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Optimism For Church Growth: Encouraging Lessons From Christian Revivalists For Generations Primed to Flourish

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

OPTIMISM FOR CHURCH GROWTH:
ENCOURAGING LESSONS FROM CHRISTIAN REVIVALISTS
FOR GENERATIONS PRIMED TO FLOURISH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Thank you, Dad. God speaks to me through you. I named my first son after you, not only because I wanted to honor you, but because I want him to be like you. To my brother, Billy, I will always follow you. To Isaac Smith, thank you for showing me what leadership should look like.

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God, make me a reflection of you.

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ABSTRACT

Negativity is contributing to the numerical decline of the Christian church in America. Dogmatism, judgmentalism, hypocrisy, and pessimism have added to the image problem that repels pre-Christians. The common self-critiquing statement of many Christians, that Christianity has become known more for what it is against than what it is for, identifies part of the error that has led to the image problem that burdens the Christian church, but it stops short of diagnosing the full spectrum of the limiting effects of negativity.

In vision-casting, tone matters, and it's difficult to trust a sinking ship. Reversing the judgmental and pessimistic tone of the Christian church will lead to a decline in the number of people who fear rejection from the church and a decline in the expectation that the world will be destroyed before long-term discipleship strategies can work. The positivity that results will produce energy and growth. Optimism is an effective tool in accomplishing goals, and it is an attribute of successful Christian evangelists.

Pessimism and cynicism have put Christians at a disadvantage in the competition for souls, but the church is not dying. Worldwide, the church is growing, and it will continue to grow. Despite the damaging effects of the widespread adoption of dispensationalism, Christians have reason to be optimistic about the potential of an American, Christian revival. This work will make the case that optimism for the future of the Christian church is both warranted and beneficial. It will do so by examining the ideas and events that have caused pessimism to grow, the effects of pessimism on the church, the current evangelistic success of Christianity in America, the readiness for young

people to adopt the mission associated with the gospel message, and the intrinsic benefits of optimism itself.

INTRODUCTION:

THE WORLD NEEDS THE CHURCH

After I graduated college, I moved to Olathe, Kansas, one of the fastest-growing cities in the country, to help my brother plant a church. For over three years, we poured blood, sweat, tears, and money into that church. We tried everything we could think of to reach people with the gospel message. However, just a few years into the effort, having run out of resources, energy, and hope, we closed the church. It was a demoralizing experience. As a result of that experience, I lost faith in the local church model. Soon after that, I quit going to church altogether.

After a few years of rebellion against my calling to serve the mission of the local church, a friend invited me to his church, and I eventually joined that thriving congregation. Hearing testimonies of life change renewed my excitement about the potential of the local church. Since then, I have had the opportunity to serve a healthy church in Gillette, Wyoming that has solidified my belief that the church is God's plan to help people respond to the coaxing of the Holy Spirit. No other institution has been able to or will be able to accomplish tangible change in communities around the world like a healthy local church.

When a person loses faith in the church's ability to accomplish the Great Commission, that person will often give up the mission altogether. Initially, they may tout a desire to make disciples by other means, but apart from the local church, no method of evangelism and discipleship has worked on a large, sustainable scale. These failures lead to doubt, and if there is no hope of success, effort wanes, fingers are pointed, and defensive bunkers are built. Pessimistic Christians put themselves in bubbles and

focus on self-preservation. When the mind is clouded by feelings of frustration and regret, a person's interpretations of biblical prophecy (a prediction based on a revelation from God) begin to lean toward the pessimistic possibilities. While there are still some brave firefighters who will attempt to rescue a few from the flames that have engulfed the house, they do so with little optimism for widespread success because the pessimistic firefighters have turned off their hoses.

Positive Psychology

It has been well-documented that a positive mental outlook leads to success. This dissertation will follow the lead of Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener and use the terms positive psychology and positive affect to imply a general sense of happiness and optimism.¹ A person who utilizes the benefits of positive psychology will achieve more than he or she could without them. Sonja Lyubomirsky, author of *The How of Happiness*, argues that happy people show “more flexibility and ingenuity in their thinking and are more productive in their jobs. They are better leaders and negotiators and earn more money. They are more resilient in the face of hardship, have stronger immune systems, and are physically healthier. Happy people even live longer.”² After assessing the results of research performed by Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener, Shawn Achor concluded that happiness leads to success in almost every area of life, including marriage, health,

¹ Sonja Lyubomirsky, L. King, and E. Diener, “The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?” *Psychological Bulletin* 131, no. 6 (2005).

² Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A Practical Guide to Getting the Life You Want* (London: Piatkus, 2010), Chapter 1, Kindle.

friendships, community involvement, creativity, jobs, careers, and businesses.³ Positive psychology will be a marker of the next great American revival, just as it has been in past revivals. Christian theologians who deny the hopeful message of Scripture are leading their Christian followers to unnecessary failure because they doubt the chance of success.

What convinces some people that success is possible in the first place? To discover why some people were able to persevere and succeed by overcoming seemingly impossible odds when their pessimistic counterparts gave up, failing to see even simple solutions, Shawn Achor researched the mindset of people who worked in similar circumstances but came to different conclusions about perseverance. In *Before Happiness*, he writes,

The reason some people were thriving while others—people in the exact same situation—were stuck in hopelessness, was that they were literally living in different realities. Some were living in a reality in which happiness and success seemed possible, despite the obstacles. Others were living in a reality where it was not. After all, how could someone expect to achieve happiness or success when stuck in the mindset that neither was possible?⁴

He concludes that success is only possible if people change their reality—the entire lens through which they viewed their world—and believe success is possible. Christians who adopt a positive mental outlook will be more successful in their mission than Christians who adopt a negative mental outlook.

³ Shawn Achor, *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles that Fuel Success and Performance at Work* (New York: Virgin Books, 2011), 41.

⁴ Shawn Achor, *Before Happiness: The 5 Hidden Keys to Achieving Success, Spreading Happiness, and Sustaining Positive Change* (New York: Random House, 2013), xv.

Pessimistic Attitude

When the number of those people who considered themselves to be Christians grew large enough in the United States that they could use political means and majority rule to advance the Christian mission, they gave in to that temptation.⁵ This caused Christians to see people disconnected from the Church as the opposition rather than “sick” people in need of the Savior (Mark 2:17). The desire to see those people in the way that Jesus saw them led Leonard Sweet to optimistically refer to people who are disconnected from the Christian church as pre-Christians.⁶ It is one thing to mourn sin and pain in the world. Christian tears are necessary and inevitable if they believe biblical warnings about such sin. Blessed are those who mourn (Matt. 5:4). But this mourning should not turn into pessimism. About this sort of pessimism, Trevin Wax writes:

An overly pessimistic view of the world leads to a defensive posture. A defensive posture leads to defensive decision-making. We start making decisions based on maintenance rather than mission. Holding on to what we have holds us back from moving forward in faith in the power of the gospel. The gospel blows up pessimism. If you truly believe the Word of God has authority—that it will accomplish God’s purpose and will not return empty, if you truly believe that God has a church and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it, then you fortify yourself for spiritual *battle*, not for surviving a spiritual siege.⁷

Our given mission, or commission, is to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” (Mark 16:15) And we know that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in [Jesus’] name to all nations.” (Luke 24:47) Now that decline is

⁵ Collin Hansen, “We Must Not Play by Majority Rules,” The Gospel Coalition, March 1, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/we-must-not-play-by-majority-rules/>.

⁶ Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 50.

⁷ Trevin Wax, “Pessimistic About the Future? You Need ‘Gospel Bearings,’” The Gospel Coalition, accessed January 26, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/christians-need-gospel-bearings-when-pessimism-is-all-the-rage/>.

the trend in the American Christian church, it appears that the dominant Christian narrative in America today is that living in the last days means that we are doomed to fail in that mission, although few would admit that is the conclusion to which the narrative leads. It is depressing to be doomed to failure, and a group doomed to failure doesn't have much curb appeal.

A True Story

In 2010, at a time when Christ Community Church (CCC) had become one of the largest churches in a small suburb in Missouri, their pastor, Caleb, resigned. Jonah, the pastor who succeeded Caleb, had an attractive personality and an above-average communication ability, but by 2013, three years after Jonah became the lead pastor, the average Sunday morning attendance of CCC had declined by more than half. When denominational leadership recognized the numerical decline, their investigation uncovered an unfortunate change in tone at CCC. When the church was successfully reaching many unchurched people with the good news of God's love, the tone of the ministry was one of hope and hospitality, but Jonah had become engrossed with the goal of behavior modification. His sermons focused on the substantial rise of sinfulness in the world and the need for the church to separate from society. When it was determined that Jonah's messages had become too legalistic, the denomination asked Jonah to resign. After a significant fight, Jonah did leave the church, but he and half of the congregation of CCC started another church in that same small suburb. The new church was called Solid Rock Church (SRC). SRC prioritized the pursuit of holy living. Five years later, due to an internal dispute, the worship pastor of SRC and half of the congregation left SRC to start a new church in the same suburb. However, after hiring a new pastor,

prioritizing community involvement, practicing extravagant hospitality, and setting optimistic evangelism goals, the congregation at CCC experienced growth and energy like never before.⁸

Although this may be an extreme case, it is an example of a problem that can stifle church growth in America. This dissertation will reveal that the positive mental outlook of CCC is more effective than the pessimism and judgmentalism of SRC.

An Outline

Chapter one will reveal that the American Christian church has an image problem, and it will begin to show how the adoption of an optimistic message of hope and grace can reverse that problem. Chapter two will ascertain that pessimism is its own self-fulfilling prophecy, and chapter three will show that if the church follows the lead of optimistic Christian leaders like Jonathan Edwards, it will foster a spirit of excitement for the future of the Church, rather than feelings of anger and a need for seclusion.⁹ Chapter four will demonstrate that in order to be known for what it is for rather than what it is against, the church should graciously reach out to millennials and Generation Z with language they can understand, while being less distracted by arguments about secondary theologies. Finally, chapter five will show that positive psychology itself, which is inherent to the Christian faith, can help to correct the church's image problem. The church must allow a positive mental outlook to open its eyes to the full range of future evangelistic possibilities.

⁸ This is a true story, but the names, dates, locations, and some details have been changed in order to preserve the privacy of those involved.

⁹ The optimism of Jonathan Edwards will be addressed in the beginning of chapter three.

This dissertation will make the case that, while the church in the United States is numerically in decline, there is much reason for optimism, and that optimism itself could actually be part of the solution. The church is not dying. Philip Jenkins, in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, argues that Christianity “should enjoy a worldwide boom in the coming decades” and even in America, “Christianity is very much alive and well.”¹⁰

One of the primary reasons for the church’s decline in America is the church’s image problem caused by its attitude toward the world and its future (chapter one). That attitude is partially due to the pessimism that has become prevalent in the Christian church (chapter two), but a look at church history would suggest that pessimism is not merited. In fact, the church has experienced revivals on a large scale even when the world faced terrible times (chapter three). The good news is that our current world, specifically the youngest generations, is ripe for harvest (chapter four), and optimism, caused by knowing that there is hope for the future, could actually help the church achieve that hope (chapter five). A positive mental outlook is at the heart of the solution needed to correct to the image problem that is causing the decline of the Christian church in America.

¹⁰ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2 and 263.

CHAPTER 1: IMAGE PROBLEM

The Church Is Falling Behind

The growth of Christianity in the United States is not keeping pace with the growth of the population of the United States. A 2012 study from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life states, “One-fifth of the U.S. public—and a third of adults under 30—are religiously unaffiliated today.”¹¹ In a 2015 report called *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew notes, “The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing.”¹² That Pew report shows that “those with no religious affiliation, or the ‘nones,’ were increasing at a faster rate than ever before.”¹³ From 2007 to 2014, the number of people who categorized themselves as unaffiliated grew from 16.1 percent to 22.8 percent, evangelical Protestants declined by 0.9 percent, Catholicism declined by 3.1 percent, mainline Protestants declined by 3.4 percent, and non-Christian faiths grew by

¹¹ Luis Lugo, “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” Pew Forum, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

¹² Pew Research, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

¹³ Matthew L. Murphy, “Missional Communities: Why They Are Failing and How to Help Them Thrive” (DMin dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2017), 8.

1.2 percent.¹⁴ Lifeway reports that “as many as 100,000 churches in America are showing signs of decline toward death.”¹⁵

USA Today reports from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), “there is an eleven percent decrease in those who call themselves Christian. It shows the biggest growth factor occurring in those who say they have ‘no religion.’ This group grew from 8.2 percent in 1990 to fifteen percent in 2008.”¹⁶ Even Gallup, whose research appears to be the most optimistic about the number of people who attend church on a regular basis because of their surveying methods, admits that the church is not growing as fast as the population.¹⁷

The Church Is Resistible

David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons attribute this decline largely to Christianity’s “image problem.”¹⁸ In fact, the perception of Christians is so bad that in many circles, simply carrying the label “Christian” labels a person “irrelevant” and an “extremist.”¹⁹ This thesis submits that a change in attitude about the future of the church, and therefore

¹⁴ Pew Research, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” America Religion, accessed December 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

¹⁵ Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 7.

¹⁶ Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Most Religious Groups in USA Have Lost Ground, Survey Finds,” *USA Today*, March 17, 2009, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-03-09-american-religion-ARIS_N.htm.

¹⁷ Kelly Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America,” ChurchLeaders, July 19, 2018, <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>.

¹⁸ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity—And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), Chapter 1, Kindle.

¹⁹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You’re Irrelevant and Extreme* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 21, Kindle.

the future of the world, will be part of the solution to this problem. Rather than complain about the hurdles the church will have to jump to begin to add to the numbers of people in America who are saved, this dissertation will defend the assertion that optimism for Church growth will help the Church to achieve that growth. It will contend that the very cynicism and pessimism that feeds the Church's image problem are also at the heart of its failure to find solutions.

It should not be surprising that the unfavorable opinions of people disconnected from the church have translated into problems in the Church. Thom Shultz, CEO of Group Publishing, and Joani Shultz, Group's Chief Creative Officer, write, "We, as the church, need to admit we don't look that good. When pre-Christians see us, they're not all that attracted to us and wonder why we don't make some changes. For our own good—and for their good, too."²⁰ Dottie Escobedo-Frank concludes in his research, which focuses largely on The United Methodist Church, that "The United Methodist Church in America, and the mainline church in America, is facing the biggest problem it has ever encountered. And whether or not the Church makes the necessary changes will determine if the gospel continues in this context."²¹

Forty-two percent of Americans believe that people of faith are part of the problem when it comes to what happens in the country today, and even more, forty-six percent, say that religion is part of the problem.²² Christians have been ruled out by many

²⁰ Thom Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore: And How 4 Acts of Love Will Make Your Church Irresistible* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2013), Chapter 1, Kindle.

²¹ Dottie Escobedo-Frank, "The Church Revolution from the Edge" (DMin dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2012).

²² Kinnaman and Lyons, *Good Faith*, 13.

when it comes to finding solutions to the nation's problems. "Today only one-fifth of U.S. adults strongly believe that clergy are a credible source of wisdom and insight when it comes to the most important issues of our day."²³ Pre-Christians don't necessarily have a problem with pastors or priests, but they don't see the incites of clergy as "relevant to living real life."²⁴ Many pre-Christians are not aware that some of the "essential instructions of our society emerged from the Christian worldview."²⁵

David Kinnaman, a researcher for the Barna Group, and Gabe Lyons spent two years researching and conducting thousands of interviews to determine the cause of the image problem behind the decline in Christian church participation in the United States. According to their research, "Many of those outside of Christianity, especially younger adults, have little trust in the Christian faith, and esteem for the lifestyle of Christ followers is quickly fading among pre-Christians. They admit their emotional and intellectual barriers go up when they are around Christians, and they reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians."²⁶

It is tempting to ignore the intensity with which the younger generations hold these views, but, considering its calling to actively engage the ideas of culture in order to win them for Christ, the Church must take it upon itself to understand their perspectives. What has the Church done to cause young people to feel "rejected by Christians"? Pre-Christians "think the church no longer represents what Jesus had in mind, that

²³ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Good Faith*, 13.

²⁴ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Good Faith*, 29.

²⁵ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Good Faith*, 33.

²⁶ Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, 90.

Christianity in our society is not what it was meant to be.”²⁷ Even many within the Church would agree with that judgment. This dissertation will attempt to explain how Christians can change the perspective of pre-Christians by changing the outlook of the average Christian. Christians can learn to sympathize with the conclusions of pre-Christians rather than cynically condemn their opinions. Too often, Christians send repelling messages with their judgmentalism (overly critical or moralistic behavior), cynicism, and pessimism. Pessimism about the likelihood of influencing a change in a person’s life or cynicism about that person’s desire to discover truth causes some Christians to view pre-Christians with disdain rather than with care and hope.

Engaging Communication

The current struggles of the American church have been intensified by its failure to communicate effectively. The church’s inability to reach the youngest generation is not only a result of the generation’s resistance to organized religion. It is also due to the church’s inability to speak in a tone they will hear.²⁸ “The missional community is to incarnate the kingdom of God into the particular context in which God has called them.”²⁹ In *Viral: How Social Media is Poised to Ignite Revival*, Leonard Sweet writes, “The primary missional challenge of the church will be to incarnate the gospel in a Google world.”³⁰ This challenge is compounded by the complexity of the Google culture.

²⁷ Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, 161.

²⁸ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 39.

²⁹ Murphy, “Missional Communities,” 14.

³⁰ Leonard Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2012), Introduction, Kindle.

Alan Hirsch says, “As communication technology increases, the number of subcultures increases which causes more barriers to communicating the gospel.”³¹ Within each subculture are people in various stages of readiness to hear the gospel. The Church must learn to share its faith with pre-Christians of all kinds: with uninterested individuals (agnostics), interested faith shoppers (including the effort to compete with non-Christian faiths), and skeptics who aggressively object to the gift Christians offer pre-Christians.

That Google world Sweet writes about will not hear us unless we alter their perception of us. Kinnaman and Lyons say, “The primary reason outsiders³² feel hostile toward Christians, and especially conservative Christians, is...our ‘swagger,’ how we go about things and the sense of self-importance we project.”³³ In their exploration of thousands of outsiders’ impressions, they discovered that “Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against. [They] have become famous for what [they] oppose, rather than what [they] are for.”³⁴ The church’s cynical attitude about the behavior of pre-Christians causes its communication to be perceived primarily as judgmental. Pre-Christians believe Christians don’t like them because of “what they do, how they look, or what they believe. They feel minimized—or worse, demonized—by those who love Jesus.”³⁵ In their national survey, they found the three most common

³¹ Alan Hirsch, “Missional Velocity,” Vimeo, April 29, 2010, 47:01, <https://vimeo.com/11320693>.

³² David Kannaman and Gabe Lyons use the word “outsider” to refer to atheists, agnostics, those of a faith other than Christianity, unchurched individuals with no firm religious convictions, and unchurched individuals who claim to believe in God. This dissertation will use the words “outsider” and “pre-Christian” somewhat interchangeably.

³³ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

³⁴ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

³⁵ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

perceptions of present-day Christianity are antihomosexual (an image held by 91 percent of young outsiders), judgmental (87 percent), and hypocritical (85 percent). These “big three” are followed by the following negative perceptions, embraced by a majority of young adults: “old-fashioned, too involved in politics, out of touch with reality, insensitive to others, boring, not accepting of other faiths, and confusing.”³⁶ That survey was completed over ten years ago, and in *Good Faith*, Kinnaman and Lyons point out that perceptions of those surveyed over ten years ago “were a prediction of the crisis today.”³⁷

The antihomosexual conversation is of primary importance to the youngest generations, and the church must take much care in its response. The homophobic language of many Christians and the delayed response to the LGBT question by others has caused divisions within the church and between the church and pre-Christians. Too often, same-sex attraction and gay sex were lumped together, which caused unnecessary confusion and pain.³⁸ This is a conversation the church has to get right.

The numbers get even more discouraging when a person considers children within the Church. Young adults who regularly attend church hold these same negative perceptions.

Four out of five young churchgoers say that Christianity is antihomosexual; half describe it as judgmental, too involved in politics, hypocritical, and confusing; one-third believe their faith is old-fashioned and out of touch with reality; and one-quarter of young Christians believe it is boring and insensitive to others.

³⁶ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

³⁷ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Good Faith*, 169.

³⁸ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Good Faith*, 170.

These are significant proportions of young people in Christian churches who raise objections to the motivation, attitudes, and image of modern Christianity.³⁹

Christ came from the Father “full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) These perceptions are the results of an overemphasis on truth rather than a healthy balance of grace and truth. Young pre-Christians look for Christians who reflect the gracious fruits of the spirit, not Christians who look first to judge and condemn. Perhaps it is time that the Church stops defending its way of communicating the gospel message and accepts that it has earned these negative perceptions.

In 1996, the Barna Group released the report “Christianity Has a Strong Positive Image Despite Fewer Active Participants,” which showed that both insiders and outsiders respected Christians. According to the study, 85 percent of outsiders, including the youngest generations, were “favorable toward Christianity’s role in society.”⁴⁰ But in *unChristian*, Kinnaman and Lyons write, “That was then. Now, a decade later, the image of the Christian faith has suffered a major setback. Our most recent data show that young outsiders have lost much of their respect for the Christian faith. These days nearly two out of every five young outsiders (38 percent) claim to have a ‘bad impression of present-day Christianity.’”⁴¹ They discovered that

One-third of young outsiders said that Christianity represents a negative image with which they would not want to be associated. Furthermore, one out of every six young outsiders (17 percent) indicates that he or she maintains ‘very bad’ perceptions of the Christian faith. Though these hard-core critics represent a

³⁹ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

⁴⁰ George Barna, “Christianity Has a Strong Positive Image Despite Fewer Active Participants,” February 5, 1996, <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=34>.

⁴¹ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

minority of young outsiders, this group is at least three times larger than it was just a decade ago.⁴²

In addition to this, “outsiders express the most opposition toward evangelicals. Among those aware of the term ‘evangelical,’ the views are extraordinarily negative (49 percent [have a negative perception of the word] to 3 percent [have a positive perception of the word]). Disdain for evangelicals among the younger set is overwhelming and definitive.”⁴³

These perceptions of outsiders are now affecting the actions and ideas of young insiders. “Two-thirds of young born-again Christians say they believe that most outsiders have a negative image of Christianity. Another one-third admit that the way Christians act and the things they say make them embarrassed to be a Christian.”⁴⁴ Young Christians

are also sensitive to the way in which Christians engage a broken world and are often frustrated by the poor image that Christianity has. [Kinnaman and Lyons write that] many young believers say that in some circumstances they are reluctant to admit they are Christians. They don’t fear being unpopular, but they feel that raising the Christian flag would actually undermine their ability to connect with people and to maintain credibility with them. This is a major indictment of unChristian faith, that to bring those around them closer to Christ, they must distance themselves from the current “branding” of Christianity.⁴⁵

Part of the problem is that “a generation of young Christians believes that the churches in which they were raised are not safe and hospitable places to express doubts.”⁴⁶ Why, then, would they trust the church to treat pre-Christians with hospitality?

⁴² Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

⁴³ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

⁴⁴ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

⁴⁵ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

⁴⁶ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 11.

