

Why Your Congregation Is More Important Than Ever

Quotations

“Christian” America is Gone. Cultural Angst

“The twenty-first century will be equivalent to 20,000 years of progress at today’s rate of progress.” – Ray Kurzweil of Google

“The rate of technological change is now accelerating so fast that it has risen above the average rate at which most people can absorb all these changes. Many of us can’t keep pace anymore. ‘And this is causing us cultural angst.’” – Thomas Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late*

“Everyone’s in the dark looking for the switch. When you’re in the middle of history the meaning of things is usually unclear... In real time most things are obscure....‘Only slowly did it dawn upon us that the whole world structure and order that we had inherited from the nineteenth century was gone.’” – Peggy Noonan, Wall Street Journal, February 2018

Barna

The best way to find yourself is by looking within yourself. 91% of U.S. adults agree. 76% of practicing Christians agree.

People should not criticize someone else’s life choices. 89% and 76% agree.

To be fulfilled in life, you should pursue the things you desire most. 86% and 72% agree.

The highest goal of life is to enjoy it as much as possible. 84% and 67% agree.

“While we wring our hands about secularism spreading through culture, a majority of churchgoing Christians have embraced corrupt, me-centered theology.” – Barna Trends 2017

Symptoms of “Man Turned in on Himself”

Promiscuity, consumerism, obesity, narcissism, apathy, greed.

Chaos: Each being god leads to chaos. “Chaos ‘bounces back’ to the modern man in the form of increasing anxiety and depression.”

Distrust: “Our self-centeredness turns our fellow man into our competition.” Therefore, distrust.

Affinity in virtual communities: “We therefore create ‘safe’ and undemanding simulations of community for ourselves through technology.” – Choate Davis, 44

“Functional Atheism”

“The modern world quite literally ‘manages’ without God. We can do so much so well by ourselves that there is no need for God, even in his church. Thus we modern people can be profoundly secular in the midst of explicitly religious activities. Which explains why so many modern Christian believers are atheists unawares. Professing to be believers in supernatural realities, they are virtual atheists; whatever

they say they believe, they show in practice that they function without practical recourse to the supernatural. – Os Guinness, *The Call*, 149

“A third shadow common among leaders is ‘functional atheism,’ the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen – a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God.” – Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 88

Contradictory Developments Weakened Mediating Centers, like Congregations

“Individualism tends to weaken mediating power centers that stand between the individual and the nation as a whole—from families to local communities (including local governments), (and) religious institutions.... In their place, it strengthens individuals, on the one hand, and a central government, on the other, since such a government is most able to treat individuals equally by treating them all impersonally. For this reason, a hyper-individualist culture is likely to be governed by a hyper-centralized government, and each is likely to exacerbate the worst inclinations of the other.” – Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic*, 99-100. Cf. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*

Mark 7:21-23

“For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Romans 7:14, 18

“I am of the flesh, sold under sin.” “I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.”

Ephesians 2:1

“You were dead in trespasses and sins.”

Romans 3:23

“For all have sinned and fall short (present tense) of the glory of God.”

Augustana II

It is taught among us that since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God’s eternal wrath all who are not in turn born anew through baptism and the Holy Spirit.” – Kolb, Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 38

Romans 6:5-6

“We were therefore buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing.”

1 Peter 1:3

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Hyper-Individualism; “Hyper-centralized Government”

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“Hyper-Centralized Government” Has Resulted in Politicization of Life

“The state has increasingly become the incarnation of the public weal. Its laws, policies, and procedures have become the predominant framework by which we understand collective life, its members, its leading organizations, its problems, and its issues. There are other forces that frame common life as well—most notably the ubiquitous market—but these are not autonomous from the state but linked integrally with its extensive instrumentalities. This is the heart of politicization and it has gone so far as to affect our language, imagination, and expectations. The language of politics (and political economy) comes to frame progressively more of our understanding of our common life, our public purposes, and ourselves individually and collectively.” – James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*, 103

Your Congregation as a Needed Mediating Center

“Despite the massive scale and blanket coverage of the modern social service state, it fails to provide something essential...: the modeling of habits and values that lay the foundation for upward social mobility and life as a contributor to one’s community.” – Howard Husock, *Who Killed Civil Society?* Quoted by Leslie Lenkowsky, Wall Street Journal, September 10, 2019; A13. Cf. New Deal of FDR, Great Society of Lyndon Johnson.

