

You've probably seen *Field of Dreams*. It's one of the great sports movies of all time. A farmer named Ray Kinsella has a vision to build a baseball field in the middle of his cornfield. All of these great baseball players from history come wandering in from the stalks of corn. One of them asks, "Is this heaven?" Kevin Costner's farmer replies, "No, this is Iowa." I've lived in Iowa. I don't think anyone would ever confuse it with heaven. But do you all remember the great catchphrase from that movie– the mantra that drove Ray to build his baseball field? If you build it, they will come."

This has been the philosophy of the church for many years. We believed that if we built it they would come. If we build the right building, in the right location, and if we built the right services, with the right music, and the right preaching and we had the right programs and the right ministries, people would come to our churches.

We've made building it into a science. Church growth experts could tell you how to design your facilities. Consultants could tell you how to design your services. We had conferences and conventions to help us build it better. We did all of this so they would come. We would build the right church, then we would invite people to come and see, and they would want to be a part of it.

There is nothing wrong with this approach in and of itself. Philip, one of the disciples of Jesus used this very approach himself with Nathanael in John 1:45-46. Check this out.

Philip found Nathanael and told him, '*We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom prophets also wrote– Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.*' 'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?' Nathanael asked.

Let me translate that for you. "Can anything good come out that backwoods, one-stoplight, hick town?" And listen to what Philip says. "Come and see." Come check it out and see for yourself.

The apostle Paul understood the local church could have this kind of impact. Paul tells the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 14 that when the church comes together and they use their spiritual gifts– they speak, they sing, they instruct that it all should be done in a way that makes sense, in a way that an outsider could understand and they may be convinced and convicted by the truth. And so Paul urges them in verse 40 "Everything should be done in a

fitting and orderly way.” So, Paul’s philosophy wasn’t build it and they will come, but build so that if they do come, they can understand.

For decades this seemed to be an effective strategy. We saw the advent of the mega-church and we saw churches with 5,000, 10,000, 20,000 and more. We saw the dawn of the multi-campus church, where people listened not to a live preacher, but watched a video. We’ve now got live streaming of the these services so you can watch while still lying in bed in your underwear. Increasingly, I talk to people and when I ask them where they go to church, they tell me, “Oh, we watch the such and such podcast. We’ve been doing the so and so series from iChurch, and in their mind that counts as being a part of a church. There’s no community, there’s no commitment. There’s no engagement other than tapping a screen.

The mega-churches were going to lead the people of God into the future. Churches all across the nation looked to Willow Creek Community Church to become seeker sensitive. We looked to Saddleback to become Purpose Driven. We looked to South East Christian Church and to other mega churches. We tried to build it, but did they come?

Don't get me wrong. I'm not one of the those anti-mega-church guys. I deeply appreciate what they've done. My ministry has benefited from them. The mega-churches have done many great things, and they still are. But the results are in and the numbers are not encouraging. We must face up to the reality. We are not reaching our culture for Christ.

The mega churches, with a few remarkable exceptions, have succeeded not in reaching the lost, but in attracting the already churchied. They didn't find the lost lambs, they just moved sheep from one pasture to another. People left smaller churches with less and went to bigger churches with more.

While the mega-churches seemed to be thriving, that success hasn’t carried over to most other churches. Overall church attendance declined. Every year between 1 and 2 million people leave the church, thousands of pastors quit the ministry, and more than 4,000 churches close their doors, and until recently there weren’t enough new church plants to replace them. We built it, but they didn't come.

One Reality: The Collapse of Church Culture

Here is the reality: we are witnessing the collapse of the church culture. Reggie McNeal, author and director of leadership development for S. Carolina Baptist convention writes:

The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order.

Reggie is not a lone voice. George Barna, a Christian researcher, author and pollster says emphatically, “*It is the end of the church as we know it.*” In other words, “If we build it, they won't come.”

These Christian leaders are merely echoing what those in the world have known for a long time. Yale Professor of Religious Studies Louis Dupre says:

The West appears to have said its farewell to a Christian culture ... Christianity has become a historical factor subservient to a secular culture rather than functioning as the creative power it once was.

What would make these guys say such dire things about the church? What do they mean that the church is on life support, or that it's the end of the church as we know it, or that the church is just a historical factor? It's because of two very significant realizations.

Two Realizations:

One: The Church Doesn't Impact the Popular Culture

First, the collapse of church culture means that the church no longer impacts popular culture. We have no meaningful influence on our culture. The church exists in its own little bubble, and our culture does its thing, and what we do in our church bubble has very little influence on the culture. In most cases, the church is a non-factor. The church isn't even a blip on most people's radar screens.

