's decorations. Rescuing shipwrecked victims remained the stated purpose of their charter. The lifeboat center was overflowing with people. However, fewer members were willing to sign up for lifesaving missions at sea, so they hired professional lifeboat crews to do this work.

Sometime later, a large ship wrecked off the coast and the boat crews brought in loads of wet, cold, half-drowned people. They were dirty, some terribly sick and injured. The beautiful new club suddenly became a filthy mess. Expensive equipment was damaged and nice furniture was ruined. A special committee was formed to build a shower and bunk house outside, away from

the station so victims of shipwrecks would not interfere with the main facility.

Eventually, a few of the lifesaving center's members felt the cause of rescuing people had been lost. Meetings were held and there were many strong words and angry feelings. Most of the people wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities altogether. "It's too unpleasant, it's a hindrance to our social life, they could threaten our way of life." A few, however, still insisted upon saving lives; this was their mission. Their only reason for existence was rescuing anyone who needed help. They were voted down and told that if they wanted to save lives in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. That is what they did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are common in those waters, as are drownings.

This is the story of the church. But it is a story that is about to change... dramatically! Last week we looked at the collapse of the church culture. There are several cultural and demographic shifts taking place in our country that spell not just change, but many believe it means the total upheaval of church culture. George Barna, the leading researcher and pollster of the North American church says, "It is the end of the church as we know it." Reggie McNeal, who serves as the Missional Leadership Specialist for the Leadership Network, calls it the complete collapse of church culture. To sum last week: the church no longer has any significant influence on popular culture, and the church subculture quickly reaching a point where it will no longer be able to sustain itself, its facilities and programs. And this may be a very good thing.

Throughout church history there have been times when the church became weighed down with human traditions and teaching, and she strayed from her purpose and divine calling. There would then be periods of upheaval, hardship and change. The church always emerged renewed, revitalized, and stronger than before. I have no doubt that the very same thing will happen this time. Jesus promised that he would build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The end of the church as we know it will make room for the church as God wants it.

To add to George Barna and borrow from a famous song by R.E.M. "It's the end of the church as we know it, and I feel fine."

How should we respond to this tidal wave of change? How can we be on board with God leading in the future, and not be washed out into the sea of history? How can we feel fine about the end of the church as we know it? There are three responses the church can have. The first two are very tempting and seem attractive, but they are wrong.

I. Withdraw

The first response is to withdraw— to abandon our culture, pull out, and live in our own little church bubble while hopefully the tidal wave washes over us and passes us by. This is the hunker-in-the-bunker mentality.

I must confess, this sometimes feels like a really good idea. I don't know about you. Maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm weird, but sometimes I have these fantasies. I have this dream about how wonderful it would be to be able to buy a private Island in the Caribbean and populate it with a bunch of like-minded believers, and there we could live happily ever after far removed from all of the world's problems. Or we could be like modern pilgrims go somewhere and establish a colony of our own and worship God as we see fit. We could build a giant spaceship, call it Mayflower 2, and we could go find our own planet. On this planet there would be no one to harass us or mock us. We would be free to worship God and live our lives. Do you ever have fantasies like that, or am I just weird?

It sounds like a great idea, but there's just a couple of little problems in withdrawing.

A. It is Disobedient

The first problem is it's disobedient. It's not what God has called us to do. Jesus tells his disciples, and I think ultimately He tells all of us in Mark 16:15, *“go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”* You go, he says, and where does he tell us to go? Into the world, not away from it.

The command to go is a giant road sign with an arrow pointing us to the world. Withdrawing is going in the opposite direction. There are a lot of times I'd rather not go that way. I'd much prefer going this way. That way is hard. It is full of problems and difficulties. I'm going to get hurt. Can't we please go this way instead? No, we can't, and still be the people God has called us to be.

It ignores our main mission and purpose as the church. God didn't place the church in the world to be a spiritual survival bunker from the world or an all-inclusive resort that allows

us to escape the world. We are not a refuge. We are a rescue mission. Imagine if all the doctors and nurses at Mercy and Cox decided they had had enough of all the sick and injured people. They decided that people live unhealthy lives that make them sick. They didn't eat the right food. They didn't get enough exercise. They kept doing stupid, reckless things, so they all decided to leave. They were going somewhere there was only healthy people who lived healthy lives. I know it's ridiculous and far-fetched. You have doctors where there are sick people. But it's no different when the church decides to withdraw from the world. Where you have sinners, there you need the church.

B. It Doesn't Work.

The second problem is it doesn't work. One of the great mistakes the Jews of Jesus' day made was that they believed the best way they could serve and worship God was to separate themselves from the rest of the world. They had all kinds of rules to make sure they didn't get too close to the world and the world didn't get too close to them. They had rules about what they ate, who they ate with, where they went, what they wore, what they could and couldn't do, all just to make sure that the world stayed a safe distance away.

This was one of the attitudes Jesus had to confront in his disciples. In Acts chapter 10, Peter was being a good Jew, following the rules praying at the assigned time of the day. God gives him a vision that completely rocks his world.

Acts 10:9-15; 27-8

Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."...