They have heard the cliché talking heads of the older generations to their honest questions, and they appear to them to be inauthentic.⁴⁷ It's no wonder that American teens are among the most religiously active Americans, but "American twentysomethings are the least religiously active."⁴⁸ They are not only leaving because they were not disciplined correctly. They are also leaving because they don't want to be associated with the church. They are not necessarily walking away from faith, but they are walking away from the church.⁴⁹

A quality rebranding would bring energy to the church. It would help the Church reach new, young believers and keep the young believers it has. Although they may be ashamed of the reputation of the Church, they are not ashamed of Jesus. Kinnaman and Lyon's research found thousands of young people who want "nothing more than to elevate the relevance of Jesus to our culture."⁵⁰

A contributor to this problem is found in the common belief among Christians that there has been a dramatic increase in human sinfulness, and that sinfulness is evidence that Christ will soon return.⁵¹ This belief has caused many to interpret the resistance of pre-Christians as an inevitable next step in the fulfillment of prophecy, rather than a problem that needs to be corrected. If pre-Christians are resistant, they are too often discarded as unchosen by advocates of election and declared stuck in their sin

⁴⁷ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 11.

⁴⁸ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 213.

⁴⁹ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 26.

⁵⁰ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

⁵¹ Stephen Altrogge, "What Is This World Coming To? Exactly What Jesus Said It Would," Bible Study Tools, accessed January 8, 2019, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/blogs/stephen-altrogge/what-is-this-world-coming-to-exactly-what-jesus-said-it-would-come-to.html>.

by others. Rather than love relentlessly and offer extravagant, graceful hospitality, those Christians are quick to label a skeptic or a prodigal as a “lost cause.” This mentality has become recognizable to pre-Christians and translates into resistance and complaints about hypocrisy and judgmentalism.

Cynicism and Disunity is Unappealing

“Pessimism” is not the only antonym of “optimism” listed in Webster’s dictionary. “Cynicism” is there as well.⁵² Too often, the initial response to an idea that challenges Christians is dogmatic cynicism rather than curiosity. In the past, as Christians searched for methods to justify the disconnect between their pessimistic expectations of the church and the apparent growth of the church, they chose secondary theologies to exclude people from their church who called themselves Christians. A Baptist pastor once told me that Christians who don’t believe in a literal, seven-day creation are not actually Christians. The infighting about ideas like these is terribly unattractive to pre-Christians. Who would want to be adopted into a family that fights all the time?

Cynicism shouldn’t be allowed to repel pre-Christians, and it must not be allowed to keep Christians from optimistic partnership with people who share core beliefs.

Leonard Sweet writes,

Because I suspect some of our 22nd century kids may live to be 170, I looked at what the church was talking about 170 years ago. In my tribe (Methodist), one of the biggest issues consuming local churches in 1847 was “promiscuous seating” at church, by which they meant the radical notion that families (including children) could sit together in worship, not just separate seating for women and children on one side of the church, and men on the other. In 1847 it was causing

⁵² Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Optimism,” accessed August 22, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/optimism>.

splits in churches and charges of heresy, tearing apart communities, causing civil war in families, and wasn't "resolved" until the 1852 general conference. So I wonder...how many of our holy hullabalos today will look just as ridiculous 100 or 150 or 170 years from now as this holy hullabaloo back then?⁵³

If Christians are distracted, fighting among themselves, how will they learn to set an example of hospitality and progress to the rest of the world? The Church uses examples like the refusal of hospitality in 2 John and 3 John to stop the teachers of false doctrine in order to create divisions based on minute theological differences, but New Testament history "is full of fruitful dialogue and debate between sisters and brothers of good faith who wrestled with each other's views and profited from the open dialogue in the end."⁵⁴

There are times that the persistent teaching of a gospel that is contrary to the gospel taught by Jesus Christ must be rejected. In Galatians 1:9, Paul abandons his regular hospitable approach to say, "As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!" There is a time to offer hospitality and a time to refuse it, but too many Christians have erred on the side of division and judgment rather than hospitality and dialogue in order to win internal squabbles that serve no purpose but to bolster personal pride. The divisions that have resulted from these disagreements have fractured the church into many segments and denominations that people are forced to choose between in order to join the Christian church movement in America.

⁵³ Leonard Sweet, *Facebook*, September 16, 2017, 13:11, <https://www.facebook.com/lensweet/posts/10154753804671791>.

⁵⁴ David Arthur DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 463.

In *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz makes the case that having too many options actually causes people to be more hesitant to make a choice.⁵⁵ People who go to purchase something, but are faced with too many options, avoid purchasing. This problem is compounded when the people offering the various choices claim there is something wrong with the other options being offered.⁵⁶ The Christian church in America is at a minimum failing to keep up with population growth. Could that be, in part, because pre-Christians assume that the many options (or versions) of Christianity imply that there is no singular truth, despite what most of them claim? Could it also be that Christian leaders have become most passionate about ideas and secondary theologies that most people don't care about?

Leonard Sweet also writes, "Better to be wrong about something big than right about trivialities...Every person who has revolutionized history has not spent their time arguing over trivialities, but dared to declare big dreams and decrees. And every one (Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, etc.) was wrong about something big."⁵⁷ A majority of Church leaders would agree that there are too many denominations in Christianity, but they continue to hold tight to the secondary theologies that caused many of the denominational divides in the first place. The topics of argument are tedious, but they stick to their guns while claiming that they are protecting their parishioners from a slippery slope. When did it become the Church's job to be the arbiter and keeper of all facts? When did it become the Church's job to tell people what conclusions they can and

⁵⁵ Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: Ecco, 2016).

⁵⁶ DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*.

⁵⁷ Leonard Sweet, *Facebook*, September 2, 2018, 6:29, <https://www.facebook.com/lenssweet/posts/10155506223096791>.

cannot come to in their search for truth? The Christian mandate is to make disciples, but the desire to have huddles of people bunkered together who all have the exact same beliefs has hindered the church's ability to reach people who would otherwise become those disciples.

In the experience of this writer, people who have chosen sides on the largest number of minute theologies are often the most hostile toward pre-Christians. Perhaps it's time to choose fewer battles and focus on the mandate, and if it's politics, bureaucracy, or money that keeps sects from uniting, priorities need to change.

Hospitality

What is it about Christians that make pre-Christians think so negatively about them? One contributing factor is the hostility they believe Christians have toward their ideas. In *God Space*, Doug Pollock writes, "Essentially, we are sending the culture this message: Not only do we not endorse your point of view, we also don't accept you. This lack of acceptance crushes opportunities for spiritual conversations."⁵⁸ Jesus Christ was able to walk with sinners without repelling them with judgment. Instead, He showed them extravagant hospitality and grace that led them to repentance.

The alternative to the common habit of prideful hardheadedness is persistent hospitality and grace that agrees to disagree and works together without full agreement. Jesus, knowing that Judas would betray Him, washed Judas' feet and said, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet." (John 13:14) Hospitality was of prime importance to the early Christians. The church was

⁵⁸ Doug Pollock, *God Space* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2009), 31.

even spoken of as “God’s household.” (1 Tim. 3:15) It is not surprising, then, that early Christians welcomed “traveling Christians, itinerant preachers, and other strangers into the church.”⁵⁹ Hospitality was not only a method for welcoming diverse ideas. It was also the means through which they exercised charitable activity within the fellowship of the local church and within the larger context of their community.

Infighting in the church has caused Christians to lose sight of what the world has long known about the importance of hospitality to success. While Christians bunkered down in church basements and huddled up to form a plan to attack everyone who disagreed with them, society made the world a better place. Could it be that the influence of the Judeo-Christian ethic working itself into society is what, at least in part, made the freedom found in American society so revolutionary? The Christian church was once a leader in caring for foreigners (even those with opposing beliefs), advancing medical science and care, increasing education, and housing the homeless.⁶⁰ Much of that has now been transferred primarily to the government. The inconsistency between the way Christians attempt to make disciples and the way Jesus made disciples makes Christians look disconnected from Jesus.

The Church should not blame pre-Christians for their view of the Church. Their views are influenced by the hypocrisy and judgmentalism of the Church, but they are also influenced by their fallen nature. It should be no surprise that pre-Christians are resistant to the gospel message (2 Tim. 3:2). We don’t blame a lion for killing a zebra. We don’t

⁵⁹ Ralph Martin and Peter H. Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 504.

⁶⁰ Rosie Beal-Preston. “The Christian Contribution to Medicine,” Spring 2000, <http://admin.cmf.org.uk/pdf/helix/spr00/11history.pdf>.

blame babies for crying in church, but we have discovered strategies to counteract the distractions of babies crying in church. Dr. Thomas Sowell says, we don't blame "plane crashes on gravity. Certainly, planes wouldn't crash if it wasn't for gravity. But when thousands of planes fly millions of miles every day without crashing, explaining why a particular plane crashed because of gravity gets you nowhere."⁶¹ Gravity is a constant. Resistance of pre-Christians to Christ is a constant, but that does not mean that the Church owns none of the blame for their resistance. The Church also cannot blame its lack of growth on the resistance of pre-Christians unless it believes the Holy Spirit has stopped preparing hearts for the gospel message. The effective Church counters resistance with grace, truth, and hospitality.

It would also be easy for Christians to dismiss the judgments of pre-Christians, condemning them as unchosen or lost to the inevitable fall of man. This argument could be made by quoting 2 Corinthians 4:4, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God," but relegating pre-Christians as lost causes would be removing ourselves from the world when we were called to be "in the world" (John 17:14-61). Christians have not been given the mandate to judge who has been blinded and who has not, but we have been given the joyful directive to offer Christian hospitality to the whole world. The Christian church is called to extravagant hospitality.

⁶¹ Thomas Sowell, "Random Thoughts," Creators.com, August 11, 2009, <http://www.creators.com/conservative/thomas-sowell/random-thoughts-2009-08-11.html>.

Come as You Are

Rather than condemn them for their sinful behavior, Jesus ate with sinners, while the Pharisees separated themselves from them and criticized them (Mark 2). Instead of teaching them not to drink too much alcohol, Jesus provided more wine to the people at the wedding in Cana (John 2). Rather than condemn them for worshiping an idol to an “unknown god,” Paul met the religious leaders on common ground when He told them on Mars Hill about the almighty God (Acts 17). If we follow the example of Jesus and His disciples, it would appear that to be in relationship with Jesus is to be in relationship with the world.

Romans 12:13-21 says,

Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The human conflict is that although in our core we are the same, on the surface we create barriers and conditions for sharing and receiving love. According to Jesus’ example, we are called to welcome all people and challenge ourselves to love one another because we are more alike than we are different. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes,

Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling

to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross (Phil. 2:3-8).

The churches in America that have truly adopted a mission that invites people to “come as you are” or “belong before you believe” have seen numerical growth.⁶² Rather than confronting people with cynicism, these churches allow people to bring their ideas with them to church. Andy Stanley says the church is in the environment-creating business, building on-ramps for people to begin their journey with Jesus Christ.⁶³ “While those of us in the church may believe we offer good on-ramps for everyone, this is not the word on the street,” according to author Doug Pollock, in his book *God Space*. “For many who grew up outside the walls of the church, going to church is a scary proposition.”⁶⁴ Christian churches would be wise to deal with the opinions of pre-Christians in a graceful, Christlike manner that engages culture with respect and love, but it will take a change in approach to change the perception that the church is full of cynical, judgmental people, because our previous actions have at least indirectly contributed to these perceptions.

What were those previous actions? In boycotting, protesting, and demonizing everything it didn't like, Christians looked like negative, angry people. It forgot the joy that should come with salvation and instead prioritized chastity, poverty, separateness, and self-righteousness (disguised as holiness), and, perhaps the most harmful of all, over-

⁶² John Burke, *No Perfect People Allowed: Creating a Come as You Are Culture in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

⁶³ Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).

⁶⁴ Doug Pollock, *God Space* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2009), 12.

spiritualized sacred tradition. The gospel is good news, but the Christian church made it look like bad news.

Analyzing the Data

A Closer Look

This chapter opened with a statement about Christianity in America falling behind. The following is a list of some additional statistics that back up this claim. These statistics are taken from a speech given by Scott Thumma, titled “A Health Checkup of U.S. Churches,” delivered at the Future of the Church Summit on October 22, 2012 in Loveland, Colorado:

- There are as many as 200,000 American churches in various stages of stagnation or decline, according to the latest statistics. Every year more than 4,000 of them close their doors forever.⁶⁵
- Churchgoers are getting older, on average, than the general population. The younger the generation, the higher the percentage that reports they are unaffiliated with a church.⁶⁶
- Church attendance is shrinking. While 40 percent of Americans say they attend church every week, the actual number is more like 20 percent.⁶⁷
- Four out of five Americans say they’re sure God exists and identify themselves with a faith group. But less than half of them ever attend church.⁶⁸
- Within five years, the percentage of congregations characterized by “high spiritual vitality” dropped from about 43 percent in 2005 to 28 percent in 2010.⁶⁹
- Giving is down in recent years—part of an ongoing decline.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Scott Thumma, “A Health Checkup of U.S. Churches,” in *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, ed. Thom Shultz and Joani Shultz (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2013), Chapter 1, Kindle.

⁶⁶ Scott Thumma, “A Health Checkup of U.S. Churches,” Chapter 1, Kindle.

⁶⁷ Scott Thumma, “A Health Checkup of U.S. Churches,” Chapter 1, Kindle.

⁶⁸ Scott Thumma, “A Health Checkup of U.S. Churches,” Chapter 1, Kindle.

⁶⁹ Scott Thumma, “A Health Checkup of U.S. Churches,” Chapter 1, Kindle.

⁷⁰ Scott Thumma, “A Health Checkup of U.S. Churches,” Chapter 1, Kindle.

- Every year, 2.7 million church members fall into inactivity.⁷¹
- Half of all churches in the U.S. did not add any new members to their ranks between 2010 and 2012.⁷²

In interpreting these facts, there are some statistical illusions to consider. The growth of some large churches may skew the numbers of church attendance.⁷³ It is not a coincidence that the states whose church attendance are coming closest to keeping pace with population growth are the states with some of the largest churches in the country: Hawaii, Arkansas, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Tennessee.⁷⁴ The fact that people who attend a megachurch are less likely to attend on an “every week” basis may skew attendance numbers. If people attend less often, the average total attendance may decline while the number of people who attend on a fairly regular basis might stay the same or even increase. This problem is compounded by the reality that most churches do not take attendance. Most churches rely on a headcount rather than track the frequency of an individual’s attendance.

On the other hand, the problem may be worse than it appears because many individuals claim to attend church more often than they actually do, and many people claim to go to church who actually do not. Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves, authors of the “National Congregations Study,” call this the “the halo effect.”⁷⁵ The halo effect is the

⁷¹ Scott Thumma, “A Health Checkup of U.S. Churches,” Chapter 1, Kindle.

⁷² Scott Thumma, “A Health Checkup of U.S. Churches,” Chapter 1, Kindle.

⁷³ Bob Smietana, “Statistical Illusion,” *Christianity Today*, April 1, 2006, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/april/32.85.html>.

⁷⁴ Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts.”

⁷⁵ Mark Chaves, Mary Ellen Konieczny, Kraig Beyerlein, and Emily Barman, “The National Congregations Study: Background, Methods, and Selected Results,” Duke University, August 1999, <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/jssrmeth.pdf>.

difference between what people tell pollsters and what people actually do. Kelly Shattuck points out that “Americans tend to over-report socially desirable behavior like voting and attending church and under-report socially undesirable behavior like drinking.”⁷⁶

Most of this research shows that much of the church’s decline is due to a mass exodus of the younger generations from regular church attendance. Bob Allen, editor of Baptist News Global, offers this summery of research concerning young adults’ church attendance habits:

Young adults are leaving the church in record numbers, and experts wonder how many of them are ever coming back. LifeWay Research found seven in 10 Protestants ages 18 to 30 who went to church regularly in high school quit attending by age 23. A third of those had not returned by age 30. That means about one-fourth of young Protestants have left the church. The Barna Group says six in 10 young people will leave the church permanently or for an extended period starting at age 15. The 2012 Millennial Values Survey...found college-age millennials are 30 percent more likely than the general population to be religiously unaffiliated...Just one in four says he or she attends religious services at least once a week, while 43 percent say they seldom or never attend. Nearly half of younger millennials still live with their parents, but those who live at home are no more likely to attend church than those who do not...Pollsters fear current trends signal more than sowing wild oats...Research suggests the main reason for disengaging from religion is...their faith simply does not seem relevant or important to their daily lives.⁷⁷

There is another group of individuals leaving the church, those individuals who are not leaving *faith* in Jesus Christ but have determined that the church is not the best place to learn, fellowship, and worship. For these people, podcasts, online church, social media, and the rapidly growing worship music industry have served as a church replacement. A Barna study showed that “eighty-eight percent of adults say their faith is

⁷⁶ Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts.”

⁷⁷ Bob Allen, “Millennials Losing Their Religion,” *Baptist News Global*, June 25, 2012, <http://www.abpnews.com/culture/social-issues/item/7555-millennials-losing-their-religion.html>.

important to them, but most choose not to grow their faith in church.”⁷⁸ And when you consider the importance of church to churchgoers, “nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of people in the United States are open to pursuing their faith in an environment that’s different from a typical church.”⁷⁹ Shultz says, “Last weekend most people in America avoided church. And a sizable portion who did make it to church wished they were somewhere else.”⁸⁰ This could be largely because only “44 percent of people who attend church every week say they regularly experience God at church.”⁸¹

“Reveal,” a study conducted by the Willow Creek Association, concluded that spiritually mature members were among the most likely people to report they are considering leaving the church.⁸² Rodney Bertholet, in his research about the state of the Church, concluded that this church decline is an “epidemic of shocking proportions” that “demands a verdict, as it looks metaphorically like dead bones scattered all over the valley. Not only are these dead bones ugly to look at, but it also makes Christianity appear weak and ineffective.”⁸³ The American Christian church has the tools and calling

⁷⁸ The Barna Group, “Americans Are Exploring New Ways of Experiencing God,” June 8, 2009, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/270-americans-are-exploring-new-ways-of-experiencing-god.html>.

⁷⁹ The Barna Group, “Americans Are Exploring New Ways of Experiencing God.”

⁸⁰ Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, Chapter 1.

⁸¹ The Barna Group, “What People Experience in Churches,” January 9, 2012, <http://www.barna.org/congregations-articles/556-what-people-experience-in-churches.html>: 4.

⁸² Greg L. Hawkins, Cally Parkinson, and Eric Arnson, *Reveal* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 53.

⁸³ Rodney F. Bertholet, “These Dead Bones Can Rise Again: Preventing Church Closures in North America” (DMin diss., Portland Seminary, 2013), <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/41>, 4.

to meet the spiritual needs of the culture it has planted itself in, but feedback implies that we are not doing our job.

The Well Curve

A caveat is warranted in this discussion. It is true that overall church participation numbers are declining, but a few studies may give reason for optimism within the statistics. A 2017 Harvard Study shows that the decline in religious affiliation in America can be attributed to the secularization of the people who were “moderately religious.”⁸⁴ In other words, many of those people who are “lukewarm” have been compelled to leave the church (Rev. 3:15-17). The people who in the past claimed “not strong affiliation” have begun to claim “no affiliation,” but the percent of people who claim “strong affiliation” has actually increased over the past 35 years.⁸⁵

In 2008, Leonard Sweet, in his book *Aqua Church 2.0*, used future-minded semiotics to see that the “normal distribution curve” is no longer a “Bell Curve” but a “Well Curve.”⁸⁶ A well curve is a graph with the opposite shape of a bell curve. Chad Hall points out that televisions are simultaneously getting larger (flat screen televisions) and smaller (cell phones). Stores are getting larger (superstores) and smaller (boutiques).

⁸⁴ Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock, “The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion: A Response to Recent Research,” *Sociological Science*, November 27, 2017, https://www.sociologicalscience.com/download/vol-4/november/SocSci_v4_686to700.pdf, 686.

⁸⁵ Schnabel and Bock, “The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion,” 688.

⁸⁶ Leonard Sweet, *AquaChurch 2.0: Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2008), 173.

People are eating more healthful food (Whole Foods) and more fast food (Chick-Fil-A).⁸⁷

Whether you look at politics, business, or the church, people are fleeing the middle ground, and, in order to minister to this world, the church must take ministry “to the edges, not to the center” where the best-of-both-world solutions are.⁸⁸ The thriving churches are the smallest and largest churches, and the dedicated are becoming more dedicated as the less-dedicated leave. The moderate church is disappearing, but is that a bad thing?

Looking South

There are plenty of reasons for concern for Christianity in America, but the growth of Christianity in the global south could be the best news to Christian growth advocates. Timothy C. Tennent says, “the church is experiencing unprecedented growth outside the West, far away from the traditional centers of theological reflection.”⁸⁹ Philip Jenkins, in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, argues that “until recently, the overwhelming majority of Christians have lived in White nations,” making it appear to be the religion of the haves.⁹⁰ Recently, though, the numbers have shifted. The largest Christian communities are now in the south. “The center of gravity in the

⁸⁷ Chad Hall, “Leader's Insight: The Disappearing Middle,” CT Pastors, July 2007, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2007/july-online-only/cln70716.html>.

⁸⁸ Sweet, *AquaChurch 2.0*, 174.

⁸⁹ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology In the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 193.

⁹⁰ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.”⁹¹

If Christians even maintain their current share of the populations of the southern countries, the number of Christians in the world will soon drastically increase because those countries are growing at such a rapid rate. The face of Christianity is changing, but it appears to be in good hands. The skin color of the average Christian is getting darker, and Christianity is becoming more Pentecostal and traditional.⁹² The Muslim church is reaping much of the rewards of the rapid growth of the African population, but Jenkins argues that in terms of reproduction rates, the Christian church is outpacing the Islamic people.⁹³ Publishers Weekly reports, “In a meticulously researched study, Jenkins examines the reasons that Christian churches are booming in these countries. One of the main reasons, he argues, is that Christianity in these developing nations focuses less on doctrine and church politics and more on the ways that religion weaves itself into daily life.”⁹⁴

New Local Churches

Every year, Christians send millions of dollars and some of our bravest and best leaders to start new local churches. How has this strategy worked? Most of us who find ourselves concerned with matters of Church growth have heard the statistic that 80 percent of church plants fail. That statistic is often quoted but rarely cited. No reliable

⁹¹ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 2.

⁹² Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*.

⁹³ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 9.

⁹⁴ Publishers Weekly, “The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity,” March 1, 2002, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/0-19-514616-6>.

source has been found by this writer to prove the validity of that statistic; however, there are a few statistics that imply that it is false.

Ed Stetzer from LifeWay Research challenges the claims of the Acts 29 Network that 80 percent of church planting attempts fail in the first year and The Purpose Driven brochure in claiming that over 70 percent of local church startups fail in the first year. He claims that these statistics are unfounded.⁹⁵ His research shows that 99 percent of church plants survive the first year, 92 percent the second year, 81 percent the third year, and 68 percent the fourth year.⁹⁶ These statistics are encouraging, but are these numbers good enough to change the course of the American church decline?