This is a fairly new development. Our society was once defined by the presence of the church. Even though everyone was not a committed Christian, our culture's morals and accepted norms of behavior were largely influenced by Christian values. We now live in a culture, though, where the actions, beliefs and influence of the church don't even register on the cultural Richter scale.

George Barna did a major study to find out what factors influenced people's lives. He gauged things like the news media, politicians, family and friends, entertainment and

celebrities, as well as the church. Do you know what he found? In the average American's life the church is one of the least influential factors. It's not even in the top dozen.

When I first entered the ministry I served a church in rural Kansas, and it was like a time capsule left over from another world. Local pastors still spoke at Christmas convocation of the public high school. Teachers didn't assign homework on Wednesdays because that was church night. There were no games on Wednesday night, and the practices always let out early. On Sunday morning everything was closed, and most people still went to one of three churches. The gas station did open at noon. But the restaurant, the mechanic, the grain elevator, the candy factory were all closed on Sunday.

There was a day and age when the church was the center of the community. It would be one of the first buildings built in town. It was at the center of town. It was the school. It was the town meeting hall. The community calendar was structured around the church. There were blue laws. Stores and businesses were closed on Sunday. People didn't have to work on Sunday. Your kids didn't have soccer or baseball games on Sunday or Wednesday.

In those days everyone knew what it meant if you called someone a Pharisee or Judas. If a city was called a Sodom, everyone knew what that meant. That's because our culture was informed by a biblical worldview. Those days are gone, and they're not coming back.

The community and the school aren't going to plan their activities around the church. Now the church has to plan its calendar around everything else. Kids have games on Sundays. Many people have to work on Sundays. Stores are open and have sales on Sunday mornings.

When I type my sermons I have problems with my spell checker, because it doesn't recognize some of the most common words we use in the church and the Bible. When Jane Austen's novels *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* were made into movies, they had to filter out much of her original biblical vocabulary, because the American audience no longer knew what her words meant.

A few years ago some Christian friends went to the NCAA basketball tournament. Under the basket was the ubiquitous guy with the orange hair and the giant John 3:16 sign. Behind my friends sat two couples who were debating what the John 3:16 sign meant. One thought it was

an advertisement for a new restaurant, another thought it was a signal for someone to meet him at the John on the third floor, stall 16.

These are just random examples, and we could go on all day with them, but they all show that we now live in a culture no longer influenced by the church. To further underscore that fact, Christians and churches are now about the only group that it's acceptable to mock and ridicule. If you make fun of any other group it is considered prejudiced, but poke fun at Christians, everyone laughs. Not only that, Christians and churches are beginning to be routinely and systematically ostracized, pushed aside and have their civil rights violated in this country. Teachers are fired for reading their Bibles at lunch. Judges are reprimanded for quoting the Bible in their decisions. Cities are fined for nativity displays. Crosses and the Ten Commandments are being ripped down.

This doesn't mean that people no longer have a spiritual interest. The vast majority of Americans still believe in God and describe themselves as spiritual. Most Americans still pray and Jesus still remains remarkably popular. The thing is most people don't believe the church has the answers. They see it as a dried-up, irrelevant, dusty institution. America is now turning to other spiritual leaders instead of the church: Deepak Chopra, Paulo Coelho, James Redfield, Rhonda Byrne, and Eckhart Tolle.

What we in the church need to realize is this. It isn't going back to the way it used to be. We've fooled ourselves into thinking that if we just work harder. If we just do church better we can turn things around. No matter how much we wish for it. No matter how hard we work for it, it isn't going back. We live in a different world. We need to get over it and get on with it.

Two: The Church Subculture itself is Facing Imminent Collapse

The second realization about the collapse of the church culture is this: The church subculture itself is facing imminent collapse. The institutional church in America is built on ground that is eroding quickly. It is not a question of if, but a question of when the whole thing comes crashing down on itself.

Here's what I mean by the church subculture. The church has built around itself, its own little world. We have our own organizations, institutions and parachurch ministries. We have our own publishing companies with our own books and magazines. We have our own

entertainment industry with our own musicians, comedians and entertainers. We have our own education system with our own schools, colleges and universities. All of this is glued together with a certain set of traditions and expectations.