Peter was so stubborn; God had to tell him three times. Just as he was wrestling with what this meant, the doorbell rings. There were some non-Jews at the door. The rules of separation said a good Jew never eats with a non-Jew. In fact, Peter prided himself on not ever having eaten with a non-Jew in all of his life. Peter realized that God was telling him that all of these rules he thought would keep him safe from the world were actually keeping him from his mission field. So Peter went with these guys to the home of a Roman centurion, and here Peter

explains the vision to them.

27 ...Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean."

We can be like Peter. We think if we have enough separation from the world we'll be safe. We even have our own list of rules. When my dad was a kid some of the rules were things like good Christians don't play cards. Good Christians don't play pool. One Christmas my dad and his brother got a pool table for Christmas. They told some of their buddies at church about it. Some of these kids told their dads who were elders, and that very afternoon, the elders showed up at my dad's house and took the pool table away. They didn't want the world to get too close.

When I was growing up in the church the rules had changed a bit. My grandparents now played cards although it was just Rook and Uno. Now the rules were things like good Christians don't go to dances. I wasn't allowed to go to my own prom. Good Christian boys didn't have long hair. Good Christians don't listen to rock music. Traveling evangelists would come to town preaching the evils of rock music. They told us things like KISS stood for Kids in Satan's Service and AC/DC stood for Anti-Christ Devils Children. They played records backward and told us it was the voice of Satan. They even said the syncopated beats of Christian rock music could lead to demon possession.

When I was in college I learned that about 95% of what these guys told us were complete fabrications. The rules have changed again, but the desire and the intention is just the same: Keep the world at a safe distance away.

The reason the rules keep changing is they don't work. They don't really keep the world away. The problem is in here, not out there. Paul writes about the failure of such rules:

Col 2:23, These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.

James 1:14 Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away.

I'm not saying we should be unconcerned about the world's influence on our lives. Just the opposite. We should be very aware. But building walls of rules don't keep the world out of our hearts and minds. The way to protect yourself from the world is to love Jesus, and to follow

him with all of your heart.

The rules don't succeed in keeping the world from influencing us, but they do keep us from influencing the world. When we try to withdraw and separate from the world, we are deciding not to impact the world, to not reach it. The very world Jesus died to save we try to leave. God placed the church in the world because he wants us to reach the world. We are the life preserver God has thrown to a shipwrecked and drowning world.

II. Fight

The other tempting response is to fight. If we can't withdraw from culture, maybe we can go to war with it. We hear a lot today about the culture war, and there are a lot of Christians who believe winning it is the primary mission of the church.

There are those that think that through protest, activism, politics, civil disobedience, and lots of rude, annoying Facebook posts we will win the battle, and we can change America back to a church culture.

I understand this desire too. I get angry at what I see happening in the world around me. I feel a righteous indignation. I yell at the TV at the foolishness I see. I want to fight back. I want to fire off angry emails and post indignant messages. However, politics and activism will not be our salvation. As Cal Thomas reminds us, "The kingdom of God will not arrive aboard Air Force One." Don't get me wrong. We should be responsible citizens, and good stewards of the political freedoms and rights that we have as Americans. We should be politically engaged.

Christians who say we shouldn't be actively engaged with the popular culture are off base. It is to be poor stewards of what we have been given. It is to ignore a good opportunity to have a positive impact. There is a difference though between being positively engaged and fighting it out with an enemy.

Nothing in the N.T. makes me believe that political activism is the mission and purpose of the church. The ministry of the N.T. church was never political engagement. It was to proclaim the good news of Jesus, and to show the love of Jesus to others. The early church never protested high taxes. They never marched on Rome. Paul never wrote a letter to churches urging them to boycott. We do see Paul exercise his rights as a Roman citizen. He makes very powerful and persuasive appeals to those in authority, but even those were to convince them of the truth of Jesus, not politics. I guess what I'm saying it this is that politics

and activism may be a tool that we can use if we can do so positively, but it's never our calling. There are a couple of reasons for this.

A. It Confuses the Victim With the Enemy.

First it confuses the victim with the enemy. The problem with culture war is that the world is not the enemy. It is the victim of the enemy. The people of the world aren't to be defeated, they are to be saved. Fighting with the people you are trying to save isn't going to fulfill our calling.

We are in a war. There is a battle going on, but it is a spiritual battle. Eph. 6:12 says, *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

If we get caught up in the culture war, even if we win that battle, we might lose the war that matters. We're not here to win elections or court decisions, but to win hearts and souls to Jesus. When Jesus went to battle, he went toe to toe with the self-righteous. He got combative with the religious leaders, but never with the world. Never at sinners. For them, he had compassion. For them, he had tears. We need to be praying for the world. We need to be hurting for the world. We need to be serving the world, but not fighting it.

B. It Fails to Show the Love of Jesus

Fighting with world not only confuses the victim with the enemy, but it also fails to show the love of Jesus. It's hard to love someone you are fighting against. I see a lot of Christians who are bitter. They are angry with the world. They are hateful. If we are busy mocking, ridiculing, and attacking the world, how are we going to love them?

Listen to what Paul says about what kind of attitude and behavior should characterize our engagement with the world.

Titus 3:1-2

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men.

This points us to a third way that doesn't mean withdrawing from our culture or going to war with it. It doesn't mean becoming like the world. It is to engage the world with the love and truth of Jesus.

Prayer