Even considering the more optimistic statistics, after conducting his research, John Hinkle concludes that, “for years denominational leaders have attempted to address [the church’s] waning of influence by establishing lofty goals for new church plants or imposing unrealistic, evangelical church membership drives, both with little success in the longer term.”⁹⁷ In fact, “despite the work and heightened emphasis [on church planting], the research nevertheless uncovers that many denominations have yet to realize a net growth rate, even while seeing record levels of church planting.”⁹⁸ Church leaders have heard talk of exponential growth that will result from local church startups, but “in

⁹⁵ Edward Stetzer and Warren Bird, “The State of Church Planting in the United States: Research Overview and Qualitative Study of Primary Church Planting Entities,” 5, accessed January 8, 2019, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/assets/10228.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Edward Stetzer and Phillip Connor, “How Many Church Plants Really Survive-and Why?” accessed January 8, 2019, http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200904/200904_036_equipping.cfm.

⁹⁷ John Austin Hinkle Jr, “A Simple Cup of Coffee: What Starbucks Can Teach the Church about Hospitality in How We Reach Our Neighbors,” (DMin dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2015), <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/112>, 2.

⁹⁸ Stetzer and Bird, “The State of Church Planting in the United States,” 25.

spite of increased interest in church planting ventures, there has yet to be a documented church planting movement which involves the rapid multiplication of churches rather than the simple addition of churches.”⁹⁹

In the Future

Another reason for optimism is that spirituality is important to young adults. The thirst for God is still there. “How could it not be,” says Schultz, “when the profoundest human questions—Why does the universe exist rather than nothing? How did humanity come to be on this remote blue speck of a planet? What happens to us after death?—remain as pressing and mysterious as they’ve always been?”¹⁰⁰ Later in his writing, he expounds on this idea when he says, “Consider these encouraging statistics: 91 percent say they believe in God. 88 percent say faith is important.”¹⁰¹ The polls show a huge majority of Americans still believe in a Higher Power. “But the need for new questioning—of Christian institutions as well as ideas and priorities—is as real as the crisis is deep.”¹⁰² The real challenge enters this equation when we recognize that most young adults consider spirituality just one element of a successful, eclectic life. “Fewer than one out of ten young adults mention faith as their top priority.”¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Stetzer and Bird, “The State of Church Planting in the United States,” 3.

¹⁰⁰ Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, Chapter 1.

¹⁰¹ Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, Chapter 2.

¹⁰² Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, Chapter 1.

¹⁰³ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

The deficit of young adult talent, energy, and visioning in the church today exists even though most of those who avoid church today attended a Christian church when they were younger.¹⁰⁴ Even though more than 90 percent of Americans say they believe in God, Barna reports that most of them avoid church.¹⁰⁵ According to Barna, more than 50 percent say a growing number of people they know “are tired of the usual type of church experience.”¹⁰⁶ Sixty-four percent say that they are open to carrying out and pursuing their faith in an environment or structure that differs from that of typical church. And 75 percent say they believe that “God is motivating people to stay connected with Him, but in different ways and through different types of experiences than in the past.”¹⁰⁷

Christians Hold the Keys to Meaning

After living a life of wealth and plenty, Matthew recognized that the things of this world will fade away. He quotes Jesus, saying, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt. 6:19-20). When the world attempts to offer meaning, it inevitably offers a perishing good that will soon disappoint its recipient. One of the elementary principles of the Christian faith is that only God offers lasting meaning. Here’s what Shawn Achor says about meaning:

¹⁰⁴ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

¹⁰⁵ The Barna Group, “Americans Are Exploring New Ways of Experiencing God.”

¹⁰⁶ The Barna Group, “Americans Are Exploring New Ways of Experiencing God.”

¹⁰⁷ Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, Chapter 3.

If the mental map you are using lacks meaning markers, it is incomplete and inaccurate and can lead you astray. Meaning markers are quite simply those things in your life that matter to you: career advancement, a new business, your kid's admission to a desired school, better health, your faith, and so on. No matter what goal or challenge you set for yourself, if you want to be able to channel your full range of intelligences toward achieving it, your personal meaning markers should be points on your mental path. So, if you're currently finding your work less meaningful, your obstacles less surmountable, or your goals less attainable, chances are you need to redraw your mental map. Truth be told, we could all really use help finding more meaning in our lives. In *The Happiness Advantage*, I defined happiness as "the joy we feel moving toward our potential." A lack of meaning in our reality robs us not only of that joy, but also our ability to use our multiple intelligences to increase our success, but as we have seen, a high IQ or EQ alone won't help us find meaning along our paths.¹⁰⁸

The Christian faith has the "help" that Achor is looking for, and that will never change.

This should be a source of logical optimism for the Christian church.

Considering the Future

Some discouraging numbers and thoughts have been documented in this dissertation because the church needs a reality check. Only then will it begin to understand the pit it is in and find a way to get out of it, but the church is not in danger of death. It is built on the solid rock of Jesus Christ, and "the gates of Hades will not conquer it" (Matt. 16:18). The church is in desperate need of a new generation of optimistic leaders who will change the landscape of Christian ministry in America. This dissertation will provide a potential method of course correction, beginning with a shift in perspective by way of theological and attitude correction. Speculative eschatological views that lead Christians to disdain the world they live in, pessimism about the future of the Christian church, and cynicism about the potential adoption of pre-Christians have

¹⁰⁸ Achor, *Before Happiness*, 69.

had an unintended, negative impact on the Church's ability to fulfill its Great Commission.

The next chapter will discuss the effects pessimism and cynicism have had on church growth. A coach who knows the inevitability of loss should be without even an inkling of doubt that failure is inevitable before she delivers that bad news to her team, if the news is necessary at all. Otherwise, the news itself is likely to cause the feared, negative outcome. Jesus will return, and although humans don't know what His return will look like, "it won't be just to extract cowering saints from the rubble of a forsaken planet, [and] it won't be to evacuate a bunch of me-focused consumers so [they] can live on a cloud."¹⁰⁹ To see Paul's description of Christians going to the clouds to welcome their king back to earth as a description of an evacuation is, at best, simply an assumption (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

Eschatology is the study of the future of the world and the destiny of humanity; therefore, conversations about pessimism and optimism depend largely on eschatological predictions. This dissertation will not select and defend a single eschatological theory, but a conversation about the role pessimistic eschatology has played in contributing to the church's image problem is warranted. The pessimism that chilling predictions of future terror produces leads conservative evangelicals in America to militant bunkering rather than energized evangelizing.

The church's eschatological communication should reflect the discernment of John. In a world prone to publicly share every thought on social media, it seems absurd to believe someone could keep a revelation from God secret, but John of Patmos did just

¹⁰⁹ Joshua McNall, *Long Story Short* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2018), 165.

that when he said, “And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down’” (Rev. 10:4) In this present age, we will not know the contents of that revelation, but the censoring itself teaches a lesson in the effects of communication. It is strongly unlikely that the message of the seven thunders revealed the accuracy of premillennial dispensationalism (the version of premillennialism that includes a seven-year period of tribulation between the second coming of Jesus and the millennium), and it is possible that the disclosure of the thunders’ message would have caused more failure than success. About this censoring Joshua McNall writes, “The command seems somewhat odd, since John is elsewhere ordered to ‘Write’ what he has seen, regardless of its strange or controversial content. Yet in this one instance, just as he is about to click the button labeled ‘Publish,’ the voice of God chimes in—‘Don’t do it!’”¹¹⁰ The proponents of theologies that lead to belief in an inevitable decline in Christian discipleship, conspiracy theories of an antichrist around every corner, and the futility of graceful moral correction are given the option to practice similar restraint.

¹¹⁰ Joshua McNall, “What Seven Thunders Spoke: Why Some Revelations Ought to Go Unpublished,” February 8, 2018, <https://joshuamcnall.com/2018/02/08/what-seven-thunders-spoke-why-some-revelations-ought-to-go-unpublished/>.

CHAPTER 2: PESSIMISM AND CYNICISM

Why All the Pessimism?

Anxiety levels in Americans are rising.¹ People are worried about the future, and, although almost all of the evidence shows otherwise, they feel like things are getting worse. Evan Osnos of the *New Yorker* reports that preoccupation with the apocalypse is flourishing from groups of religious doomsayers to Silicon Valley.² Some people expect future disaster to come about as a result of technology. Some blame the media, the stock market, or the government. Others point their fingers at nuclear weapon stockpiles or global warming.

In an important statement about pessimistic Christians, Trevin Wax, author of *This Is Our Time*, writes,

Every generation believes that things are getting worse when compared to the past. Every generation adopts, at some level, a variation of the myth of decline or the myth of progress... In the church, we are tempted to scour the annals of church history looking for the pinnacle of better times, from which we have fallen and now must reclaim. Perhaps it's the early church, the Golden Age of the ecumenical creeds, the Reformation and Puritan era, or the revivals of North America. Whatever point in time we pick, we contrast ourselves to our ancestors and feel as if we've fallen from those heights. The world, and too often the church, is getting worse, we say. But all of this is a myth.³

¹ American Psychiatric Association, "Americans Say They are More Anxious than a Year Ago; Baby Boomers Report Greatest Increase in Anxiety," May 7, 2018, <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/americans-say-they-are-more-anxious-than-a-year-ago-baby-boomers-report-greatest-increase-in-anxiety>.

² Evan Osnos, "Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich," *The New Yorker*, August 10, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich>.

³ Trevin Wax, *This Is Our Time: Everyday Myths in Light of the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), Chapter 8.

Humans tend to judge the progress of the world based on the worst of current circumstances. Although that emotion is produced by uninformed thought, it is occasionally helpful when it leads people to search for solutions to problems. However, when it leads to pessimistic retreat and bunkering, it is counterproductive. Obviously tensions rise during times of war, political insecurity, and rapid technological change, but humans have relentlessly adapted. “Doomsday—as a prophecy, a literary genre, and a business opportunity—is never static; it evolves with our anxieties. The earliest Puritan settlers saw in the awe-inspiring bounty of the American wilderness the prospect of both apocalypse and paradise.”⁴ And how do people who believe the worst about the future react? They build bunkers, and they prepare to fight.⁵

Is all of this fear warranted? No. The reality is that almost every statistic measuring health, comfort, war, famine, knowledge, and freedom reveals that the world is a better place to live today than it has ever been before.⁶ Marian Tupy writes,

Over the last 200 years or so, the world has experienced previously unimaginable improvements in standards of living. The process of rapid economic growth started in Europe and America, but today some of the world’s fastest growing countries can be found in Asia and Africa—lifting billions of people from absolute poverty. Historical evidence, therefore, makes a potent case for optimism.⁷

⁴ Osnos, “Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich.”

⁵ Osnos, “Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich.”

⁶ Gareth Cliff, “This Is the Best Time to Be Alive,” TEDx, University of Free State, November 19, 2015, video of lecture, 19:19, <https://youtu.be/W-I3w7U8H8s>.

⁷ Marian L. Tupy, “Things Are Getting Better, So Why Are We All So Gloomy?” January 6, 2018, <https://humanprogress.org/article.php?p=1084>.

Hans Rosling writes, “Over the past twenty years, the proportion of the global population living in extreme poverty has halved. This is absolutely revolutionary.”⁸ If you believe God cares for the poor, widows, and the least of these, you have to believe that we live in the best time since Adam and Eve walked the earth. This does not mean that there is nothing wrong with the world as it is today or that it does not have a lot of improving to do, but it does mean that improvement has been somewhat constant throughout history. Steven Pinker, the Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, writes,

The world has made spectacular progress in every single measure of human well-being... Problems are inevitable, because our knowledge will always be infinitely far from complete. Some problems are hard, but it is a mistake to confuse hard problems with problems unlikely to be solved. Problems are soluble, and each particular evil is a problem that can be solved. An optimistic civilization is open and not afraid to innovate, and is based on traditions of criticism. Its institutions keep improving, and the most important knowledge that they embody is knowledge of how to detect and eliminate errors.⁹

There is, however, some disagreement about the exact amount of progress in one primary area: freedom. It is true that at least since 2008, the world has “witnessed a sustained attack on political and economic freedoms, as well as freedoms of religion and free expression,” but in order to get a complete picture of the history of religious freedom, a look at a time period greater than a decade is necessary.¹⁰ Setbacks must not be seen as long-term declines. In the Common Era, one of “the world’s first official

⁸ Hans Rosling, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2018), 6.

⁹ Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), Chapter 1.

¹⁰ Marian L. Tupy, “An Update on the Global State of Human Freedom,” June 15, 2016. <https://humanprogress.org/article.php?p=297>.

declaration[s] of universal religious freedom” did not come about until emperor Constantine joined emperor Licinius in issuing the Edict of Milan in 313, and the phrase “religious liberty” wasn’t coined until Tertullian used it in 197.¹¹ Since that time, the world has seen a steady (not constant) increase in religious liberty, and where religious liberty increases, all of human prosperity increases.¹²

For most of human history, a nation’s progress on freedom and liberty were not considered a subject of international concern. Before World War II, “massacres of ethnic groups within a country were met with little more than polite statements of disapproval. Less flagrant violations were not even considered a fit subject for diplomatic conversation.”¹³ Now, governments at all levels at least proclaim their commitment to human rights. When Freedom of Religion was enshrined in the Bill of Rights, the world began to recognize the value of religious freedom.¹⁴

This does not mean that progress is inevitable, but it gives reason for optimism. Because human progress is not linear, the timeline of progress over recorded history moves up and to the right, but temporary setbacks lead some people to fear the worst

¹¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Story About Religious Freedom You Haven’t Heard,” December 1, 2017, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/the-story-about-religious-freedom-you-havent-heard/>.

¹² Anthony Gill, “Religious Liberty and Economic Prosperity: Four Lessons from the Past,” *Cato Journal* Vol. 37, Cato Institute, Winter 2017, <https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/serials/files/cato-journal/2017/2/cj-v37n1-9.pdf>, 116.

¹³ George Clark, ed. “United States Key Role in Support of Human Rights.” *Human Rights in Brief*, 2006, <https://photos.state.gov/libraries/mongolia/805999/PDFs/Human-Rights-in-Brief.pdf>, 5.

¹⁴ Clark, ed. “United States Key Role in Support of Human Rights,” 17.

rather than expect the continuation of progress.¹⁵ When you consider the long timeline rather than snapshots in history, freedom is rising, including religious freedom.

Even if the world had not seen such an increase in religious freedom, the American Christian church would not have legitimate cause for concern. It is undeniable that the world now exercises religious freedom at a much higher rate than was experienced when the church founded, and that did not stifle growth for the early church.¹⁶ In fact, persecution often caused growth (Acts 8:4). Although persecution is not a guarantee of Christian mission failure, it does not always produce church growth, but as Johan Candelin explains, persecution often grows because some of the fastest-growing churches in the world exist in countries without religious liberty.¹⁷

Christ's Hopeful Message

Philippians 4:8 says, “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Paul’s advice to the Philippians is eternally applicable. Unfortunately, the Christian church has attached itself to creeds and statements of belief that neglect statements of love and of actions that reflect the fruit of the spirit.¹⁸ Those creeds do not reflect the ministry and teachings of

¹⁵ HumanProgress.org, “What We Do.” <https://humanprogress.org/about#sec2>.

¹⁶ Thomas Schirrmacher, “Persecution and Mission,” Lausanne World Pulse Archives, November 2008, <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles-php/1048/11-2008>.

¹⁷ Joseph Candelin, “Persecution of Christians Today: Christian Life in African, Asian, Near East and Latin American Countries,” *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Hg*, 16-24, October 28, 1999.

¹⁸ John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 678.

Jesus. Using a teaching style rooted in stories, Jesus entered the long narrative of history to inject a gracious gospel that placed “others” before “self.” The image problem of the church cannot be separated from this lack of Christlike messaging.

Jesus talked about a “narrow door” to His kingdom, but He immediately followed it with a statement about people coming “from the east and west and north and south, and will take their place at the feast in the kingdom of God,” and His pessimistic language about those who fail to enter was directed at His contemporaries (Luke 13:24-29). About the church’s “image problem,” Chris Hillman Brown pointed to the importance of reflecting the language of Jesus by focusing on the prophecy concerning the “radiant” future of the Church and its calling to be “a city on a hill” not the “judgmental or disparaging tone” of the American church.¹⁹

The church’s image problem cannot be separated from the extreme difference in tone between Jesus’ graceful language and the Church’s cynical language, and it would be unwise to ignore the ideas and values that most evidently display that image problem. In *A Missional Orthodoxy*, Gary Tyra points out that there is a “crucial connection” between eschatology and missiology.²⁰ In discussing their connection, Tyra writes,

Regardless of one’s position with respect to a cultural mandate, historically some evangelicals have tended to focus so much on an attempt to pin down the precise timing of Christ’s parousia [second coming] that they have failed to engage in the kind of gospel demonstration (i.e., social action) necessary for many lost and hurting people in our world to be able to really “hear” the good news of God’s love being proclaimed to them.²¹

¹⁹ Chris Hillman Brown, “Christianity Has an Image Problem,” 7 Cultural Mountains, <http://www.7culturalmountains.org/Blog/Theology-of-the-7-Mountains/Theology-of-the-7-Mountains/Christianity-Has-An-Image-Problem&fldKeywords=&fldAuthor=&fldTopic=0>

²⁰ Gary Tyra, *A Missional Orthodoxy: Theology and Ministry in a Post-Christian Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 333.

²¹ Tyra, *A Missional Orthodoxy*, 331.

A Christian's eschatology affects his or her mission effectiveness, and the tone and topic of the vision-casting of many Christians has kept young people, prodigals, and skeptics from listening to the Christian message. Although his own conclusions about the eschatological future of humans comes too close to universalism, Brian McLaren points out that the dispensational eschatology (or what he calls the "eschatology of abandonment") "marginalize[s] Jesus with all his talk of the kingdom of God coming to earth, being among us, and being acceptable today," and a more optimistic eschatology will lead to "an engaging gospel of the kingdom" and a recognition that "people matter."²²

Retreating

Ed Love writes, "The pious escapist believes that the world is a wicked place and the primary hope of the Christian is that he or she can have the assurance of an other-worldly heaven."²³ On the topic of the church's image problem, Gabe Lyons points to the need for Christians to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth, not "sheltered" and "insulated" from the world.²⁴ Lyons' language sounds much more Christological than the language of Paul Axton of the Ploughshares Bible Institute, who writes that his belief in a future eschatological city calls him to depart from human government and social

²² Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: By Celebrating Strengths of Many Traditions in the Church (and Beyond), This Book Will Seek to Communicate a "Generous Orthodoxy"* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 236-8.

²³ Ed Love, "The Coming God: Pursuing a Theology of Hope" (DMin dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2011), <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/5>, v.

²⁴ Gabe Lyons, "Christianity Has an Image Problem," Preach It Teach It, accessed January 8, 2019, <https://www.preachitteachit.org/articles/detail/christianity-has-an-image-problem/>

organization.²⁵ Axton disagrees with David Kinnaman's assessment of the church's "image problem" when he calls it more of a "boiling frog" problem.²⁶ His eschatological understanding leads him to argue that the church must "escape" the "safety of the world," and that the Christian church should go "underground" and "separate" itself from Americanism.²⁷ He compares this connection between Christianity and America to the Jews who pointed to Caesar as their king rather than recognize Jesus as their king.²⁸

Mission Failure

In a lecture about eschatology, Dr. John Drury said, "Our beliefs about the future determine our perspective on the present."²⁹ Pessimistic eschatology can cause the Church to assume that mission failure is inevitable and miss out on the benefits of positive psychology. The authors of the New Testament books never said that the birth of Jesus introduced a steady decline of humanity that would end in the second advent (the literal second coming of Jesus Christ to earth to be physically reunited with the Christian church), but the authors of the entirety of the Christian scriptures introduce a long narrative of history that culminates in the physical reunification of God and His children.

²⁵ Paul Axton, "Homeless Christianity: The Church Militant or Triumphant? Part II," Forging Ploughshares, August 16, 2018, <https://forgingploughshares.org/2018/08/16/homeless-christianity-the-church-militant-or-triumphant-part-ii/>.

²⁶ Paul Axton, "Escaping an Evil Christianity: Must Theological Education Go Underground?" Forging Ploughshares, June 30, 2018, <https://forgingploughshares.org/2018/06/30/escaping-an-evil-christianity-must-theological-education-go-underground/>.

²⁷ Paul Axton, "Escaping an Evil Christianity."

²⁸ Paul Axton, "Homeless Christianity."

²⁹ John Drury, "Lecture 8.1, Intro to Christian Theology THEO-500," Marion, Indiana, December 10, 2018.

If the Church is able to leave the door open to optimistic interpretations of eschatological prophecies, it can take advantage of the benefits of positive psychology.

Christ's messaging made Christianity "the single greatest movement in the history of the world,"³⁰ and the idea that this movement will be ended when Jesus Christ returns to "rapture" a relatively small group of people before a tribulation is a "recent novelty in church history."³¹ In fact, "the Bible knows nothing of a preliminary return of Christ prior to his final return."³² Nevertheless, rapture theology has become "widespread in evangelical churches" with very little backing in Christian Scripture.³³ The antagonistic tone of the church, seen most evidently in dispensational theologies, has shaken the Church on its foundation laid by Jesus. Is it any surprise that the hateful, judgmental people of Westboro Baptist Church are dispensationalists, and many Christian leaders who espoused more optimistic eschatological beliefs helped Christianity to become such a great movement (see chapter three)?³⁴

The rise of dispensationalism in America came from more pessimistic semiotics (the study of signs) that resulted from the horrors of World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, and war in the Middle East.³⁵ Isaiah demonstrated an

³⁰ William Lane Craig, "#439 Christian Pessimism?," Reasonable Faith, September 13, 2015, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/question-answer/P100/christian-pessimism>.

³¹ Craig, "#439 Christian Pessimism?"

³² Craig, "#439 Christian Pessimism?"

³³ Craig, "#439 Christian Pessimism?"

³⁴ Justin L. Ayoud, "Harold Camping Oct. 21 Rapture: Westboro Baptist Church to Protest 6B Funerals," The Christian Post, October 21, 2011, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/harold-camping-oct-21-rapture-westboro-baptist-church-to-protest-6b-funerals-59009/>.

³⁵ Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 26.

optimistic form of semiotics that displayed faith in God's sovereignty in the future despite the gloomy time in which he lived. Although dispensationalism is "on the wane" in academic circles, a majority of Christians seem to be content with the comfort that results from the belief that Christians will not be around to suffer the wrath of the antichrist or the punishment awaiting those who do not live the life Christians are prone to believe they must live.³⁶ The Pew Research Center found that 58 percent of white evangelical Christians say Jesus Christ will definitely or probably return to earth before 2050, and 41 percent of all Americans believe Jesus Christ will definitely or probably return to earth before 2050.³⁷ Even if these people do not know that their predictions of future events affect their outlook on life, it must. If a parent does not believe his or her children will be on this earth for long, there is less reason to look optimistically into the future.

³⁶ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 27.

³⁷ Russell Heimlich, "Jesus Christ's Return to Earth," Pew Research Center, July 14, 2010, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2010/07/14/jesus-christs-return-to-earth/>.