This is the church, as we know it, and its collapsing. To pretend otherwise is to stick our heads in the sand. The old traditional denominations are hemorrhaging members at such an alarming rate their extinction seems unavoidable, and in many cases that will be a good thing. Even the newer, more vibrant denominations are struggling. The Southern Baptists which recently were the fastest growing group of Christians in the United States have now started declining. The independent Christian Churches with whom we identify have stagnated ourselves. According to U.S. Religion Census our churches grew by less than 1% over the previous decade.

Running Out of Money

Let me break this down in three ways. First of all, the money is running out. 80 % of money given to churches comes from people 55 and older. Once baby boomers leave their careers and retire on fixed wages, unless something dramatic changes, most of the money that the church has been running on will be gone.

Running Out of People

But it's not just the money that is running out. It's the people. Let me share with you the one statistic that jumped out at me at the NACC this last week. This is percentage of Christ followers by generation.

Builders (before 1946) – 65%
Boomers (1946-1964) – 34%
Busters (1965-1980) – 16%
Millennials (1981- above age 18) – 4%

For the first three generations, we see a drop off of about 50%, but when we get to the millennials it goes over a cliff. What we're doing isn't working. Dawson McAllister, a leading youth ministry expert says that 90% of the kids active in youth groups will drop out of church by their 2nd year in college. 1/3 of them will never come back. The answer isn't more guitars, more lights, more of what we've been doing, only better. One of the most compelling things I heard last week came from Craig Groeschel, lead pastor of Life Church. He said that if was

starting a church today, it would look nothing like Life Church. He said the contemporary church is the new traditional. We are in the same place now, the church was in the 80s and 90s with its piano and organ and hymns and pews. Our job is not to catch up to LifeChurch, but to figure out what's next.

Running Out of Influence

There is one other factor that points to the imminent collapse of the church subculture, and it helps explain why the church no longer has any influence on popular culture as a whole. Attending church has little influence on our own lives. There is very little measurable difference between church goers and non-church goers.

The people sitting in church are statistically unrecognizable from the rest of the population as a whole. In other words, our being in church is having very little impact on our own lives. We've lost our saltiness. We've hidden our light. No wonder the church has little impact in the world. The bottom line is this. In a few years not only will nobody come, there will be nobody to build it and no money to build it with.

III. Reality Three: The Church Will Not Fail

I believe this is an honest and realistic appraisal of the church in North America. The question now is, what are we going to do about it? I think there are three potential responses we can have. Two of them I believe are wrong and destructive responses, but they are also very tempting and alluring. There is also a third response. A biblical answer that will enable the church to reach out to the world with eternal life. We will look at those responses next week

Please don't hear what I'm not saying this morning. When I say that we are witnessing the collapse of church culture in America, I'm not talking about the death of the church. Jesus told the apostle Peter in Matthew 16:18, **1.** *"I will build my church and all the powers of hell will not conquer it."* Hebrews 12 declares **2.** that the church is a mountain that cannot be moved, a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Ephesians 1:23 tells us **3.** the church is the fullness of Christ who fills everything in every way. Eph. 3:10 says it is through **4.** the church that the manifold wisdom of God will be made known, and in verse 21 **5.** God's glory will be in the church throughout all generations. I Tim. 3:15 says we are **6.** the church of the living God, the pillar

and foundation of the truth. The church of Jesus Christ will not fail, she will not fall, she will not falter. She will fulfill all that God has intended for her.

The death of the church culture, doesn't mean the death of the church. In fact, it could very well mean a great resurgence and revival of the church like we've never seen before. We just have to be careful not to confuse the church culture which is dying with the true church.

Much of what we call "church" today didn't exist in the first century. If you were walking down the streets of Ephesus in A.D. 80 and you were talking to one of the first Christians and you asked, "where is the church?" or, "What time is church?" "What ministries does your church have?" "Which church do you attend?" Do you realize most of these questions would be meaningless to him?

Much, if not most of what we call and think of as "church" is not really church at all. It is our own church culture, and it is this church culture which is dying, not the true church. If it has outlived its place and purpose, let us not waste our energy and resources trying to save it. As Jesus hung on the cross he never wanted the impact of his sacrifice to be reduced to an invitation for people to join and to support an institution." Let us put our hearts into what Jesus put us here for in the first place, to love God with all of our heart, with all of our soul and with all of our mind, and to love others as ourselves and reach them with the love of God shown through Jesus. That's it.

A hundred years from now the church will still be alive and well, it will just look drastically different from what we're used to calling "church" now. Will we be a footnote in history, or a bridge to the future. That's up to us.