“The ultimate soul-forming institutions in a free society are frequently religious institutions. Traditional religion offers a direct challenge to the ethic of the age of fracture. Religious commitments command us to a mixture of responsibility, sympathy, lawfulness, and righteousness that align our wants with our duties. They help form us to be free.” – Levin, 204

“There is a yearning for a different way, especially among the young; a way that has integrity with the historic truths of the faith and the witness of the Spirit and that is adequate to the challenges of the present moment.” – Hunter, 276

“Exile was the place where God was at work” – Hunter, 277. Cf. Jeremiah 29:4-7

“Formation into a vision of human flourishing (Cf. Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *Theology for the Life of the World*, 2019) requires an environment that embodies continuity, historical memory, rituals marking seasons of life, intergenerational interdependence, and most important of all, common worship.” – Hunter, 283.

Going to the Scriptures in the Face of Today’s Questions

“During the last year or so I’ve come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a homo religious, but simply a man, as Jesus was a man – in contrast, shall we say, to John the Baptist. I don’t mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness, characterized by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection. I think Luther lived a this-worldly life in this sense.

I remember a conversation that I had in America thirteen years ago with a young French pastor. We were asking ourselves quite simply what we wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint (and I think it's quite likely that he did become one). At the time, I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith.... I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problem, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is metanoia; and that is how one comes a man and a Christian.

May God in His mercy lead us through these times; but above all, may He lead us to Himself.” - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Collier; pp. 369-370

Yancey

“Having spent time around ‘sinners’ and also around purported saints, I have a hunch why Jesus spent so much time with the former group: I think he preferred their company. Because the sinners were honest about themselves and had no pretense, Jesus could deal with them. In contrast, the saints put on airs, judged him, and sought to catch him in a moral trap. In the end it was the saints, not the sinners, who arrested Jesus” (Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* In *unChristian*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, 60.

“Liberated from Shame and Guilt”

“Let's start with shame and guilt, because these are the two that we most often confuse, and the consequence of doing that is severe. The majority of shame researchers and clinicians agree that the difference between shame and guilt is best understood as the difference between ‘I am bad’ and ‘I did something bad.’

“Guilt = I did something bad.

“Shame = I am bad.

“When I was trying to decide how much I wanted to share with my team about how fear and anxiety were the real drivers behind my unreasonable timelines, it was shame that was holding me back. ...the gremlin message was *You research leadership and you can't even lead. You're a joke.*

“It wasn't guilt: *Man, I've been unfair to my team with these timelines. I've made the wrong choice for the wrong reasons.*

“It was shame: *It's not that I've made bad choices. I am a bad leader.*” – Brene Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 128.

“A Belonging Place and Launching Base”

Barclay

“The gift of God in Christ is articulated as an unconditioned gift in its creation of a community that neither mirrors nor endorses the regnant systems of value.” “Paul makes clear that the truth of the good news is entirely lost if it is not enacted in creative social relations that are apt to challenge central features of their cultural environment. The relationship between “theology” and “social practice” is thus mutually

constitutive: it is the Christ-event that gives meaning and shape to communal practice, while it is in social practice that the nature of the Christ-event is, or is not, realized.” – John M. Barclay, *Paul & the Gift*, 439

“Formation into a vision of human flourishing (Cf. Mirosław Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *Theology for the Life of the World*, 2019) requires an environment that embodies continuity, historical memory, rituals marking seasons of life, intergenerational interdependence, and most important of all, common worship.” – Hunter, 283

“Thinking Institutionally”

“Observers who contend that the anti-institutional trends that signal an exodus from congregational life are a healthy development—a sign of a new ‘revolutionary’ expression of Christianity—are profoundly misguided. The reason is that such trends are rooted, in fact, in a consumer logic that makes individual choice central and the self sovereign.” – Hunter, 283

“Growing distrust is not confined to political institutions. In recent decades we modern people have grown more suspicious of almost all our society’s major institutions. That includes business, unions, public school, the legal and medical professions, religious institutions, journalism, and nonprofit organizations.” – Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally*, 12

“Today we are caught up in talk about institutions failing us. But look closely and I think you will see that when institutions fail, it is mainly a matter of people failing institutions. People fail institutions by failing to think and act with due regard to the valued purposes embodied in institutions. To repeat an earlier point, the failure does not consist in simply making mistakes, errors, and miscalculations. It consists in failures of being.” – Heclo, 126-127

“Thinking institutionally offers us a more excellent way of being in the world. It demarcates a middle zone of liberating constraints. To the one side is the lone cultural wanderer facing a bewildering array of choices.... To the other side ... is the yearning for unity and a pooling of particularities into something whole. It is the totalizing vision that answers to the cultural wanderer’s lostness. The promise is an ‘I’ capable of knowing itself only because it is absorbed into a monistic ‘we.’” – Heclo, 190.

I try to go to church every week because...

...because I like these people.
...because life is tough and I need guidance and encouragement.
...because I find it stimulating.
...because I want peace instead of fear, shame, guilt and anger.
...because I’m a steward of my new birth.
...because I want to learn about the mysterious God.

Hope, not Grief

How old were our young people and seminarians on 9-11?

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It’s a great time to be the Church!