Pessimism About the Future of the Church

Pastor Survey

ANSWER CHOICES ▼	RESPONSES ▼	
▼ Hostility toward Christianity in the world is increasing.	81.36%	48
▼ Sinfulness in the world is increasing.	69.49%	41
▼ Violence in the world is increasing.	62.71%	37
▼ Hostility toward Christianity will continue to increase until Jesus returns.	69.49%	41
▼ Sinfulness will continue to increase until Jesus returns.	64.41%	38
▼ Violence will continue to increase until Jesus returns.	54.24%	32
▼ Hostility toward Christianity in the world is decreasing.	8.47%	5
▼ Sinfulness in the world is decreasing.	3.39%	2
▼ Violence in the world is decreasing.	11.86%	7
▼ Hostility toward Christianity will continue to decrease until Jesus returns.	1.69%	1
▼ Sinfulness will continue to decrease until Jesus returns.	1.69%	1
▼ Violence will continue to decrease until Jesus returns.	3.39%	2
Total Respondents: 59		

Between September 3, 2018 and September 6, 2018, I performed an anonymous survey on Facebook of fifty-nine of my colleagues (pastors in The Wesleyan Church).³⁸ The primary purpose of the survey was to ask them what they think about hostility toward Christianity, sinfulness, and violence in the world. Forty-eight of them (81.4%) think that “hostility toward Christianity in the world is increasing,” while only 8.5% of them believe “hostility toward Christianity in the world is decreasing.” Forty-one of them (69.5%) think “hostility toward Christianity will continue to increase until Jesus returns,” and only one of them (1.7%) thinks “hostility toward Christianity will continue to decrease until Jesus returns.”

³⁸ See Appendix A.

Forty-one (69.5%) think sinfulness in the world is increasing, and only 3.4% think sinfulness in the world is decreasing. Thirty-eight (64.4%) think “sinfulness will continue to increase until Jesus returns,” and only one (1.7%) thinks “sinfulness will continue to decrease until Jesus returns.”

The most revealing result shows that they are out of touch with reality. Thirty-seven of them (62.7%) think “violence in the world is increasing,” while only seven (11.9%) think “violence in the world is decreasing.” Thirty-two of them (54.2%) think “violence in the world will continue to increase until Jesus returns,” and only two (3.4%) that “violence will continue to decrease until Jesus returns.”

Historically speaking, it is difficult to make the case that our world is not becoming more peaceful. Jim Geraghty, in an article titled “There Are a Lot of Reasons to Feel Optimistic about America’s Future,” writes, “We fear terrorism, but one of the reasons that terrorism and asymmetrical warfare are rising is because conventional war is growing rarer.”³⁹

On the topic of violence and war, Steven Pinker explains that

Tribal warfare was nine times as deadly as war and genocide in the 20th century. The murder rate in medieval Europe was more than thirty times what it is today. Slavery, sadistic punishments, and frivolous executions were unexceptionable features of life for millennia, then were suddenly abolished. Wars between developed countries have vanished, and even in the developing world, wars kill a fraction of the numbers they did a few decades ago. Rape, hate crimes, deadly riots, child abuse—all substantially down.⁴⁰

³⁹ Jim Geraghty, “There Are a Lot of Reasons to Feel Optimistic about America’s Future,” National Review, August 3, 2018, <https://www.nationalreview.com/the-morning-jolt/america-future-optimism-warranted/>.

⁴⁰ Steven Pinker, “The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined,” Viking, 2011, <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2011-19860-000>.

Human nature leads people to fear the worst outcome and think pessimistically about the potential for positive outcomes, but HumanProgress.org reports that

Evidence from individual scholars, academic institutions, and international organizations shows dramatic improvements in human well-being throughout much of the world. In recent decades, these improvements have been especially striking in developing countries. Unfortunately, there is often a wide gap between the reality of human experience, which is characterized by incremental improvements, and public perception, which tends to be quite negative about the current state of the world and skeptical about humanity's future prospects.⁴¹

Brian Wang reports the results of the research of Laurence Chandy and Geoffrey Gertz, which says

[The] rise of emerging economies has led to a dramatic fall in global poverty... [The authors] estimate that between 2005 and 2010, the total number of poor people around the world fell by nearly half a billion, from over 1.3 billion in 2005 to under 900 million in 2010. Poverty reduction of this magnitude is unparalleled in history: never before have so many people been lifted out of poverty over such a brief period of time.⁴²

Gloomy Church

Hebrews 13:17 instructs pastors to do their work “with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” This verse led John Piper to say, “A gloomy pastor makes a sick congregation.”⁴³ Apocalyptic predications based on the current state of the church ignores over 1,000 years of Christian history in the Near East. Piper goes on to say, “An alarmist approach to eschatology is usually historically naïve.”⁴⁴ Each of the

⁴¹ HumanProgress.org. “What We Do.”

⁴² Brian Wang, “Poverty in Numbers: The Changing State of Global Poverty from 2005 to 2015 by the Brookings Institute,” Next Big Future, February 27, 2011, <https://www.nextbigfuture.com/2011/02/poverty-in-numbers-changing-state-of.html>.

⁴³ Piper, “Gospel Hope for Cultural Pessimists.”

⁴⁴ John Piper, “Gospel Hope for Cultural Pessimists,” Desiring God, March 17, 2016, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/gospel-hope-for-cultural-pessimists>.

arms of eschatological thought has sufficient theological capacity to provide room for optimism for the future of the Church to govern their activity until the second coming of Christ, but some theologies do so with more dedication. All holistic views of the Bible recognize that evil will not triumph, but some doom Christianity to decline until the triumph is realized.

In a culture where it is not in vogue to be the favored team, confidence itself is a repellent to many people, especially the younger generations.⁴⁵ Still, the Christian church in America has largely espoused a single, unsubstantiated conclusion that is leading the Church to an undesirable fate.⁴⁶ That eschatological theory has been labeled dispensationalism. When a theology has as many diverse theories, each with intelligent supporters, as Christian eschatology does, a wise theologian would admit his or her probability of being at least partially inaccurate, yet many have clung to dispensationalism as absolute truth. Christians who prioritize the Great Commission will avoid arrogant defense of a specific theory. The faith of Christians should not be placed in a single interpretation of end-times prophecies; therefore, a concise survey of those prophecies is in order. This section will attempt to do that by looking at those portions of the Bible that refer to the second coming of Jesus Christ. The purpose of this section is not to advocate for a specific eschatological theory. Instead, it will provide an interpretation of some of the crucial Bible passages that speak of eschatology and

⁴⁵ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 19.

⁴⁶ Audrey Barrick, "Poll: What Evangelical Leaders Believe about the End Times," The Christian Post, March 9, 2011, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/poll-what-evangelical-leaders-believe-about-the-end-times-49340/>.

demonstrate that no single interpretation of these passages can be trusted with absolute confidence.

God's Plan

After He created the world, God stepped back and called it good, as if to say, “now watch it work.” He rested and allowed its beauty to sustain and to amaze, but He did not then leave it alone. The Creator is absolutely involved with the evolution of His creation, and His plan will come to pass. Nothing will hinder its fulfillment. Isaiah 46:9-10 says,

Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

If God has made known the end from the beginning, can humans know these things? Yes, but not in the way an individual knows a clock will chime on the hour. Rather the end is known similar to the way a mother knows she would sacrifice everything for her child. Theologians are not to know the *date* of the end but the *result* of the end. Matthew 24:36 says, “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

This dissertation will assume two areas of general agreement. The first is that a second coming of Christ is imminent. The disciples assumed the imminence of the return and the end of the world when they asked, “When will all this happen? What sign will signal your return and the end of the world?” (Matt. 24:3) Douglas Wilson points out that

this statement implies that the two events will occur at the same time.⁴⁷ As the disciples watched Jesus ascend to heaven, two men in white robes, presumably angels, asked them, “Why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!” (Acts 1:11) This implies that the second coming of Jesus will be just that, a coming to earth,⁴⁸ not a taking away from earth.⁴⁹

The second assumed agreement is that no man can know the day of Jesus’ return. The temptation to use enigmatic prophecies⁵⁰ to predict the exact date of Jesus’ return has led and will lead many smart people to make themselves look ignorant.⁵¹

Documentational Scripture

The passages that point to specific events in time—this dissertation will name them Documentational Scripture—can be logically divided into two categories, history and prophecy. However, there is much disagreement about which passages fall into each category, because prophecy that has been fulfilled, whether recently or in antiquity,

⁴⁷ Douglas Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced: Christ’s Kingdom on Earth* (Moscow, ID: Canonpress, 2011).

⁴⁸ Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced*, 21.

⁴⁹ For more acknowledgments of the second coming, see Matthew 24:30, John 14:3, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Hebrews 9:8, James 5:8, 2 Peter 3:10, 1 John 3:2-3, Revelations 1:7, and Revelation 22:20.

⁵⁰ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus: When Did Jesus Say He Would Return?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015), 68.

⁵¹ Sproul, *The Last Days*, 52.

becomes history.⁵² Most of the prophecies in Scripture have already been fulfilled⁵³; therefore, an examination of biblical history will aid in understanding those passages that are often considered to be prophecies.⁵⁴

If it is the fulfillment of prophecy that Christians are looking for to signal the return of Christ, consider this optimistic prophecy of Jesus Christ that points to the success of the Church, not to the demise of the world, as a sign of His return. In Matthew 23, Jesus tells the people of Jerusalem that because they rejected the Christian prophets, their house would be left “desolate” until they proclaim, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Matt. 23:37-39) The word “house” here could either refer to the whole polity of Israel or to the Temple, but, either way, the Jews⁵⁵ would become followers of Christ before He returns.⁵⁶ This most certainly has not happened on a large scale. Paul often began his ministry in a city at the synagogue, and after he was rejected by the Jews, the Gentiles were drawn to his message. Paul believed that the conversion of the Gentiles would arouse “envy” in the Jews that would result in the Jews accepting Christ (Rom. 11:14). Perhaps this will happen on a large scale when the nations turn to God.

The focus of many biblical prophecies is the nation of Israel—its birth, development, rebellion, destruction, and redemption—but all prophecies at least partially

⁵² Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced*, 93.

⁵³ Sproul, *The Last Days*, 47.

⁵⁴ Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced*, 16.

⁵⁵ Sproul, *The Last Days*, 60.

⁵⁶ Charles J. Ellicott, *A Bible Commentary for English Readers*, vol. 6 (London, UK: Cassell & Company, 1905).

point to Jesus. A messenger spoke to John, saying, “Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10). This is prophecy, to tell of Jesus and His Kingdom, but prophecy “will become useless...Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture!” (1 Cor. 13:8-9). Therefore, the focus of prophecy is not a detailed description of end-time predictions of a tribulation (distress or suffering resulting from oppression or persecution), a millennium (a reference to the 1,000-year period referenced in Revelation 20), or even a rapture (the prophesied moment that all Christians will physically join Jesus Christ for eternity), but on a King and His Kingdom. Although much of biblical prophecy has already happened, the expansion of this Kingdom is proceeding. It is at hand, continuing, and near. Matthew 3:2 is one of many passages that say, “the kingdom of heaven has come near.”⁵⁷ It is a mistake to assume that we are at the end of this Kingdom development and growth.⁵⁸

The Kingdom has been steadily growing since the day of Christ, and yet many Christians continue to look for a future kingdom, choosing to focus on the kingdom as a future reality rather than a present reality. Kingdom growth is happening now exactly as He promised and taught. Just as nothing can stop the chemical reaction taking place when yeast is introduced into flour, nothing can stop the growth of the Church (Gal. 5:9). This line of reasoning could lead theologians to much more optimistic conclusions, and, as they begin to believe success is possible, optimism will produce positive results.

⁵⁷ Other passages with similar statements include Matthew 4:17, Matthew 10:7, Matthew 12:28, Mark 1:15, Luke 10:9-11, and Luke 11:20.

⁵⁸ Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced*, 82.

Harold Eberle writes,

Most of the great leaders throughout Church history held to a victorious eschatology. However, during the twentieth century, Christians became increasingly skeptical and pessimistic about the future. During World War I, Christians in Europe began to embrace a negative view of the world. Christians in North America followed suit during the Depression and World War II. As the world was thrust face-to-face with challenges and the wickedness of war, people embraced a negative view of humanity and a pessimistic view of the future. It was during those trying periods when many Christians embraced a more pessimistic eschatology. They came to believe that the world is gradually slipping under the influence of wicked leaders and eventually Satan will take control of the economic and religious systems of the world.⁵⁹

Prophecies of Isaiah

The prophecies in Isaiah are largely focused on the Jewish plight of future enslavement by the Babylonians and their eventual deliverance, but it also points, like other prophetic books, to a future Messiah and introduces Gentiles to God's salvation narrative. When Isaiah 28:5 speaks of a great day that is coming, it appears to be a glorious day of Jesus' reign with His people: "In that day the Lord Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of his people." Isaiah's focus was lifted from the dark days that faced his beloved people to a future time when glory would come upon the earth.⁶⁰

There is no mention in the book of Isaiah of a tribulation, a millennium, the decline of the Kingdom, a constant increase of the oppression of the church, or a third coming of Jesus Christ. Instead, Isaiah 46:10 paints an optimistic picture of those end

⁵⁹ Harold R. Eberle and Martin Trench, *Victorious Eschatology* (Yakima, WA: Worldcast Publishing, 2009), Introduction.

⁶⁰ See also Isaiah 11:10 and Isaiah 31:7.

times. The dread that is so often the central idea of eschatological discussions cannot be justified by the book of Isaiah or similar books of prophecy. The prophetic books of the Bible “are concerned primarily with this life rather than anything beyond it,” and the few passages that do reference the afterlife are “unclear.”⁶¹

Paul quotes another messianic prophecy from the book of Isaiah when he writes, “The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope” (Rom. 15:12-14). The passage being quoted is Isaiah 11:6-10, which points to an almost-too-good-to-be-true future time that dispensationalists associate with a time after the second coming of Jesus. The passage in Isaiah says,

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

About this passage, Douglas Wilson, a historical optimist and postmillennialist (someone who believes that all of the Bible was written before 70 A.D., and that most of the prophecy that Bible scholars consider eschatological actually point to the events surrounding the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by Nero), writes, “The great Apostle Paul is appealing to Isaiah as a justification for his preaching to the Gentiles. And since then, we have had two thousand years of the Lord’s government and peace increasing.”⁶² If Jesus lived during that prophesied time, that time is now past and future.

⁶¹ Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 1.

⁶² Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced*, 16.

Prophecies of Daniel

The book of Daniel also predicts the coming of the Messiah. When Daniel interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he spoke of empires that would come over the next several centuries. Those empires seem to have been the empires of Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom), Persia, Greece, and Rome. The final portion of the dream concerned a fifth kingdom that would be set up during the fourth. It was compared to a "rock cut out" by divine hands that would strike the other kingdoms and crush them to pieces (Dan. 2:45). What is the fifth kingdom? Is this the kingdom that Jesus repeatedly described while He was on earth? Daniel's explanation gives us a strong indication that it is: "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people" (Dan. 2:44). If the Christian church now operates in this kingdom, this prophesy should be a great source of optimism about the Church's future.

The Jews seem to have missed it because they were looking for a political kingdom, but Jesus told Pilate that His Kingdom was not of this world. It was from another place (John 18:36). This explanation convinced Pilate that Jesus was a king (John 18:37). Jesus' mission cannot be separated from His Kingdom.⁶³ In His famous prayer, Jesus tied God's Kingdom to God's will (Matt. 6:9-13). Just as Jesus' will is in the process of being accomplished, so also is His Kingdom upon us. The two are connected. To assume that a rapture of the saints will occur, followed by a great tribulation upon this earth and a royal reign of the Christians, followed by the final judgment, is to fall into

⁶³ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 102.

Pilate's trap. The Kingdom is not an earthly, political kingdom.⁶⁴ The Kingdom is bigger than that.⁶⁵

In a vision, Daniel saw past the time of the four beasts in Daniel 7 and past the time of the ten kings. Daniel wrote about that kingdom:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Dan. 7:13-14).

Jesus seemed to claim to be the fulfillment of this prophecy when He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18). The postmillennialist could convincingly argue that those prophecies have now become history.⁶⁶

Jesus taught more about the Kingdom than any other subject. According to 1 Corinthians 15:19, if our only hope is the kingdom in this age, we have no hope at all. Matthew 11:12 implies that the kingdom was in existence in the past; Mark 10:15 implies that we can receive the Kingdom in this life; and Luke 16:16 implies that it is coming. Jesus seemed to imply that the Kingdom would not come dramatically, but it would expand slowly. In Matthew 13:31, Jesus compares the Kingdom to a seed that takes time to grow, and in Matthew 13:33, He compares the Kingdom to yeast that a woman mixed into a large amount of flour, implying a slow renovation of the dough (Matt. 13:31-33).⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 107.

⁶⁵ See also Luke 17:20 and John 3:3.

⁶⁶ Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced*, 103.

⁶⁷ See also Mark 4:25-29 and Mark 4:30-32.

The kingdom of God was also said to be at hand, but also near. Seemingly, it is here but not yet fully here. The Kingdom appears to have arrived been here before it has fully come to fruition. If the kingdom was a present reality when Luke wrote Luke 17:20-21, the kingdom is a past and future reality.⁶⁸

After Jesus' resurrection from the dead, His followers inquired, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They were still looking for the kingdom to come physically and politically in their lifetime, and even when they recognized that the kingdom was not of this world. It would take them years to see the slow, growing nature of the kingdom and its extension to the Gentiles. Christ did not give them a "yes" or a "no." Instead he told them that there was work to do and power to do it with (Acts 1:7-8).

A.D. 70. Daniel 9:24-27 is a metaphorical passage that predicts a stop to the temple sacrificial system. Some historians connect this prophecy to the destruction of the temple by Nero and the Roman General Titus in A.D. 70.⁶⁹ The passage says:

Seventy "sevens" are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place. Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven "sevens," and sixty-two "sevens." It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two "sevens," the Anointed One will be put to death and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. He will confirm a covenant with

⁶⁸ John Piper. "Is the Kingdom Present or Future?" *Desiring God*, February 4, 1990, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/is-the-kingdom-present-or-future>.

⁶⁹ Matthew Henry, Adam Clarke, and Robert Jamieson, *The Bethany Parallel Commentary on the New Testament: From the Condensed Editions of Matthew Henry, Jamieson, Fausset, Brown, Adam Clarke: Three Classic Commentaries in One Volume* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1983), Comments on Daniel 9:27.

many for one “seven.” In the middle of the “seven” he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And at the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.

Most readers interpret the “sevens” in this passage as weeks.⁷⁰ Postmillennialists argue that the coming of the Messiah is prophesied to happen after the sixty-nine weeks and before the seventy weeks are completed.⁷¹ Immediately after Titus took Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Titus burned the temple and worshiped pagan gods on the temple mount. It seems reasonable that the seven weeks plus the sixty-two weeks in Daniel 9:25 are sixty-nine of the seventy weeks mentioned in Daniel 9:24. This would be the end of the reign of sin that would occur just under 500 years after the restoration referred to in Daniel 9:25. In 458 B.C. (Ezra 7:7), Artaxerxes ordered the restoration of Jerusalem. A.D. 33 was 490 years later; therefore, Daniel 9:24-27 appears to be a messianic prophecy.

The Beast. The beast and abomination spoken of in Daniel 9:27 and Revelation 13 can be interpreted as metaphorical, someone who existed in the past, or someone who will exist in the future. These passages have often been used to predict a seven-year, great tribulation that will correlate in some way with the second coming of Christ. The primary marking of the beast’s existence is the end of temple sacrifice (Dan. 9:27), which was a historical event that occurred in A.D. 70. Yet even if the seven-year great tribulation is an event that will occur in the future end times, right before or right after the second coming of Jesus, the prophecies that are used to predict that do not foretell a constant decline of the church until that happens.

⁷⁰ Loraine Boettner, *Postmillennialism* (Self-published, Amazon Digital Services, 2011), Introduction, Kindle.

⁷¹ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 85.

Prophecies of Timothy and Titus

In Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, the author makes a compelling case for the eradication of strict, legalistic forms of Torah observation, and he advocates for a new covenant with higher expectations (Matt. 5:20). Paul uses much of the Pastoral Epistles to end quarrels about methods and practices of law-following. In Titus 3:9, Paul writes, "But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless." Although Paul did write about moral responsibility, reliability, and fidelity, these instructions were given in the context of the Church, not in the context of Jewish law.⁷² These teachings were meant to end quarrels, not to start them.⁷³

2 Timothy 3:1-9 says,

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people... They are men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone.

Paul shows Timothy that the signs of living in the "last times" are already to be seen in the activity of false teachers who peddle heresy for material gain and for illicit encounters with "silly women," but Paul assures Timothy that the opposition will amount to nothing.⁷⁴ The trouble that people face in this life, this time of evil which Paul

⁷² David Arthur DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 741.

⁷³ See also 2 Timothy 2:14.

⁷⁴ DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 735.

describes as “the last days,” will cause pain. The setting in which Paul talks about persecution that has already begun in 2 Timothy 2:9, and the persecution mentioned in 2 Timothy 3:12, is a continuation of the warnings in 2 Timothy 3:1-9. These warnings should not be divided as distinct events. In these passages, the reader is warned about suffering hardship and degrading circumstances for the sake of the gospel, but it is the return of Christ and the assurance of future vindication and honor that is the strongest incentive to endure temporary pain.⁷⁵

It would be a mistake to use a passage like 2 Timothy 3:1-9 to justify pessimistic expectations by interpreting it as a description of a world that has been and forever will be in moral and physical decline. Pastor Robert Jeffress argues that the world is “right now” experiencing the “moral deterioration” that evidences the arrival or soon arrival of the tribulation that will precede the return of Christ.⁷⁶ The theory requires an assumed escalation of trouble that is not explicitly written in 2 Timothy 3. If the last days began in the time of Jesus, the terrible times described could be contained to a period in the last days or consistent until the return of Christ. The Postmillennialist argues that the Great Commission will increasingly succeed in the present age and the perils described in 2 Timothy 3 will decrease.⁷⁷

The open-minded Christian will have difficulty reconciling predictions of deterioration with the verifiable improvements in human livelihood, the increase in life expectancy, and the decrease in accepted injustices. Paul writes the book of 2 Timothy

⁷⁵ DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 756.

⁷⁶ Robert Jeffress. “Terrible Times in the Last Days.” First Baptist Dallas, November 3, 2017, <http://www.firstdallas.org/icampus-blog/terrible-times-in-the-last-days/>.

⁷⁷ Sproul, *The Last Days*, 200.

from prison in the midst of circumstances that would lead most people to thoughts of extreme pessimism about the future, in a time that could literally be described as his “last days” in this world. It was also written in a time when Nero persecuted Christians on a staggering level, slaughtering Christians in arenas by gladiators and wild animals. Such behavior would never be tolerated today as it was in the first century.⁷⁸ In this letter, Paul describes the sinful people of his day as “sinful people in an era in history.”⁷⁹

“We’ve now had about 2,000 years of last days. That’s roughly equal to the time between Abraham and Jesus—beginning at God’s first covenant agreement with humanity, through Abraham, and reaching to the start of his second covenant, through Jesus.”⁸⁰ Although we are not given a full prophecy of what will happen in the entirety of the last days, we can see that conditions have not declined steadily since the time of Jesus. The Church has grown. This passage should not lead readers to pessimism about the whole future of the world. The arguments and proofs pessimists attempt to provide are reliant on the communication technologies that have made atrocities and disasters appear to occur more frequently than in the past when wrongdoing and tragedy occurred without recognition. Steven Pinker writes,

Whether or not the world really is getting worse, the nature of news will interact with the nature of cognition to make us think that it is. News is about things that happen, not things that don’t happen. We never see a journalist saying to the camera, “I’m reporting live from a country where a war has not broken out”—or a city that has not been bombed, or a school that has not been shot up. As long as bad things have not vanished from the face of the earth, there will always be

⁷⁸ EyeWitness to History, “Nero Persecutes the Christians, 64 A.D,” 2000, <http://www.tribunesandtriumphs.org/colosseum/colosseum-christian-martyrs.htm>.

⁷⁹ Stephen M. Miller, *The Complete Guide to the Bible* (Phoenix, AZ: Barbour Pub., 2007), 449.

⁸⁰ Miller, *The Complete Guide to the Bible*, 449.

enough incidents to fill the news, especially when billions of smartphones turn most of the world's population into crime reporters and war correspondents.⁸¹

Passages like the first part of 2 Timothy 3 have been used for centuries to argue that the future is bleaker for Christians than the present. That message is anchored in the idea that “the last days” is a time in the future, or a time that has recently arrived, in which evil will overcome good, but that idea is flawed. Scripture is clear that the last days began with the first advent. The arrival of Jesus Christ marked the beginning of the end. Speaking of Jesus, 1 Peter 1:20 says, “He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.” 1 John 2:18 says, “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.” The evil that is described in these passages is meant to describe the world in which we already live.

The description of sinful behavior and dire circumstances in 2 Timothy 3 could just as easily point to Timothy's world as to ours. We see in other New Testament letters that Paul uses similar language to point out similar behavior in his time in history.⁸² In Acts 20:29-30, Paul says, “I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following.” Similarly, the goal of Titus 1:10-13 was not to refer to rebellious people and false teachers in a distant apocalypse. This may not prove that the specific events in 2 Timothy 3 were occurring in Paul's lifetime, but it definitely shows that the vices listed are common to early Christian

⁸¹ Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 41.

⁸² William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (S.I.: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 547.

history. Greek present tense does imply that the verb is present and moving forward, but in this case, William Mounce, addressing the present tense of Paul's language, argues that 2 Timothy 3:5 "shows that while the vice list may be applied to society in general, Paul is really thinking about certain people professing to be Christians."⁸³ The Wycliffe Commentary points out that "The last days probably is not here limited to the eschatological age-end, but includes the Gnostic attack of the Church then developing."⁸⁴ In other words, pain and sin in the world have been a constant since Adam and Eve lived.

The logical mind then seeks to determine if Scripture implies that the horrible times described therein will get worse in the latter part of the last days. Even though the church has often been resilient in the face of dismal prophesy, the prophetic warnings of persecution, evil behavior, and natural disaster can have a crippling effect on the subject of pain if the imagination allows them to grow to an infinite height. How great will the suffering become if the pain will increase until the second advent? If the suffering can only increase, it is tempting to hope for the second coming before Christians accomplish all that they can to win as many people as possible.

It should be added here that peace that transcends all understanding and Christian joy must not be dependent upon the absence of immorality or physical threats of danger. There are times on this earth that it will appear to be more like heaven, and there are times that it will appear to be more like hell, but Christians are commanded to stay joyful and patient through both seasons. These periods of time are referred to when Paul calls them "terrible times" (2 Tim. 3:1). The word "times" is translated from the Greek word

⁸³ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 547.

⁸⁴ Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett Falconer Harrison, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1990), "The First Epistle to Timothy."

Kairos. The ancient Greeks had two words for time, *Chronos* and *Kairos*. *Chronos* is the ongoing, measurable time. *Kairos* is qualitative. It measures moments and seasons.⁸⁵ In other words, they will be like periods or moments, a temporary existence.

Paul did not intend this statement to be a thesis on all he believes regarding the future, but a warning about evil behavior. A. C. Purdy argued eschatology was very important for Paul, and that is seen in Paul's expectations for the future found in 1 Corinthians 15:20–28. In that passage, Paul describes what he believed would be a blessed day for followers of Jesus Christ.⁸⁶ About that passage in 1 Corinthians, Kenneth L. Gentry Jr. writes, "That Corinthians passage is filled with hope. Therefore, in 2 Timothy 3 he does not say all that can be said. What he does say there should be balanced with his more extensive statements elsewhere."⁸⁷

Prophecies of Revelation

John's Revelation was a letter to seven churches, and its readers would be wise to read it with a full understanding of who the letter was written to.⁸⁸ "John's wild and fantastic images invite Christians living in the Roman province of Asia Minor during the last decade of the first century to perceive the true character of the realities that face them

⁸⁵ McKinley Valentine, "Chronos & Kairos," March 7, 2013, <https://mckinleyvalentine.com/kairos/>.

⁸⁶ A. C. Purdy, *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible Volume 3 K-Q: An Illustrated Encyclopedia Identifying and Explaining All Proper Names and Significant Terms and Subjects in the Holy Scriptures, including the Apocrypha* (New York: Abingdon, 1962).

⁸⁷ Kenneth L. Gentry Jr. "2 Tim 3 (# 8): Despair or Hope?" *Postmillennial Worldview*, January 28, 2015, <https://postmillennialworldview.com/2015/01/28/2-tim-3-or-the-postmillennial-hope-8/#more-5857>.

⁸⁸ DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 889.

every day, and to respond to them in a way that will allow them to share in the triumph of the Lamb rather than in the punishment of Babylon.”⁸⁹ When the book of Revelation depicts wrath, it is primarily referring to the future wrath of God on the devil, his forces, or those who were unfaithful to God.⁹⁰ Examples of these references include a statement in Revelation 6:16-17 about the “wrath of the Lamb that is to fall upon the kings of the earth,” a statement in Revelation 14:10 of an angel who threatens “anyone who worships the beast,” and a statement in Revelation 11:18 about God’s wrath on those who were “destroying the earth.”⁹¹ Much of the letter is written about the hope offered to those who are rescued by the Lamb that was crucified and raised from the dead. This truth relegates the coming wrath and destruction to those who “shrink back” from the faith, while those who “have faith” will be saved (Heb. 10:39).

The date of the authorship of the book of Revelation plays a key role in the interpretation of its predictions. The book was either written before A.D. 70 or in the A.D. 90s. The evidence of a late writing is largely based on a reference in the writing of Irenaeus, a student of Polycarp. Polycarp was a disciple of John, the author of Revelation. Irenaeus was born in A.D. 130, but he wrote the book *Against Heresies* in A.D. 180. In that book, he wrote about John’s revelation as having been already written at the close of

⁸⁹ DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 885.

⁹⁰ Ralph Martin and Peter H. Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 1239.

⁹¹ Martin and Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, 1239-1240.

the reign of Domitian.⁹² Domitian died in A.D. 96.⁹³ “Not very long ago” is a vague reference to use as a foundational argument for determining such a critical theology.

The New Testament has a tone of urgency and expectation that seems to point to an event that would come soon. This leads premillennialists and amillennialists to argue that the authors of the New Testament were misunderstanding the prophecies of Jesus and the prophets when they used the word “soon.” Douglas Wilson writes that most of the authors of the New Testament seem to be “waiting for something drastic that will happen soon, and not one of them even mentions the most cataclysmic event in Jewish history—the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70—as being past. That event was the destruction of the old Judaic order and its replacement by the Christian church, the New Israel.”⁹⁴ One would assume that those events would have been referenced if a book was written after A.D. 70. This seems to be an obvious argument for an early authorship of Revelation.

Revelation 6:9 talks of souls who had been martyred for being faithful to their testimony, using similar language as those who are beheaded because of their testimony in Revelation 20. The people who are beheaded in Revelation 20:4 are beheaded by the seven-headed beast from Revelation 12:3. The postmillennialist then argues, quite convincingly, that the seven heads of the beast point to the same thing to which the seven hills and seven kings point—to Nero. Nero persecuted the church from A.D. 64 to A.D. 68—for 42 months, as described in Revelation 13:5-7.

⁹² Sproul, *The Last Days*.

⁹³ Wayne Jackson, “When Was the Book of Revelation Written?” Christian Courier, accessed November 18, 2017, <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/1552-when-was-the-book-of-revelation-written>.

⁹⁴ Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced*, 111.

The postmillennialist also has a convincing argument in the New Testament consistently stating that these prophecies will happen soon (see Matt. 24:34 and Rom. 13:12-14). Daniel was told to seal the words of the prophecy because the time was not yet, and he was only 400 years from the prophesied events (Dan. 12:4). Revelation 22:10 told the prophet not to seal up the words of the prophecy because the time was near. It seems logical to conclude that these prophecies would point to a fulfillment less than 400 years in the future.

The premillennialists and the postmillennialists disagree about the location of the events documented in Revelation 20 that refer to a throne where judgment will occur. The most obvious place of this event is heaven.⁹⁵ The use of the word “thrones” in Revelation 20:4 seems to be a reference to a spiritual throne, not an earthly throne. The word “thrones” is used forty-seven times in Revelation, and forty of those instances are relevant to its use in 20:4. Every time the word is used, it is used to refer to a heavenly throne. This also seems to be true outside the book of Revelation.⁹⁶

The premillennialist interpretation would conclude that every unbeliever was killed in Revelation 19, but Revelation 20 refers to Satan deceiving the nations. If all the people were destroyed, who is left to compose the nations, and who will be around to be deceived? It would seem logical to conclude that Revelation 19 and 20 use different imagery to predict the same event: the second coming of Christ. If that is true, it would

⁹⁵ Cornelis P. Venema, “Revelation 20: Part IV – The Believer’s Reign with Christ,” Grace Online Library, accessed January 8, 2019, <https://graceonlinelibrary.org/eschatology/revelation-20/revelation-20-part-iv-the-believers-reign-with-christ-by-cornelis-p-venema/>.

⁹⁶ See, for example, Matthew 19:28, Luke 1:32, and Acts 7:49.

also seem logical to conclude that the 1,000-year reign could just as likely be a heavenly or spiritual reign as an earthly reign.

Readers would be wise to use John's revelation to understand the true nature of the world we live in rather than to guess future events.⁹⁷

Other Prophecies

Most of the prophecies of the Bible point to one of four events: the Babylonian captivity in 598 B.C., the life and death of Jesus, the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, and the second coming of Jesus Christ. The "last days" began with the life of Jesus, but a majority of eschatological discussions focus on the small number of years before, during, and after the return of Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:2).

1 Corinthians 15:15-58 shows that the death of death (the termination of physical death) occurs at the second coming of Jesus. No man will die a physical death after Jesus returns to earth. Similarly, the glorification of Christians and the redemption of the world will occur simultaneously with Jesus' return. Romans 8:18-23 shows that when the sons of God are revealed at the second coming of Jesus, all of creation will be redeemed. The curse cannot perpetuate beyond the second advent. There is also no evidence that individuals will have the ability to come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ after the second coming of Jesus. 2 Thessalonians 1:5-8 gives evidence of these things happening when Christ returns:

And God will use this persecution to show his justice and to make you worthy of his Kingdom, for which you are suffering. In his justice he will pay back those who persecute you. And God will provide rest for you who are being persecuted

⁹⁷ Greg Van Buskirk, "John Wesley's Practical Eschatology," Boston University School of Theology, Doctoral Conference, March 24, 2012, https://www.academia.edu/4066589/John_Wesley_s_Practical_Eschatology.

and also for us when the Lord Jesus appears from heaven. He will come with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, bringing judgment on those who don't know God and on those who refuse to obey the Good News of our Lord Jesus (2 Thess. 1:5-8).

Premillennialists connect what has already happened and what has yet to happen to more concrete terms: "this age" and the "age to come." They then place the line of demarcation between the two ages at the second coming of Jesus. Matthew 13 contains multiple verses that indicate that "the judgment will occur at the time of our Lord's return."⁹⁸ This produces much difficulty for premillennialists, who claim that there will be a literal one-thousand-year period between Jesus' return and the final judgment. In Matthew 13:40-43, Jesus says,

As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

Then in Matthew 13:49-50, Jesus says, "This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Writers such as Alan E. Kurschner and Steve Hays offer a defense of premillennialism that points to Matthew 24:12-13 as proof that wickedness will continually increase.⁹⁹ That passage says, "Because of the increase of wickedness, the

⁹⁸ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 85.

⁹⁹ Alan E. Kurschner, "Randal Rauser Asserts Premillennialism Is Pessimistic, Therefore, It Is Against Social Justice and the Environment," Eschatos Ministries, January 23, 2013, <https://www.alankurschner.com/2013/01/23/randal-rauser-asserts-premillennialism-is-pessimistic-therefore-it-is-against-social-justice-and-the-environment/>, and Steve Hays, "Pessimillennialism," Triablogue, January 21, 2013, <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2013/01/pessimillennialism.html>.

love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.” This passage does not speak of the extent to which the wickedness will increase or for how long it will continue to increase. Mortal men can only attempt to compare the intensity of wickedness to the past, and that gives very little insight into the height it could reach. This is a vague reference to hang a theology on.

Douglas Wilson argues that the series of troubles cited in passages like these “are not talking about the end of the world at all.” Those passages are about the destruction of Jerusalem and “the end of the age of Israel.”¹⁰⁰ The postmillennialist argues that this passage is pointing to the events that took place in A.D. 70. It would be difficult to argue that the list of terror in Matthew 24 more easily applies to our time than the time of Nero and Titus, and if Matthew 24:12 is applied to some future time of terror, it must be reconciled with Matthew 24:7, which claims that in that time nations will be at war. When compared to history, now is a time in which wars are rare.¹⁰¹

Kim Riddlebarger argues that “premillennialists must attempt to sidestep the clear teaching of Scripture that the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:35-57, 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11, 2 Thess. 1:5-10), the restoration of all things (2 Pet. 3:3-15), and the judgment occur at the same time—our Lord’s second advent.”¹⁰²

The church has a clear commission, given from God, who has “all authority in heaven and on earth,” and it is not to decline until Jesus returns to rescue the few who remain (Matt. 28:18). That statement about God having all authority implies that Satan

¹⁰⁰ Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced*, 102.

¹⁰¹ Geraghty, “There Are a Lot of Reasons to Feel Optimistic about America’s Future.”

¹⁰² Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 86.

has been bound. That commission is to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20). Ed Love writes, “The people of God live precisely between the ascension and the return. In the meantime, God’s people are joined to Jesus Christ by the Spirit and, while God’s people wait, they are commanded to remain in faith, hope, and love.”¹⁰³ During the time of this present inter-advent age, Satan cannot prevent the gospel from succeeding in bringing souls globally to faith in Christ. Paul tells the church,

I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:17-18).

He can persecute the church. He can tempt to sin, but Satan cannot stop the gospel.

Notable Eschatologists

John Darby, who lived from 1800 to 1882, played such a significant role in the development of premillennial dispensationalism that his followers were said to believe in Darbyism. He admitted that his “morbid imagination” led him to believe that apostolic authority had been given only to the Catholic church.¹⁰⁴ This idea led him to stay loyal to Rome longer than he would have without it, though he did eventually join the movement of Protestantism. His translation of the Bible reflects his belief in the inevitable decline of

¹⁰³ Love, “The Coming God,” 52.

¹⁰⁴ William Blair Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, 2nd ed (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1902), 13.

the Church. He believed that the Church would become increasingly judgmental, gloomy, and factional. Darby regularly said, “The Church is in ruins.”¹⁰⁵ This father of dispensationalism also insisted “...the entire nature and purpose of the church has become so perverted that it is diametrically opposed to the fundamental reason for which it is instituted.”¹⁰⁶

Like Darby, Cyrus Scofield, perhaps the key figure in the spreading of dispensationalism, wrote a version of the Bible that helped to popularize dispensationalism. Scofield taught that the Christian church and Israel are two very distinct entities, thereby paving the way for Zionism, a Jewish political movement that seeks to reestablish the Jewish homeland and temple sacrificial system as part of the fulfillment of prophecy.¹⁰⁷

Like most theologians who primarily use the prophecies of Daniel to explain their eschatology, William Miller, who lived from 1782 to 1849, provided a date for most biblical prophecies, including the second coming of Jesus, which he believed would happen in “about the year 1843.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ J. N. Darby, “On the Formation of Churches, Further Developments,” *Collected Writings*, Eccl. I, Vol. 1, ed. William Kelly (Kingston on Thames, UK: Stow Hill Bible and Trust Depot, 1962), 303. See also Eccl. III, Vol. XIV, “What the Christian Has Amid the Ruin of the Church.”

¹⁰⁶ J. N. Darby, “What is the Unity of the Church?” *Collected Writings*, Eccl. IV, Vol. XX, 456.

¹⁰⁷ Maidhc O. Cathail, “The Scofield Bible—The Book that Made Zionists of America’s Evangelical Christians,” Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, September 24, 2015, <https://www.wrmea.org/2015-october/the-scofield-bible-the-book-that-made-zionists-of-americas-evangelical-christians.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Encyclopedia Britannica, “William Miller.”

The Reach of Dispensationalism

In showing how premillennialism and political posturing are often linked, Dr.

John Fea, a historian and evangelical Christian, writes,

Because religion in America directly impacts policy, military leaders and planners must learn to recognize the tenets and implications of American millennial thought. Millennialism has always been a feature of the American culture and has shaped not only the objectives of U.S. government policy, but also the way in which we interpret the words and actions of other actors on the international stage. Millennial ideas contribute to a common American understanding of international relations that guide our thinking regardless of individual religious or political affiliation. Millennialism has great explanatory value, significant policy implications, and creates potential vulnerabilities that adversaries may exploit. By gaining insight into and embracing intellectual honesty where our own prejudices and proclivities are concerned, we can greatly improve the quality and clarity of our decision-making. Pessimism and paranoia are two possible results of pre-millennial influence.¹⁰⁹

After pointing out that pessimism and paranoia may result from premillennial influence, John Fea writes that the effects of premillennialism are so engrained in American Christianity that America's adversaries can use dispensational interpretations of prophecy to predict the future actions of America's military.¹¹⁰

Major Brian L. Stuckert agrees with this assessment when he writes, "Since the beginning of the Republic, various forms of millennial religious doctrines, of which dispensational pre-millennialism is the most recent, have shaped U.S. national security strategy."¹¹¹ And about its influence in politics, Nilay Saiya writes, "Dispensationalist

¹⁰⁹ John Fea, "The Strategic Implications of American Millennialism," *The Way of Improvement Leads Home*, May 24, 2018, <https://thewayofimprovement.com/2018/05/24/the-strategic-implications-of-american-millennialism/>.

¹¹⁰ John Fea, "The Strategic Implications of American Millennialism."

¹¹¹ Brian L. Stuckert, "Strategic Implications of American Millennialism," *Advanced Military Studies Program*, May 22, 2008, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a485511.pdf>.

Christians were successful at influencing American foreign policy during the administration of George W. Bush, particularly toward the Middle East.”¹¹²

On RedState.com, Erick Erickson, a politically active Christian who appears to be a premillennialist, admits that his eschatological beliefs made him pessimistic about the future of the Church and cynical about the people in the Church:

On the last day there will be a narrow gate. That makes me pessimistic about my future in politics and the future voices on the right...In the 1800's [stet] with the rise of the Great Awakening, students of eschatology viewed the end times rather favorably. The whole world would come to Christ, many of them thought. I view the end times more pessimistically. I think there'll be many more through the pearly gates than I want, but a whole lot less than I expect.¹¹³

Dr. Joel McDurmon argues with the assertion made by Erick Erickson in an article titled “An Open Letter to Erick Erickson: Reason to Dump the Pessimistic Eschatology.”

McDurmon says,

Thank you, RedState.com mogul Erick Erickson, for showing us clearly the soft underbelly of the mainstream Christian right in America: pessimistic eschatology. I, and others, have of course said this for some time now. You have now exposed it openly, and have admitted that your eschatology dictates general hopelessness in your considerable political activism.¹¹⁴

In *Purity, Power, and Pentecostal Light*, Christopher Jon Bransletter compares the impact that the eschatology of two revivalists, A. M. Hills and R. A. Torrey, had on

¹¹² Nilay Saiya, “Onward Christian Soldiers: American Dispensationalists, George W. Bush and the Middle East,” *Political Science and International Studies Faculty Publications*, Fall 2012, 2. https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/pls_facpub/2.

¹¹³ Erick Erickson, “I Increasingly Find Conflict Between My Faith and Some Conservative Discourse,” RedState, August 21, 2014, <https://www.redstate.com/erick/2014/08/21/my-faith-and-conservative-populism-are-colliding-more-frequently/>.

¹¹⁴ Joel McDurmon, “An Open Letter to Erick Erickson: Reasons to Dump the Pessimistic Eschatology,” *The American Vision*, August 29, 2014, <https://americanvision.org/11275/an-open-letter-to-erick-erickson-time-to-dump-the-pessimistic-eschatology11275/>.

their optimism for the potential of revival.¹¹⁵ Hills was a postmillennialist. Torrey was a dispensationalist. The difference in their eschatological beliefs is the most impactful of their theological differences. The optimistic view of history, the Church, and the gospel that characterizes most postmillennialists “could not be any farther from the dispensationalist’s negative attitude toward the same.”¹¹⁶ That is just the beginning of the differences that these two eschatological beliefs produce, from social reform and integration to larger doctrinal and strategic commitments. Eschatology reveals itself as more than a secondary doctrine for revivalists. It drives them to push toward widespread, long-term success or settle for incomplete accomplishments. A revivalist’s eschatology is a major contributor to his or her mission and plays a key role in developing his attitude toward pre-Christians. Hills writes, in a statement that seems to sufficiently predict his success as a revivalist, “Jesus never spoke one syllable about the insufficiency of the Holy Spirit and the gospel, and the present means of grace to win the world and establish His Kingdom. He never intimated that...all these Christian instrumentalities were never intended to succeed! God inaugurated these means and they will succeed!”¹¹⁷

If the world is a burning apartment building that cannot be saved, the evangelist will work to save as many people as possible before the danger of collapse becomes too great. If a firefighter operates under the assumption that the fire will be victorious, he begins to create a hierarchy, relegating some of the people in the building as a lost cause

¹¹⁵ Christopher Jon Bransletter. *Purity, Power, and Pentecostal Light: The Revivalist Doctrine and Means of Aaron Merritt Hills* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

¹¹⁶ Branstetter, *Purity, Power, and Pentecostal Light*, 205.

¹¹⁷ Aaron Merritt Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology* (Pasadena, CA: C.J. Kinne, Pasadena College, 1932), 354.

and others as worth the effort. If the firefighter operates under the belief that the flames are contained and receding, he or she may be so bold as to believe every person in the building can be saved and work to accomplish that goal no matter how close to the fire each person is. Some in the American Christian church have been blinded by a theology that has led to a contemptuous view of the future. This pessimistic theology has led to a Christianity that shields itself from imminent danger, Zionist theology that is overly militant and political, and selectivism theology that leads to judgmentalism and eventually relegates certain individuals as lost causes. About the impact of dispensationalism on a person's ideas, Dr. Tommy Ice writes, "Dispensationalism made sense to many Calvinists who were pessimistic about individual human nature and it followed that society as a whole was in the same condition."¹¹⁸

Don Wagner writes that

Christian Zionists and pre-millennial dispensationalists have a pessimistic view of history and wait in eager anticipation for the unfolding of a series of wars and tragedies pointing to the return of Jesus. The establishment of the state of Israel, the rebuilding of the Third Temple, the rise of the Antichrist and the buildup of armies poised to attack Israel, are among the signs leading to the final battle and Jesus' return. Leading Christian Zionists in Bible prophecy to seek to interpret political developments according to the prophetic schedule of events that should uphold accordingly.¹¹⁹

While contrasting the eschatological beliefs of Charles Finney and Dwight Moody, Donald W. Dayton writes, "On the surface, the difference between these options

¹¹⁸ Tommy Ice, "A Short History of Dispensationalism," Worldview Weekend, November 9, 2015, <https://www.worldviewweekend.com/news/article/short-history-dispensationalism>.

¹¹⁹ Donald E. Wagner, *Anxious for Armageddon: A Call to Partnership for Middle Eastern and Western Christians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), Part 2.

is merely one of timing, of the ordering of eschatological events.”¹²⁰ He explains some of the difference by saying, “The choice of one or another of the millennial options usually revealed a fundamental mindset—a view of the world and faith.”¹²¹ Postmillennialism leads to a narrative more prone to social activism, while dispensationalism leads to a disconnection of human effort and future possibility. Eschatological differences are better defined as differences in overarching vision than in systematic doctrine.¹²² In practice, their social attitudes are completely different. To illustrate, Donald W. Dayton points out that postmillennialists founded liberal arts colleges, but dispensationalists founded Bible colleges. He notes, “The Bible school has no place for the study of history, literature, philosophy, science, etc. because these have no real role other than distractions in the premillennialist agenda. The urgency of the imminence of the return of Christ requires the minimum of biblical training and the equipping of the student in practical ministries.”¹²³ His assertion that there is no place for these things in the Bible school may be an overstatement, but his point is well taken. Liberal arts universities, like optimistic eschatologists, produce individuals who invest in the future of society, develop comprehensive strategies of success, and recognize the fusion of their spiritual and physical lives.

When religious leaders teach the world that “the end is coming,” they encourage an attitude of peril. Gary DeMar writes,

¹²⁰ M. Darrol Bryant and Donald W. Dayton, *The Coming Kingdom: Essays in American Millennialism & Eschatology* (Barrytown, NY: International Religious Foundation, 1983), 132.

¹²¹ Bryant and Dayton, *The Coming Kingdom*, 132.

¹²² Branstetter, *Purity, Power, and Pentecostal Light*, 206.

¹²³ Donald W. Dayton, *Methodism & the Fragmentation of American Protestantism, 1865-1920* (Wilmore, KY: Asbury Theological Seminary, 1995), 11.

What impact does antichrist speculation have on the ideological battles we are fighting today? If the antichrist is alive and well on planet earth, and the signs of the last day are all around us, then why bother with education, politics, the media, international affairs, economics, and a whole host of other worldview issues?...In time, the activists throw up their hands and follow the path of prophetic logic: If all the signs point to the near return of Jesus, and all sorts of bad things are going to happen, including an economic meltdown like the one described by prophecy writers John Hagee (Financial Armageddon) and David Jeremiah (The Coming Economic Armageddon), then why spend my time and resources trying to fight something that is inevitable?¹²⁴

A Summary of End-Times Prophecy

The amillennialist (those who believe that the millennium spoken of in Revelation 20 is either a metaphorical description of the period between Jesus's first and second coming or a heavenly reign of Christians who have died and are in an intermediate state, reigning until the second coming of Jesus) and the postmillennialist share similar eschatological frameworks, although the similarities decrease when the postmillennialist determines that the millennium is a literal one-thousand-year period that will happen or is happening just before the return of Jesus. The differences between the moderate postmillennialist and amillennialist are nuanced, but they do separate significantly when the conversation of the future fate of the church begins. Kim Riddlebarger points out that

many Postmillennial writers often describe the matter as a debate between "optimistic" Postmillenarians and "pessimistic" Amillenarians, while Amillennial writers often locate the difference of opinion in the postmillennial confusion of the "already" [the present blessings of the kingdom of God] and the "not yet" [the eternal blessings of the consummation].¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Gary DeMar, "Why Bother If the End Is Near?" American Vision, January 8, 2016, https://americanvision.org/3514/why-bother-if-the-end-is-near/#identifier_6_3514.

¹²⁵ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 96.

The amillennialist argues convincingly that this age, characterized by its sinful and temporal nature, will end abruptly and cataclysmically at the second coming of Jesus.¹²⁶

Even if dispensationalism is a logical interpretation of prophecy concerning the future of the world, sabotaging the hopes of a positive future of the church for a theory is unwise. If it is true that those prophecies that are often assumed to be about a future apocalypse have actually already become history, the future glory of the church is being traded for a misinterpretation. It takes faith to trust a prophecy, but the abandonment of all other options for the potential correctness of a single prediction about the details of that prophecy is blind faith. The continuation of time and the resilient growth of the church leads to optimism, but when the time of the end of this age, the destruction of men, and the return of Christ are falsely predicted, the result is not celebration. It is shame. The prediction of tribulation, when not experienced, is met with disguised disappointment. When the prophet is revealed to be a hoax, morale declines.

Victory

Even though suffering is not always a deterrent when it comes to the success of evangelism, the continued success of the Church would inevitably lead to a decline in persecution. What was the victory that Jesus Christ achieved when He resurrected from the dead? The amillennialist sees the victory of Christ as primarily a spiritual victory, but the postmillennialist argues that the victory of Christ is in an ongoing physical reality. The dispensationalist is the most eager to claim that Christian suffering will continue and

¹²⁶ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 97. See also Matthew 13:39-40, 1 Corinthians 15:50-57, 1 Thessalonians 4:17, 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10, Revelation 6:12-17, and Revelation 19:11-21.

increase until the return of Jesus, but that belief is also held by most historical premillennialists (those who believe that the second coming of Jesus will take place before the millennium but after the great tribulation) and amillennialists. It is easy for the postmillennialists to come to an optimistic prediction for the church because they believe most of the prophecies about the end times that lead others to more morbid predictions have already been fulfilled.¹²⁷ In the same way that Scripture describes the destruction of Jerusalem, the fall of empires, and the birth and death of kings in ways that “sound like Armageddon,” radical imagery was used to talk about the end times, not in order to predict a literal fiery end to the space-time continuum, but because “radical imagery was the only language robust enough to sufficiently convey the magnitude of the spiritual, emotional, and historical situation.”¹²⁸

Heaven

It is likely that optimistic Christians will look forward to the new heaven and the new earth, but not in the way a child looks forward to the conclusion of a punishment (2 Pet. 3:13). Instead they should work toward that day like a bride works in excitement to prepare for her wedding. With proper expectation of the finish line and an understanding of the prize, people generate necessary changes in order to conclude the current journey in a healthy state of accomplishment. Similar to the way that the old law prepared the world to understand the new law, this world prepares humans for the next world. Failing to recognize the church’s future potential and working for that future achievement leads

¹²⁷ Some of the passages postmillennialists use to back this optimistic view are Psalm 2:6-9, Psalm 21:8-12, Psalm 110:1-2, Isaiah 2:2-4, Isaiah 9:6-7, and Isaiah 11:6-10.

¹²⁸ Joshua McNall, *Long Story Short* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2018), 159.

to a lack of semiotic recognition, destructive self-fulfilling prophecy, and inevitable decline.

It should move Christians from pessimism to optimism to know that heaven is not a completely separated existence that ignores the present world. It is an excellent evolution of this world. In *The Last Battle*, C. S. Lewis portrays the new heaven and the new earth as a far better version of the current.¹²⁹ Randy Alcorn explains that on the new earth, Christians will say, “the reason we loved the old earth is that sometimes it looked a little like this.”¹³⁰ He continues,

The bucket-list mentality reveals an impoverished view of redemption. Even Christians end up thinking, “If I can’t live my dreams now, I never will.” Or, “You only go around once.” But if you know Jesus, you go around twice—and the second time lasts forever. It’s called “eternal life,” and it will be lived in a redeemed universe with King Jesus.¹³¹

To conclude that the eternal destination of Christians is an ethereal place in the sky is a departure from the traditional understanding of heaven. Douglas Wilson points out that “the Bible doesn’t generally speak in our popular way of ‘going to heaven when we die’—not that it is technically wrong...the final biblical hope is heaven coming here.”¹³² Christians pray to the sky when speaking to God, but that is because that is where Jesus went. It is also where He will come from when He returns to earth. The Kingdom “comes.” It does not “go.”

¹²⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (London: Collier, 1956), 168-171.

¹³⁰ Randy Alcorn, “C.S. Lewis on Heaven and the New Earth: God,” *Desiring God*, September 28, 2013, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/c-s-lewis-on-heaven-and-the-new-earth-god-s-eternal-remedy-to-the-problem-of-evil-and-suffering>.

¹³¹ Randy Alcorn, “C.S. Lewis on Heaven and the New Earth: God.”

¹³² Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced*, 21.

Pessimists and the Future

It is not surprising that a world so prone to pessimism has been attracted to a pessimistic eschatology, but it is unwise to dogmatically argue for a particular interpretation of prophecy. God has not given adequate revelation to lead theologians to conclude the exact occurrences of the future. Eschatology is a study of educated guessing about the events that will occur before, during, and after the second coming of Jesus Christ, but clinging to a single guess, especially a guess that leads Christians to dread and an assumption of perpetual decline, may lead the church to self-fulfilling prophecy. In theory, dispensationalism has the same strategy for spreading the gospel to the whole world as the other theories of eschatology, but they do not believe they will succeed in their mission. That lack of belief and lack of positive mental outlook may be detrimental, even for those who are unaware of the effects dispensationalism has had on their worldview.

The church is God's instrument, used to get His message out to the people of the world. Upon hearing the gospel, many will believe and join His family. God will continue to bless His church as the church continues to seek ways to fulfill the mission given to it by our Lord. Satan will not succeed in any of his attempts to thwart this mission. The church will overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony, with no desire to shrink from the call for fear of death (Rev. 12:11). Aaron Gyde writes,

Jesus commands his followers to make disciples of all nations, but moreover he promises that the gospel of his kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world. Jesus' credibility is at stake if Christianity does not eventually make it all over the

globe... Today, Christianity is still on the rise and is growing all over the world—even in the Middle East and Europe.¹³³

¹³³ Aaron Gyde, “The Great Commission—What History and Modern Statistics Can Tell Us About the Success of the Church,” *The Harvard Ichthus*, Fall 2013, <http://augustinecollective.org/the-great-commission/>.

CHAPTER 3: HISTORY OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN THE CHURCH

In order to help Christians see that continued church growth is possible, this chapter will describe methods of past success. This will aid in the discovery of similar avenues to future success and turn pessimism to optimism. In order to gain an optimistic mindset, Christians who seek evidence for the potential for future Church growth can take notes from the example set by many of the Church's great revivalists. This chapter will look at the Church that was formed by these optimistic revivalists and the ideas that made them the personalities who would attract so many to the Christian faith. A positive mental outlook, this chapter will show, can lead to revival.

As Frank Beardley points out, "If we believe in the final triumph of the kingdom, it follows that there will come a time when revivals will no longer be necessary. But while there is a single impenitent child of God, revivals in some form or other will be a necessity for bringing such into the fold of Christ."¹

The Joy of Revival

The power of revivals to bring people to Christ is connected to its ability to produce joy. In *The Treasury of David*, Charles Spurgeon writes, "A genuine revival without joy in the Lord is as impossible as spring without flowers, or daydawn without light."² Christianity is in need of a joyful revival. Psalm 85:6 says, "Will you not

¹ Frank G. Beardsley, *A History of American Revivals* (Kansas City, KS: American Tract Society, 1904), Chapter 18, Kindle.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Lynchburg, VA: Old-Time Gospel Hour, 1985), 86.

revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” Revival leads to rejoicing, and the emotion associated with the action of rejoicing is joy. Joy is intricately connected to Christian revival. About the benefits of revival, Betsy Hart of the Heritage Foundation writes, “As the people tell their stories of going out into the community and praying for their neighbors, sharing with others the good news of Christ’s hope and forgiveness, their eyes shine with life, with joy, that flows from revived hearts.”³

Throughout the history of Christianity, revival has served as a bringer of joy and therefore of the benefits of a positive mental outlook. Joy, like positive mental outlook, broadens “people’s momentary thought-action repertoires, widening the array of the thoughts and actions that come to mind.”⁴

About the revivals initiated by Jonathan Edwards, Dr. Dane C. Ortlund writes,

Edwards came to long for revival because he saw that it is not a move from the ordinary to the extraordinary so much as a move from the sub-ordinary to the ordinary. We become human again. We breathe once more...Simply put, revival isn’t weird. True revival is rehumanizing. It re-centralizes not the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit so much as the ordinary fruit of the Spirit.⁵

Revivals produce the fruit of the Spirit, not the least of which is joy.

Revival, Reformation, and Awakening

In an article titled “Time for a Second Reformation? Why Some Say Another ‘Revival’ Is Not Enough,” Jeremiah Johnson suggests that individual evangelism may not

³ Betsy Hart, “The Joy of Revival, From the Heart,” Time to Revive, July 2, 2015, <http://www.timetorevive.com/blog/the-joy-of-revival/>.

⁴ Barbara L. Fredrickson, “The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* no. 359 (2004): 1367-1377.

⁵ Dane C. Ortlund, “5 Things Jonathan Edwards Teaches Us about the Christian Life,” Crossway, August 26, 2014, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/5-things-jonathan-edwards-teaches-us-about-the-christian-life/>.

be enough. In fact, he says, “revival” might not be the right word because it implies something short-term. That has led him to use the word “reformation” in statements like, “The Church has settled for a small vision; maybe a much smaller one than God would have intended...It’s real important for the church to really shift into Reformation, which to me is long-term.”⁶ In this dissertation, the use of the word “revival” should be assumed to imply a large-scale, long-term transformation and growth of the Christian church.

In a fair statement made about the limits of the word “revival,” Greg Laurie points out that “An awakening takes place when God sovereignly pours out his Spirit and it impacts a culture...A revival, on the other hand, is what the church must experience. It’s when the church comes back to life, when the church becomes what it was always meant to be.”⁷ His point is that the word “revival” generally focuses on the rejuvenation of Christians, and the word “awakening” generally focuses on pre-Christians becoming Christians. This is a true observation, but because of the inseparable connection of evangelism and discipleship, like fruit to a branch, this dissertation will periodically use the words “revival” and “awakening” interchangeably.

Gordon MacDonald, chancellor of Denver Seminary, says that hope sparks revival, and revivals produce people.⁸ The people God used to lead the great Christian revivals demonstrated the effects that hope, joy, and a positive mental outlook can have

⁶ Paul Strand, “Time for a Second Reformation? Why Some Say Another ‘Revival’ Is Not Enough,” The Christian Broadcasting Network, February 4, 2018, <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2018/february/time-for-a-second-reformation-why-some-say-another-revival-is-not-enough>.

⁷ Greg Laurie, “What Is the Difference between a Spiritual Awakening and a Revival?” Crosswalk.com, July 25, 2018. <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/what-is-the-difference-between-a-spiritual-awakening-and-a-revival.html>.

⁸ Gordon MacDonald, “Beyond Pessimism or Optimism,” Christian History, 2009, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2009/january-online-only/beyondpessimisмоptimism.html>.

on producing revivals and Christian advancement. The following is an examination of some of those people.

Jonathan Edwards and Church Growth

The eighteenth century brought many great changes to the world. It saw the rise of capitalism and the middle class, the industrial revolution, a depoliticizing of the Christian church, and, arguably, the greatest Christian revival in history. This world has seen many Christian revivals, but Paul Moore argues the Great Awakening and its sister revivals around the world produced “the greatest change in society in the history of modern man.”⁹ Its impact was not only felt in the Church, but in all areas of life, and this happy period in history encouraged Christians to adopt a positive mental outlook and optimistic theologies. In reflecting on this great revival, Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century revivalist, preacher, philosopher, and theologian says,

We are taught also by this happy event how easy it will be for our blessed Lord to make a full accomplishment of all his predictions concerning his Kingdom, and to spread his dominion from sea to sea, thro’ all the nations of the earth. We see how easy it is for him with one turn of his hand, with one word of his mouth, to awaken whole countries of stupid and sleeping sinners, and kindle divine life in their souls.¹⁰

It was this incredible optimism concerning God’s plan for this world that led Edwards to write sermons that would spread the gospel of grace through faith throughout our world

⁹ Paul Moore, *Revival—Before and After* (Self-published, Amazon Digital Services, 2015), “The First Great Awakening,” Kindle.

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Writings from the Great Awakening*, ed. Philip F. Gura (New York: Library of America, 2013), 5.

and challenge “the old forms of religious authority.”¹¹ That optimism and courage was motivated by some key points of his theology, mostly developed from his study while in exile in Stockbridge.¹² Two of those beliefs were justification by faith alone and postmillennialism. Although he was most known for his revival sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” he spent “much less time and energy depicting the wrath of God than he did preparing sermons about the beauties of Christ’s perfections.”¹³ About this sermon, Dr. Dane C. Ortlund writes, “Scholars point out that the hellfire sermons were more typical of the young Edwards and gradually decreased over his career, while other themes grew increasingly strong: the beauty of Christ, the loveliness of holiness, the calmness of a justified life, the gentleness of God.”¹⁴

By Grace Through Faith

As shown in the previous chapters, the image problem of the Church is largely caused by the Church’s judgment of the actions of pre-Christians. If it were actions that saved people from the eternal consequence of sinful actions, that judgmentalism may be justified, but it is not the actions of the Christian that save him. It is the actions of Jesus Christ.

¹¹ Nancy Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 38.

¹² Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*, 39.

¹³ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 95.

¹⁴ Dane C. Ortlund, “5 Things Jonathan Edwards Teaches Us about the Christian Life,” Crossway, August 26, 2014, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/5-things-jonathan-edwards-teaches-us-about-the-christian-life/>.

How did Edwards identify those who are saved by God? The simple answer is found in one of the passage he quoted most often, John 1:12: “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”¹⁵ His children are simply to understand that “We are justified only by Faith in Christ.”¹⁶ A hospitable and inclusive belief in God’s grace led Edwards to an inclusive strategy of evangelism.

This grace-focused teaching is not unique to the Great Awakening. From Paul Moore’s extensive study of the social conditions surrounding revivals, he concludes that

revival is a gift of grace—in spite of man’s rebellion. The history of spiritual awakenings indicates that revival comes when conditions are at their worst. It comes, however, not because of those conditions, but because of the will of God. When the law is powerless to bring about change, God invades the atmosphere and rescues men from their own depravity. Revival cleanses the atmosphere like a summer shower.¹⁷

The strategies of Edwards and the other leaders of the Great Awakening did not take the place of their complete reliance on the Holy Spirit and God’s grace for the inception of revival.

Postmillennialism

Edwards’ self-efficacy and optimistic evangelistic strategies are seen in his eschatological beliefs. Edwards was a postmillennialist. Loraine Boettner, in the tradition

¹⁵ Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Writings from the Great Awakening*, 427.

¹⁶ Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Writings from the Great Awakening*, 417.

¹⁷ Moore, *Revival—Before and After*, “Conclusion.”

of Athanasius, gives a description of postmillennialism that connects Edwards' actions to his eschatology, describing postmillennialism as the

view of the last things which holds that the Kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the Gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit, that the world eventually will be Christianized, and that the return of Christ will occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the Millennium.¹⁸

While dispensationalists, like Irenaeus, believe that any effort to make this world a better place will only delay the second coming, postmillennialists foster a spirit of excitement for the future of the mission with which we participate.¹⁹

As "Yale's first and foremost child prodigy," Edwards clearly did not lack biblical knowledge.

Jonathan Edwards matriculated at Yale (then Collegiate School of Connecticut) in 1716 just before reaching 13. At the time, entrance into the college required fluency in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Four years and one intense conversion later, he graduated as valedictorian, received his Masters of Divinity from Yale in 1722 and went on to become one of America's most renowned theologians and philosophers.²⁰

In his research, Edwards became extremely interested in eschatological studies. He wrote a commentary on Revelation as he attempted to determine the things that would come after life on this earth. As a Puritan, his thinking was primarily reformed. He eventually understood that the prophecies in the Old Testament about the great kingdom really referred to the Church, as it became God's Kingdom on the earth.²¹

¹⁸ Loraine Boettner, *Postmillennialism* (Self-published, Amazon Digital Services, 2011), "Introduction," Kindle.

¹⁹ Duane Garner, *Why the End is Not Near (Answers in An Hour)* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2008), "Dispensationalism Leads to Retreatism," Kindle.

²⁰ "History," Yale University, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://je.yalecollege.yale.edu/about-us/history#sthash.CI9ShfG9.dpuf>.

²¹ Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Writings from the Great Awakening*, 529.

Jonathan Edwards begins his book, *A Humble Attempt*, with a prophecy from Zechariah 8:20-22 that points to a time when the nations would come to Jerusalem to inquire of the Lord. He believed this would happen during the Church age when Gentile nations would be converted to Christianity. Edwards writes,

In this chapter Zechariah prophesies of the future, glorious advancement of the Church. It is evident there is more intended than was ever fulfilled in the Jewish nation during Old Testament times. Here are plain prophecies describing things that were never fulfilled before the coming of Messiah, particularly what is said in the two last verses in the chapter where Zechariah speaks of “many people and strong nations worshiping and seeking the true God,” and of so great an addition of Gentiles to the Church that the majority of visible worshipers consist of Gentiles, outnumbering the Jews ten to one.²²

Edwards felt he was seeing the beginning of another great move of God upon the earth, and he took great care in reporting the spread of the movement across the country and around the world, showing that there was even potential for the movement to continue to spread after his ministry concluded. He envisioned this move of God continuing to the ends of the earth. In *A Humble Attempt*, Edwards points out his strong belief that the nations of the world will gather in Jerusalem seeking God:

See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm.²³

This is perhaps the most optimistic of all interpretations concerning the Church, and it was held by one of the most intelligent gospel preachers in history. Jonathan Edwards

²² Jonathan Edwards, *A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People, In Extraordinary Prayer, For The Revival of Religion and the Advancement*, ed. Henry Rogers and Edward Hickman (Self-published, Amazon Digital Services, 2011), Section 1 Explanatory Introduction, Kindle.

²³ Edwards, *A Humble Attempt*, “The Reformation.”

believed that the Church was fulfilling the promises made to Israel. He saw the Jerusalem of the Old Testament as the New Jerusalem of the New Testament, and he saw the Church as God's plan to disciple the world.

Thy Kingdom Come

Premillennial dispensationalism, although a fair interpretation of Scripture, has the potential to leave its advocates with pessimistic expectations for the future of the church. Edwards' eschatology led him to an optimistic approach. He believed God would shape the whole world through His beloved Israel, then through the Christian church.

Jesus taught His followers to pray: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Edwards, Carey, and most of their contemporaries confidently prayed this prayer, fully expecting that God would use them to actually usher in His reign over the earth. Edwards determined to meet this state of mind by regularly including the imminence of the Kingdom in his preaching.

The Great Awakening

The optimism and confidence of Jonathan Edwards were contagious, and people began to join him in prayer for this prophesied movement. Edwards was a thinker and an emotional leader with both depth and charisma. His charisma aroused followers to participate and adopt the vision, and their anticipation of this vision led them to prayer. Edwards says, "The time will come when there will not be one nation remaining in the world, which shall not embrace the true religion."²⁴ His vision itself was attractive. He

²⁴ Jonathan Edwards, Henry Rogers, Sereno Edwards Dwight, and Edward Hickman, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, A.M.* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1865), 286.

argues that Isaiah 60:12 demonstrates that the nation that will not serve God will perish, and heathen idolatry will be destroyed, as shown in Jeremiah 10:11: “While this earth and these heavens remain.” That is to say, it would happen before the end of the world.²⁵

In Northampton one Sunday morning in 1734, the Great Awakening saw its beginning. It came suddenly as over a short period of time about 300 people came to know Christ as their Savior. Edwards describes the time in his book *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* as follows:

There was scarcely a single person in the town, old or young, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world. Those who were wont to be the vainest and loosest, and those who had been disposed to think and speak lightly of vital and experimental religion, were now generally subject to great awakenings. And the work of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more and more; souls did as it were come by flocks to Jesus Christ. From day to day for many months together, might be seen evident instances of sinners brought out of darkness into marvelous light, and delivered out of an horrible pit, and from the miry clay, and set upon a rock, with a new song of praise to God in their mouths.²⁶

Edwards goes on to explain how this move of God in his town brought joy to young people, families, laborers, and other members of a community that had become somewhat deteriorated over the years, saying:

This work of God, as it was carried on, and the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration in the town: so that in the spring and summer following, anno 1735, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor of joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God’s presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation being brought to them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives, and wives over their husbands. The doings of God were then seen in His sanctuary, God’s day was a delight, and His tabernacles were amiable. Our public assemblies were then beautiful: the congregation was alive in God’s service, every one earnestly intent

²⁵ Edwards, *A Humble Attempt*, “The First Great Awakening.”

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God,” November 6, 1736, <http://www.jonathan-edwards.org/Narrative.html>.

on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.²⁷

He speaks also of excellent singing, young people focused on the wonderful, free, and sovereign grace of God, strangers being offered hospitality, and vicious people changing ways. It affected all sorts of people, “sober and vicious, high and low, rich and poor, wise and unwise.”²⁸ No one was considered too far gone to be saved. Sinners were not rejected and criticized but offered extravagant hospitality. In speaking of an extension of the movement, he reports, “A loose careless person could scarcely be found in the whole neighborhood; and if there was any one that seemed to remain senseless or unconcerned, it would be spoken of as a strange thing.”²⁹

America is primed to experience a revival of excitement about the Christian faith similar to the Great Awakening, and belief in the potential of such a revival will help to spur it on. Edwards’ belief in the achievability of such an event played a key role in producing it.

A Sovereign Act of God

It could be argued that revival and church growth are sovereign acts of God that cannot be instigated by human action, but Jonathan Edwards’ belief in the sovereignty of God did not keep him from working for revival. Edwards was a reformed theologian who said, “He who would set the hearts of other men on fire with the love of Christ must

²⁷ Edwards, “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God.”

²⁸ Edwards, “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God.”

²⁹ Edwards, “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God.”

himself burn with love.”³⁰ His acknowledgement of man’s ability to set the hearts of other men on fire shows that he saw no conflict between the God’s sovereignty and man’s initiating role. Pastors Shyju and Tiny Mathew believe that revival is a sovereign act of God, but when God sparks revival, He does so while “looking for an active and conscious pursuit of Him.”³¹ Even those who believe in a very limited human role in the instigation of spiritual awakenings point to God’s commands as reason for evangelism and discipleship.³²

William Carey

Another outcome of the Great Awakening was one of the greatest missional movements of God in all of church history, the Protestant Missionary Movement. William Carey, a confident man known as the father of the modern missionary, believed that the gospel was to be taken throughout the earth. In the course of his life, William Carey set a pattern and a standard for missionary work that, in the years since his death, many have copied, but few have matched.³³ His bold contention was that the Great Commission was still relevant in his time, a contention that received a less-than-

³⁰ Lain Murray, “Jonathan Edwards: The Life, the Man, and the Legacy,” *Desiring God*, October 11, 2003, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/jonathan-edwards-the-life-the-man-and-the-legacy>.

³¹ Shyju Mathew and Tiny Mathew, “Why Does ‘Revival,’ a Sovereign Act of God Need an Active Pursuit?” *Revive Nations*, November 10, 2011, <https://revivenations.org/blog/2012/11/10/revival-active-pursuit/>.

³² R. C. Sproul, “Predestination and Evangelism,” *Ligonier Ministries*, accessed February 15, 2019, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/predestination-and-evangelism/>.

³³ Janet Benge and Geoff Benge, *William Carey: Obligated to Go*, *Christian Heroes: Then and Now* (Seattle: YWAM Publishing, 1998), Chapter 17, Kindle.

enthusiastic response by a world that largely insisted that the office of apostle—and therefore the Great Commission—had been given for the first century only.³⁴

His theology was similarly (and often singularly) motivated by grace for all through faith, as evidenced by his favorite Scripture passage, Romans 10:11-13, which says, “‘Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.” Carey’s hospitable and optimistic philosophy can be summed up in a quote from a sermon he preached called *Deathless*: “Expect great things from God and attempt great things for God.”³⁵

Charles Finney

During the Second Great Awakening, Charles Finney, who lived from 1792 to 1875 and possessed similar eschatological beliefs to those of Jonathan Edwards, “preached that if Christians would make themselves useful to the highest degree, revivals and reforms would bring in the millennium.”³⁶ Having concluded that Christ will return after the millennium, Christians of the nineteenth century believed that they could speed the return of Christ by eradicating the world of its common sinful habits that were

³⁴ Brian Stanley, “Winning the World: Carey and the Modern Missionary Movement,” *Christianity Today*, December 22, 1986, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-9/winning-world-carey-and-modern-missionary-movement.html>.

³⁵ Dan Graves, “William Carey Preached Deathless Sermon,” Christianity.com, July 2007, <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/william-carey-preached-deathless-sermon-11630317.html>.

³⁶ Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*, 72.

blocking the millennium. Because slavery was seen as sinful, this postmillennial belief led a movement of Christians who fought for the abolition of that sinful practice.

The incredible growth of “voluntary societies” can be traced to the eschatology of the leaders of the Second Great Awakening.³⁷ “Although it may seem far-fetched today, in the first half of the nineteenth century, this grand optimism inspired the Christians to combine evangelism and social reform.”³⁸ In addition to organizing voluntary societies and distributing literature, they built churches, schools, and hospitals.³⁹ Their commitment to social reform, generated by optimism that the world would be in existence to enjoy such reforms, would spark the founding of

the American Board of Foreign Missions (1810), the American Bible Society (1816), the Colonization Society for Liberated Slaves (1817), the American Sunday School Union (1824), the American Tract Society (1825), the American Education Society (1826), the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance (1826), the American Home Missionary Society (1826), and many more organizations.⁴⁰

The “benevolent empire” created by the Second Great Awakening was the most robust effort to meet the social challenges of the nineteenth century.⁴¹

³⁷ Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 169.

³⁸ Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*, 72.

³⁹ Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*, 65.

⁴⁰ Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 169.

⁴¹ Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *The Religious History of America* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 140.

William Seymour

The Azusa Street Revival, led by William Seymour, brought together blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Asians to worship with levels of excitement the church in America had never seen.⁴² This was frowned upon in the “Jim Crow” era, but the revival broke through that noise. The Pentecostal formula of worship that has become so connected to the Azusa Street Revival included African American heritage, holiness (Methodism) theology, and speaking in tongues. These were the memorable signs of this exuberant, round-the-clock revival. There were some who found the “holy ghost bedlam” and mixing of races offensive, but they were quickly snubbed by the excitement produced by the revival.⁴³

After the death of Seymour, the movement began to divide, as Pentecostalism became “fraught with internal tension.”⁴⁴ However, this division did not stop the growth of Pentecostalism. In fact, their spreading caused it to grow more. The primary appeal of Pentecostalism was not about a specific issue or belief. Instead, it focused on a special quality of experience and an encounter with God. It brought joy and hope to people who struggled to find those feelings elsewhere.

⁴² Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*, 196.

⁴³ Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*, 197.

⁴⁴ Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*, 197.

Dwight L. Moody

In the late 1800s, a revivalist with a common touch named Dwight L. Moody innovated evangelism in the Christian church. “With his boundless physical energy, natural shrewdness, self-confidence, and eternal optimism, Dwight Lyman Moody could have become a Gilded Age industrial giant like John D. Rockefeller or Jay Gould. Instead, he became one of the great evangelists of the nineteenth century.”⁴⁵ He attracted children to his ministry with candy and pony rides, and he drew in adults with music and English classes. He once said, “If you can really make a man believe you love him, you have won him.”⁴⁶

E. Stanley Jones

In 1954, a revolutionary missionary named E. Stanley Jones preached a sermon titled *How Are We to Be Changed?* In that sermon, he told a story about a preacher who preached for 10 weeks about how to avoid nervous breakdowns. Soon after that series of sermons, that pastor had a nervous breakdown. About that Jones said,

Whatever gets your attention gets you, and you become like that at which you habitually gaze. So getting your eyes on the right place is everything...If you concentrate for 10 weeks on how to avoid a nervous breakdown, you'll probably end in having one...He should have turned to the positive side and talked about how to live victoriously. Then the victory side of things would have gotten him.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen. *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 70.

⁴⁶ Galli, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*, 71.

⁴⁷ E. Stanley Jones, “How Are We to Be Changed? E. Stanley Jones dated 1954,” Sermon Library, March 18, 2017, video of lecture, 4:15, <https://youtu.be/3tZ7-dBelmc>.

It was this focus on “the positive side” that drew Jones’ followers to Jesus as the divine “yes” rather than a “no.”⁴⁸ Jones pointed out that “the mood of the present day is cynicism. Many people are soured by life...And it is turning out badly and sadly, for you can’t live by a No. You have to live by a Yes.”⁴⁹ He continued, “Now is Jesus a Yes or a No? If he is No we cannot take him, because we can’t live by negation. We have to live by affirmation, for we are affirmative beings. We can’t live by no and cynicism.”⁵⁰

Billy Graham

In the 1950s, more than 214 million people heard the gospel message from Billy Graham, one of most influential individuals in Christian history.⁵¹ This confident and optimistic leader relied on the simple and consistent message of repentance and salvation. His “positive thinking fit well into the 1950s—the Depression was over, the war had been won, and people longed to pursue their own dreams.”⁵²

Under the preaching of Billy Graham, it was excitement for God’s grace that drove almost three million people to respond to the invitation to repent and be saved.⁵³ Graham’s straightforward message of a loving heavenly Father who would forgive

⁴⁸ E. Stanley Jones. *The Divine Yes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975).

⁴⁹ Jones, *The Divine Yes*, 14.

⁵⁰ Jones, *The Divine Yes*, 15.

⁵¹ Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Billy Graham Reached Millions through His Crusades. Here’s How He Did It,” USA Today, February 21, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2018/02/21/billy-graham-crusades-how-evangelists-reached-millions/858165001/>.

⁵² Koester, *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*, 245.

⁵³ Edward Gilbreath and David Harrell, “Billy Graham,” Christianity Today, accessed January 24, 2018, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/evangelistsandapologists/billy-graham.html>.

people who had committed great atrocities led a generation of people who had readopted the consumption of alcohol after prohibition to repent of their sins.

Some may argue that the thesis of this dissertation is overstated, that what the church really needs is a more accurate and thorough presentation of the gospel, but it is difficult to argue that a person could give a more accurate and thorough presentation of the gospel than that of Billy Graham. He is here being held up as an example of the power of such a presentation. The adoption of a positive mental outlook is not the only change necessary for the Christian church to become more effective in its mission to disciple pre-Christians. Billy Graham's positive mental outlook combined with messages that were free of cynicism and persistent divisiveness led to revival.

Other Optimistic Revivalists

Not every Christian who played a key role in sparking revival can easily be described as an optimist, but most of them can. The most notable character trait of Karl Barth was his courage, but he was also known for the theological virtue of "optimistic and confident liberalism."⁵⁴ William Wilberforce was so optimistic that he was even initially considered naïve. "He expressed 'no doubt' about his chances of quick success."⁵⁵ Walter Rauschenbusch was the man who popularized the social gospel. "Rauschenbusch was an optimist. He never believed society could become perfect, but he saw humankind as progressing swiftly toward the kingdom."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Musée Protestant, "Karl Barth (1886-1968), a Detailed Biography," accessed November 24, 2018, <https://www.museeprotestant.org/en/notice/karl-barth-1886-1968-a-detailed-biography/>.

⁵⁵ Galli and Olsen, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*, 284.

⁵⁶ Galli and Olsen, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*, 304.

Causation of Revival

What will the next great revival of the Christian church look like? Frank Beardsley says, “If we can learn from the positive experiences of history, maybe we can work toward the restoration of biblical truth in our generation.”⁵⁷ A thorough study of the great revivals of the past reveals that there are only a few commonalities among all of them, and a few more commonalities among most of them. “There are certain elements of permanency which have been characteristic of all true revivals from Pentecost down to the present time. An analysis of the great revivals of history shows these elements to be prayer, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the presentation of the gospel.”⁵⁸ However, the presence of these elements in all great revivals does not reveal a formula for the instigation of a great movement of spiritual growth without the active influence of a sovereign God.

The Holy Spirit

Although we are called to preach the gospel, it is the Lord who accomplishes the work of drawing people to Him and growing Christian faith to maturity. Leonard Sweet points out that, “As in Jesus’ parable of the seeds, planting frees us to be extravagant in love, yet leaves the results for God to germinate and grow.”⁵⁹ This implies that it is our responsibility to prayerfully respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit that lead us to

⁵⁷ Moore, *Revival—Before and After*, “Conclusion.”

⁵⁸ Beardsley, *A History of American Revivals*, Chapter 18.

⁵⁹ Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 23.

evangelize in the right time to the right people. Those promptings are a direct result of the power received from the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:8 shows that Christians are on a mission to be God's witnesses. Paul encourages the Galatians to "keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). Christians should participate with the Holy Spirit who is within them. The power that is available with the Spirit that lives in Christ-followers is not a resource to be ignored, and it allows individuals to experience the joy associated with witnessing the work of God in an individual's life.

Communication and Technology

The addition of communication technologies on a scale the world has never seen should be a source of optimism for revival. One contributing factor to most of history's great revivals was communication and technology advancements that led to an increased ability to communicate the gospel message. The ability to speak many languages empowered the church of Acts to make disciples of all nations soon after they were called to do so (Matt. 28:16-20). "As the Roman Empire played a major part in preparing the world for the arrival of Jesus Christ, in a similar way, major advancements in technology and new discoveries in science and industry helped to prepare the stage for the dawning of the Reformation."⁶⁰ The printing press played a key role in sparking and spreading both the Reformation and the Great Awakening.⁶¹ In fact, the Bible was the first book printed with Gutenberg's world-changing, movable-type printing press. This led to the

⁶⁰ Moore, *Revival—Before and After*, "The Reformation."

⁶¹ Louis Kirk McAuley, *Print Technology in Scotland and America: 1740-1800* (Lewisburg, NY: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2013).

affordable availability of the Bible for the masses.⁶² Print media has continued to play a key role in almost every revival in history. The World War Two Revival (1935-1950), largely led by leaders such as Billy Graham, J. Edwin Orr, Stuart Hamblin (a radio personality), and Jim Vaus, would not have been as widespread without radio evangelism.⁶³ Television has yet to participate in a great revival; neither has the internet since it changed our world by moving “from just information (1.0) to interaction and connectivity (2.0) and became a dialogue, not a monologue.”⁶⁴

Leonard Sweet argues that social media is “poised to ignite revival” because of its ability to use words not for the sake of the words themselves but for expressing ideas, sharing news, telling stories, and developing relationships.⁶⁵ Avid users of social media use it to find and maintain connection with each other, and this connection has the potential to lead to open dialogue about important topics. Sweet believes it is more natural to incarnate the gospel in TGIF (Twitter, Google, Instagram, Facebook) Culture than in the world of the Gutenbergers (those who are focused on words).⁶⁶

⁶² Leonard Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2012), 5, Kindle.

⁶³ The New York Times, “S. Parkes Cadman Dies in Coma at 71,” July 13, 1936, <https://www.nytimes.com/1936/07/13/archives/s-parkes-cadman-dies-in-coma-at-71-brooklyn-pastor-first-of-radio.html>.

⁶⁴ Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, Chapter 8.

⁶⁵ Sweet, *Viral*.

⁶⁶ Sweet, *Viral*, 18.

Optimism for American Revival

Most Christians in the West struggle to find confidence in the viability of Christian revival. “To most, revival is no more than a dream,” but anticipation of revival is an important step in beginning the process of preparing and praying for it.⁶⁷ The excitement of Kingdom growth and positive construals of others’ drives dedicated disciples of Christ to pursue evangelism on a grand scale.

There is much to anticipate in the potential of revival, but it is not the specific happenings within one that are common to all revivals. It is the outcomes that are so worth hoping for: the sense of God’s holiness, a heightened sense of the reality of hell and the heinous nature of our sinfulness, the awesome cost to our Lord in His death for us on the cross, and a heightened sense of love for God.⁶⁸ The methods used to fan the flames of revival and awaken souls to their need of revival will change, but the Christian unity and healing that results will be consistent. A common thread of optimistic expectation of revival is found throughout history in the people who God used to most effectively spread His gospel.

The next chapter will reveal signs that America is primed for revival, and it will discuss proper methods to correct the image problem that is hindering revival.

⁶⁷ Hulse, *Let’s Pray for Global Revival*, Introduction.

⁶⁸ Hulse, *Let’s Pray for Global Revival*, Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 4:

JUSTIFICATION FOR OPTIMISM FOR CHURCH GROWTH

If, then, it is determined that Christians have reason to be optimistic and even confident about the future growth of the Christian church, it is necessary to consider America's readiness for revival and church growth.

Potential for Revival

Jesus referred to the imagery of a well-known phrase about crops being ready for harvest when He described people in need of eternal life as crops in need of harvesting (John 4:35-36). Jesus used this metaphor to motivate His followers to take action, to invite people to accept the gift of grace through faith. Like the people in the first century, Americans are showing signs of being ripe for harvest, but if Christians are going to become optimistic about their ability to reap that harvest, they must understand how best to recognize it and then how to prepare for it.

Forework

Leonard Sweet says, “‘Best practices’ is working based on what you learned yesterday, but the half-life [the time it takes something to degenerate] of information is getting too short to rely completely on what has already happened.”¹ The forward-thinking Christian will adopt semiotic practices that account for the past but act in accordance with what will happen in the future. This dissertation will refer to the biblical

¹ Leonard Sweet, Lecture, Advance from Portland Seminary, Portland, Oregon, September 2, 2015.

practice of preparing for the future by reading the signs of the times with the past in mind as “forework.”² In order to reach the youngest generations with the gospel, proper forework is necessary, and it appears that the youngest generations are hungry for the discipleship that this forework will provide. As we look at the characteristics of the generations of the future, we will see signs of eagerness to become part of a mission that gives meaning and purpose. This chapter will demonstrate their desire for optimistic mentors and hospitable fellowship, and it will explore the youngest generations alive in order to begin the forework necessary to reach future generations.

A New Age

In an essay written just after the Second World War, historian Christopher Dawson explains that there have been six identifiable “ages” in relation to the Christian church and faith, each lasting for three or four centuries and each following a similar course: each of these ages began and ended in crisis.³ “The heart of each crisis was the same: intense attack by new enemies from within and from outside the church, which in turn demanded new spiritual determination and drive. Without this determination and drive, the church would have lost the day.”⁴ In his reflections on Dawson’s essay, James Emery White says that he believes “we are at the end of an age and stand at the beginning

² See Matthew 16:2-3 and 1 Chronicles 12:32.

³ Christopher Dawson, “The Six Ages of the Church,” in *Christianity and European Culture*, ed. Gerald J. Russello (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 34-45.

⁴ James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 18.

of another. A seventh age.”⁵ Like the beginning of a new school year for a seventh-grader, this new age brings excitement about a new period of growth and advancement.

Phyllis Tickle, like many historians, divides the past two thousand years into 500-year cycles. She calls these cycles the “Greats”: The Great Transformation of the first century, the Great Decline of the sixth century, the Great Schism of the eleventh century, the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century, and now the Great Emergence of the twenty-first century. She claims that the Great Emergence will be “equal in its impact” to the most impactful of the Greats, the Great Transformation.⁶ She espouses the writings of Harvey Cox, who argues we are entering the third age of history that Joachim of Fiore called the Age of the Spirit.⁷ Joachim developed a philosophy of history that contains three ages of increasing spirituality: the age of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁸ Tickle and Cox believe we are entering the third age, the Age of the Spirit. Whether it is recognized as Pentecostalism, the Charismatic movement, Emergence Christianity, or the rise of the “spiritual but not religious,” observers of Christianity recognize a shift has begun.⁹ Proper forework that reflects this shift is now necessary.

A thorough look at the impact of Tickle’s 500-year cycles could not be more exciting for the future of the Church. Each of the periods have had three distinct results: a

⁵ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 18.

⁶ Phyllis Tickle, *The Age of the Spirit: How the Ghost of an Ancient Controversy is Shaping the Church* (Grant Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 12.

⁷ Tickle, *The Age of the Spirit*, 118.

⁸ Marjorie E. Reeves, “Joachim Of Fiore,” Encyclopedia Britannica, July 29, 2010, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joachim-of-Fiore>.

⁹ Tickle, *The Age of the Spirit*, 70.

“new, more vital form of Christianity” emerges, a purer expression of Christianity arises, and, most importantly, “the faith has spread—and been spread—dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas, thereby increasing exponentially the range and depth of Christianity’s reach as a result of its time of unease and distress.”¹⁰ In these times, the power centers of Christianity lose their power, and new growth results. The exponential growth is aided by the resulting split, which leaves the original system intact, although in a new form, while an entirely new system is also created.

The changes of these 500-year cycles aren’t only being felt in the church. The world, as in past cycles, is experiencing unprecedented times of reconfiguration. In March of 2015, Doug Sosnik, a senior adviser to President Bill Clinton and author of a *New York Times* bestseller on the future of politics in the United States, writes that America is “going through the most significant period of change since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution... Years from now we are going to look back at this period of time and see it as a ‘hinge’ moment... a connection point that ties two historical periods in time, one before and one afterward.”¹¹ The world is also seeing an increase in the number of people who consider themselves introverts,¹² a rise in depression,¹³ and a widespread

¹⁰ Phyllis Tickle and Danielle Shroyer, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 17.

¹¹ Doug Sosnik, “America’s Hinge Moment,” *POLITICO Magazine*, March 29, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/03/2016-predictions-americas-sosnik-clinton-116480>.

¹² Guest, “How Digital Technology Is Creating a World of Introverts,” *Adweek*, July 3, 2013, <https://www.adweek.com/digital/how-social-media-is-creating-a-world-of-introverts/>.

¹³ Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, “Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta- Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences From 1989 to 2016,” *Psychological Bulletin*, Advance online publication, December 28, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/bul0000138>.

addiction to social media.¹⁴ Those who pay attention to the happenings of the world have become increasingly aware that the world is passing through almost unprecedented times of change.¹⁵

James Emery White points out that

identifying these “hinge moments” is actually a deeply biblical idea. The Bible lauds the men of Issachar for being sensitive to exactly these kinds of dynamics: “From the tribes of Issachar, there were 200 leaders...All these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take” (I Corinthians 12:32 NLT)...That tandem—knowing the signs of the times and how best to live in light of them—is key.¹⁶

If we are on the verge of a new age of Christianity, it is more important than ever to understand the semiotics of tomorrow and prioritize forework. If Christians want the Church to be vibrant and vital, they would be wise to understand the changes taking place. Otherwise, they face the potential of becoming irrelevant and time-bound, circling wagons with dreams of yesteryears. Dr. Leonard Sweet says, “if you want to hit a moving target, throw where the receiver is not.”¹⁷ Throw where the receiver is going to be.

Six Living Generations

Forework is most evidently necessary in preparing the church for a consistent increase in the number of generations it will be challenged to incorporate. With the

¹⁴ Jonah Engel Bromwich, “Generation X More Addicted to Social Media Than Millennials, Report Finds,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/technology/millennial-social-media-usage.html>

¹⁵ Tickle, *The Age of the Spirit*, 9.

¹⁶ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 18.

¹⁷ Leonard Sweet, Lecture, Advance from Portland Seminary, Portland, Oregon, September 2, 2015.

addition of Generation Z (also called Founders), there are six generations alive today, and a seventh is being born. As the life expectancy of people continues to rise, the number of generations alive at any given time will only increase. James Emery White points out that Generation Z now constitutes 25.9 percent of the U.S. population.¹⁸ What forework is necessary for a church that is challenged to shift into a culture of many generations?

White points out that “one of the natural flows of the church...is that left to itself the church will grow old.”¹⁹ A generation does not naturally effectively evangelize the next generation. Compound this problem by six generations, and you have a major problem without a balancing effort to make change a core value. “If the natural flow of the church is to skew older, the leadership of the church must invest a disproportionate amount of energy and intentionality in order to maintain a vibrant population of young adults.”²⁰

The necessary forework in a church that doesn’t want to grow old will include employing and empowering young people, giving them responsibility early and often, prioritizing children and youth ministry, conducting research on young people, cultivating a culture of discipleship, etc. The church won’t die with the death of older generations, but it will be healthier in the future if the older generations foster relationships with younger generations to pave the way for a healthy transfer of wisdom.

¹⁸ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 37.

¹⁹ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 147.

²⁰ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 147.

Reason for Optimism

Each age of Christianity begins and ends with frightening signs of decline, but the discouraging beginnings of each age are eclipsed by revivals, growth, and progress. Having experienced the first R-rated presidential election in American history (Trump v. Clinton), it may seem that the future of humanity looks grim, but open-minded historians would paint a more optimistic picture of the future.²¹ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously said that "...somehow the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."²² The seventh-age theory provides a logical explanation that reconciles Church decline statistics with the following proofs that the Church is not dying: First, "Christianity is on the rise worldwide, particularly in the global south. Christianity also remains the world's largest faith, and the most distant projections to 2050 see it maintaining that lead."²³ The second and more convincing proof for Christians is a prophecy of Jesus Christ. Referring to the fact that Peter knew that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, Jesus says to Peter, "Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it" (Matt. 16:18 NLT).

²¹ Carter Phipps, "Progress or Pessimism: How Should We Think About the Future?" May 29, 2013, <http://www.carterhipps.com/2013/05/29/progress-or-pessimism-how-should-we-think-about-the-future/>.

²² Martin Luther King Jr., "Sermon at Temple Israel of Hollywood," February 26, 1965, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlktempleisraelhollywood.htm>.

²³ Benjamin Wormald, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

Paving the Way for Pessimism

The reasons for optimism listed above have not convinced all Christian thinkers to adopt strategies that are driven by optimism, including long-game forework. Winning the long game, as outlined by Steven Krupp and Paul Shoemaker, requires forework similar to the strategic plan of the War Conference to infiltrate Hollywood, Laurence Golborne to rescue thirty-three miners trapped thousands of feet below ground, and Nelson Mandela to lead a country at the brink of civil war toward peace and new prosperity.²⁴ These accomplishments didn't occur accidentally, but with an optimistic long-game strategy that allows forward-thinking leaders to accomplish what others could not. They believed in their ability to accomplish their goals, so they were persistent to carry out the forework that would do in the long term what could not be accomplished in a short time.

The pessimism of the American Christian church has caused failure in implementing this principle, and their short-mindedness has contributed to the exodus of countless young people from the church.²⁵ Like most prominent American premillennialists, Dr. Adoniram Judson (A. J.) Gordon, who expected the papacy to produce the antichrist, “founded institutions and conducted ministerial affairs out of a theology of haste, not out of a long-range vision for the health of Evangelical Christianity.”²⁶ Scott M. Gibson reports that American premillennialists stood against the

²⁴ Steven Krupp and Paul J. H. Schoemaker, *Winning the Long Game: How Strategic Leaders Shape the Future* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).

²⁵ For evidence of the popularity of dispensationalism in America, see “Premillennialism Reigns in Evangelical Theology,” National Association of Evangelicals, January 2011, <https://www.nae.net/premillennialism-reigns-in-evangelical-theology/>.

²⁶ Scott M. Gibson and A.J. Gordon, *American Premillennialist* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001), xxiv.

postmillennialists' mission philosophy and strategy of a gradual conversion and universal righteousness on earth. In fact, "the premillennialist did not guarantee or even expect the conversion of the world."²⁷ While they did demand the presentation of the gospel to everyone, they, like Jonah to the Ninevites, considered the preaching of the gospel as a "necessary preparation for the Second Coming of Christ's return."²⁸ The preaching of the gospel was done with a pessimistic doubt of widespread conversions. Although in the lifetime of A.J. Gordon (1836-1895) postmillennialism would continue to dominate North American theology, he and other theologians of his time sparked a shift in theological thought and practice. Rather than optimistically believe, like the postmillennialists, that the world is bettering itself, that "war, famine, oppression, and slavery would be wiped out," premillennialists ridiculed the notion that the world would be converted to Christ.²⁹ Guided by Matthew 24:14, their focus shifted from the goal of "conversion" to the simpler goal of "witness." Gordon asserts,

Now to witness to the world and to win the world are not necessarily coextensive undertakings; and when the Church shall have testified the gospel of the grace of God among all nations, it may be that multitudes will yet remain disobedient to the heavenly message. Therefore, I boldly affirm that the Church has nowhere assigned to it the achievement of converting the world in the dispensation.³⁰

Gordon, together with other premillennialists such as D.L. Moody and A.T. Pierson paved the way for twentieth-century theologians to fully abandon long-game, missional strategies that would reach the next generations and beyond.

²⁷ Gibson and Gordon, *American Premillennialist*, 80.

²⁸ Gibson and Gordon, *American Premillennialist*, 80.

²⁹ E. T. Hiscox, "Pre-Millennial Theology," *The Watchman* (January 23, 1890): 2.

³⁰ A.J. Gordon, *The Holy Spirit in Missions* (New York: Revell, 1893), 14.

The Youngest Generations

As the twenty-first century becomes increasingly short-minded, instead of preparing for the future and adjusting accordingly, the modern American evangelical church chooses to criticize millennials rather than learn how to converse with them. Grant Skeldon, a millennial author, calls discipleship “a bridge between generations.”³¹ He writes, “the one way to guarantee you will never understand us is to criticize us without spending time with us.”³² The impact of criticizing rather than conversing has taken a toll on the church, but, even worse than that, it caused the church to be completely blindsided by Generation Z.

The Image Problem and Generation Z

Christian leadership gurus have continued to focus on how to produce change in the next generation, talking about “the problem with millennials.”³³ The millennial generation is not the youngest generation. That title has long belonged to Generation Z (Gen Z) and is now being taken by another generation, yet to be named. Much about the current form of the American evangelical church clashes with Generation Z, and that generation now encompasses a quarter of our population and a far greater portion of those

³¹ Grant Skeldon, *The Passion Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2018), 20.

³² Skeldon, *The Passion Generation*, 23.

³³ Tiger Khokunthod, “The Problem with Millennials: Entitled, Lazy, Worthless,” *The Odyssey Online*, November 28, 2016, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/millennials-are-not-the-problem>.

individuals who would be considered the “nones” or “outsiders.” “The pattern is indisputable: The younger the generation, the more post-Christian it is.”³⁴

The church’s “swagger” does not reflect the servant leadership and hospitable grace of the God Christians say they follow.³⁵ To the youngest generations, this disconnect is seen as hypocrisy. The battle cry of many of the loudest Christians has focused more on the things about pre-Christians that annoy Christians rather than on love for the lost. This causes Christians to be primarily judgmental and hypocritical, and the youngest generations feel rejected by Christians because they are being judged for behaviors that are prohibited by the Bible and even for behaviors that are not. Those people who claim to represent the love of Jesus have demonized sinners before they show extravagant hospitality. This is why Christians are primarily seen as antihomosexual, judgmental, and hypocritical.

By looking at the characteristics of millennials and Generation Z, the rest of this chapter will reveal reasons for optimism. For the purpose of this study, this chapter will not report the historical and environmental occurrences that developed these features in the youngest generations, but it will evaluate these features in formulating an effective discipleship strategy. If a positive mental outlook will lead to success, the church can learn a lesson from Generation Z, which is currently the most optimistic generation alive.³⁶

³⁴ David Kinnaman, “Five Trends Among the Unchurched,” Barna Group, October 9, 2014, <https://www.barna.com/research/five-trends-among-the-unchurched/>.

³⁵ Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, Chapter 2.

³⁶ Justin Daab, “Five Things You Should Understand About Generation Z,” Magnani, July 27, 2017, <https://www.magnani.com/blog/generationz>.

Founders

When MTV conducted a nationwide survey of one thousand respondents born after the year 2000 to see how they would identify themselves if they had the choice, they came up with the self-important name “The Founders”—as in needing to “found the new world,” rescuing it from the sins of the past.³⁷ Social entrepreneurship is one of Generation Z’s most popular career choices.³⁸ Because they are the first generation to have a majority of members who believe the world is headed in the wrong direction, members of Gen Z have a strong sense of independence and an entrepreneurial spirit, attempting to take things into their own hands to correct the mistakes of the previous generations. That is where their optimism comes from. They believe they can do it. Gen Z will not accept the conclusions of previous generations without at least reimagining them.

Logan LaPlante, a member of Generation Z, calls the best members of his generation “Hackers.” He says that “Hackers are innovators. Hackers are people who challenge and change the system to make them work differently. To make them work better...I’m growing up in a world that needs more people with a hacker mindset.”³⁹ Robert Noyce, cofounder of Intel, once said optimism is “an essential ingredient of

³⁷ Ruth Gledhill, “Exclusive: New Figures Reveal Massive Decline in Religious Affiliation,” *Christian Today*, October 17, 2014, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/exclusive.new.figures.reveal.massive.decline.in.religious.affiliation/41799.htm>.

³⁸ Bruce Tulgan, “Meet Generation Z: The Second Generation within the Giant ‘Millennial’ Cohort,” *Rainmaker Thinking*, October 2013, <http://www.rainmakerthinking.com/assets/uploads/2013/10/Gen-Z-Whitepaper.pdf>.

³⁹ Logan LaPlante, “Hackschooling Makes Me Happy,” TEDx, University of Nevada, February 12, 2013, video of lecture, 11:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h11u3vtcpaY>.

innovation. How else can the individual welcome change over security, adventure over staying in safe places?”⁴⁰ According to Carmine Gallo, optimists are the best entrepreneurs, largely because they are inspiring communicators who rally people to a better future. The founders of the youngest generations will be drawn to an optimistic church.⁴¹

Digital Connection

Research from the Wharton School declares that “already one defining characteristic is abundantly clear: This generation is Wi-Fi enabled.”⁴² They have a mass comfort with technology that dwarfs that of previous generations. Their smart phones are extensions of their bodies. David Bell calls them the “Internet-in-its-pocket” generation.⁴³ Teenagers spend nearly nine hours a day absorbing media.⁴⁴ “The implications of this constant connection to the internet and, through it, the world and all of its information leads to...the ‘ability to find whatever they’re after without the help of intermediaries—such as libraries, shops, or teachers.’ This has made them ‘more independent and self-directed than the generation before them.’”⁴⁵ What then do they need the Church for?

⁴⁰ Carmine Gallo, “5 Reasons Why Optimists Make Better Leaders,” *Forbes*, August 8, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminnegallo/2012/08/08/5-reasons-why-optimists-make-better-leaders/>.

⁴¹ Gallo, “5 Reasons Why Optimists Make Better Leaders.”

⁴² “‘Millennials on Steroids’: Is Your Brand Ready for Generation Z?” *Knowledge@Wharton*, September 28, 2015, <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/millennials-on-steroids-is-your-brand-ready-for-generation-z/>.

⁴³ “‘Millennials on Steroids’: Is Your Brand Ready for Generation Z?”

⁴⁴ Tracey Lien, “Teens Spend an Average of 9 Hours a Day With Media, Survey Finds,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/business/technology/la-fi-tn-teens-television-media-20151103-story.html>.

⁴⁵ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 44.

What do they need pastors for? What is the Church offering these young people that they can't get online? The data is easily accessible, but trusted interpreters are needed, teachers and pastors who will interpret the data in light of Jesus and His Kingdom. It won't work to simply criticize the Kardashians. The church must interpret the Kardashians in some meaningful way. Has the Church prioritized things that will keep Gen Z connected to it, such as community and fellowship, opportunities to serve, emotionally impactful environments, mentorship, etc.? The successful church will. If the Church continues to become more cynical and judgmental, it will not.

It should be a source of great optimism for the church that Generation Z recognizes the flaw in the millennial preference for online interaction (a fact that is changing), and only 15 percent of Gen Z prefers to interact with their friends via social media rather than face to face.⁴⁶ In fact, even when they do interact online, they have adopted face-to-face options like FaceTime and Skype like no generation before.⁴⁷ They have begun to reverse the trend of physical disconnectedness.⁴⁸ This could be a wide-open door for the church to step in and connect with this generation in a way that education and entertainment will not.

⁴⁶ Amanda Lenhart, Monica Anderson, and Aaron Smith, "Teens, Technology and Romantic Relationships," Pew Research Center, October 1, 2015, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/01/teens-technology-and-romantic-relationships/>.

⁴⁷ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 45.

⁴⁸ Ryan Jenkins. "15 Aspects That Highlight How Generation Z Is Different From Millennials," June 8, 2015, <http://www.ryan-jenkins.com/2015/06/08/15-aspects-that-highlight-how-generation-z-is-different-from-millennials/>.

Seeking Wisdom

Seventy-eighty percent of Gen Z still believes in the existence of God, but only 41% attend weekly religious services, and only 8% would cite a religious leader as a role model.⁴⁹ So, who are their role models? No one knows, not even them. They are still searching for them. In fact, a staggering 75 percent of the members of Gen Z are looking for a mentor.⁵⁰ Unlike previous generations, their parents failed to serve as positive role models.

One of the marks of Generation Z is that they are being raised, by and large, by Generation X—a generation that was warned repeatedly not to become “helicopter” parents (i.e., always hovering over their children). As a result, Generation Z has been given more space and more independence than any other generation. This means that Generation Z is very self-directed.⁵¹

They are “leaderless.”⁵² Their families have, on average, done little to direct them or hand them a story that works. This has resulted in a generation that has knowledge beyond any generation before, but they lack the wisdom mentors would provide. This would explain ISIS’ success in recruiting young people.⁵³ The youngest generations “have access to more knowledge content than any other generation in human history, but

⁴⁹ Joseph E. Aoun “Innovation Imperative: Enhancing the Talent Pipeline,” News@Northeastern, April 30, 2014, <http://www.northeastern.edu/president/2014/04/30/inno%C2%ADva%C2%ADtion-imper%C2%ADa%C2%ADtive-enhancing-the-talent-pipeline/>.

⁵⁰ Nick Shore, “Turning On The ‘No-Collar’ Workforce,” MediaDailyNews, March 12, 2012, <http://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/170109/turning-on-the-no-collar-workforce.html>.

⁵¹ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 51.

⁵² White, *Meet Generation Z*, 65.

⁵³ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 126.

many lack discernment for how to wisely apply that knowledge to their lives and world.”⁵⁴

Young people are searching for wisdom. “Within our world, there is an amazingly deep sense of awe and wonder about the universe. And the ones who felt this the most” is Generation Z.⁵⁵ ISIS stole some of our best metaphors and used them to attract thousands to die for an evil cause. However, they are not the first generation to come to horrible conclusions in a search for truth and meaning. The German notion of the Führer came from a generation searching for meaning and “guidance out of its troubles.”⁵⁶ They are searching for confident, optimistic leaders who believe that they can change the world.

In order to reach Gen Z, proper forework will involve engagement with their questions, their viewpoints, and their perspectives. Christians should enter into their chat rooms, respond to their blogs, and answer their tweets even more effectively than ISIS. ISIS maintained 24-hour online operation, and before military efforts thwarted many of their efforts, their effectiveness was expanded by larger rings of sympathetic volunteers and fans who passed on its messages and viewpoints, reeling in potential recruits.⁵⁷ They successfully turned their followers into evangelists. How much more can Christians accomplish with a message of hope?

⁵⁴ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 30.

⁵⁵ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 136.

⁵⁶ Eric Mataxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 141.

⁵⁷ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 126.

In a letter to Charles Thruston, who believed the misrepresentation of facts by a powerful faction wanting to separate from the United States and join Britain would succeed, George Washington wrote, “Truth will ultimately prevail where pains is taken to bring it to light.”⁵⁸ Truth is a powerful force that makes a great ally in just pursuits (John 8:32). When combined with the benefit of absolute truth, which is the good news of God’s love and grace, a positive mental outlook will help Christians introduce truth to future generations and spur the next great American revival, just as it did past revivals.

Evangelists

On June 11, 2007, Apple published a press release that would forever change our world. It was titled “iPhone to Support Third-Party Web 2.0 Applications.”⁵⁹ Apple inspired and empowered their followers to be their evangelists. They did it by giving their followers the power to create, to found new technologies. As Founders, the members of Gen Z are evangelists of their favorite brands, politicians, and celebrities. A hospitable, gracious, and benevolent church could tap into this potential more than a piece of technology could. Their energy could bring excitement to the Church for the potential of tangible life change in our world on a revolutionary scale. In *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, Leonard Sweet writes, “Jesus recommended that his disciples learn something from the wisdom of the world. He observed that ‘the people of this world’ pursue their

⁵⁸ National Archives, “From George Washing to Charles Mynn Thruston, 10 August 1794,” Founders Online, June 13, 2018, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-16-02-0376>.

⁵⁹ “iPhone to Support Third-Party Web 2.0 Applications,” Apple, June 11, 2007, <http://www.apple.com/pr/library/2007/06/11iPhone-to-Support-Third-Party-Web-2-0-Applications.html>.

dreams with greater passion and intelligence than ‘the people of the light.’”⁶⁰ The church may have to educate itself in the ways of Apple and the world in order to again become creators of dream fulfillment rather than fighters of unnecessary battles.

In *Nudge*, Leonard Sweet suggests that, “for the twenty-first century, evangelism will be built on nudges that have more to do with life before death than death and the afterlife, that focus more on the love of Christ than the wrath of God, that worry less about dying than about never having lived.”⁶¹ That would be an optimistic movement Generation Z would love to evangelize for, and that is a life they want to live. Our lives are stories, but Boomers are planners who want to take the best-case scenario and turn it into a strategic plan. The future is coming at us too fast for that, and it is full of surprises. That is one reason churches are getting hit so hard. Due to a lack of forework, Christians weren’t ready for the future with the right metaphors or the right tone. The most practical thing a person can come up with to guide him or her into the future is a metaphor and a nudge toward life and love.

Like secular social marketing organizations, the Church can utilize a framework to create little ambassadors who will evangelize the world. How could Christians do this? By being the best storytellers. The effectiveness of a sales tactic has a relatively short lifespan. The really good stories are eternally effective recruiters. Jesus spent most of His ministry teaching His followers to be confident, optimistic storytellers, but Christians attempt to systematize the stories and make them linear. They see the stories as a tool to

⁶⁰ Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2008), 5, Kindle.

⁶¹ Sweet, *Nudge*, 32.

create systematic theology rather than as the theology itself. By calling the story of Jesus a theography, Leonard Sweet argues that the story of God is theology.⁶² If Christians could perfect the art of telling stories, they could do more to make disciples of all nations.

Geoff White, the North America Digital Brand Manager for Nike Women and Men's Training, says Nike "can't sell products that don't have a good story."⁶³ Today's marketers have recognized that the successful campaign will tell true brand stories, get more personal, realize less is more, and get to the point.⁶⁴ In a personal interview on June 17, 2016, he explained, "It's not about pushing product on people. It's about making Nike part of a story."⁶⁵ This story-centricity and an increase in visual communication technologies (emoji, FaceTime, Skype, etc.), have led Generation Z to be the most visual generation in history.⁶⁶

Seeking Authenticity

Like millennials, Generation Z is on a mission to seek out that which is authentic.⁶⁷ Geoff White says it's no longer helpful to advertise products in fictional scenarios. Millennials and Gen Z want to know that there is a heart behind the story of

⁶² Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus: A Theography* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

⁶³ Geoff White, "Nike Tour," interview by author, June 17, 2016.

⁶⁴ Jerry Daykin, "Five Things Great Brands Will Do Differently on Social Media in 2015," *The Guardian*, December 22, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2014/dec/22/brands-social-media-marketing-2015>.

⁶⁵ Geoff White, "Nike Tour," interview by author, June 17, 2016.

⁶⁶ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 117.

⁶⁷ "Millennials in Adulthood," Pew Research Center, March 7, 2014, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>.

the products for which they choose to become evangelists. He goes on to say, “We hire the best Instagram photographers to photograph authentic sport in its natural habitat, and we place Nike in that story. We don’t just show the product. We show our product being used in an authentic space. Young people don’t want to see Kobe Bryant playing basketball in an arena. They want to see him working out behind the scenes.”⁶⁸

Reflecting on a Leonard Sweet presentation about semiotics, Ken Tennyson recognizes a dynamic at work in the youngest generations. He says,

Reality television is often bemoaned for its lack of meaningful content and its voyeuristic tendencies...I am interested in why it is so popular given the oft expressed discontent. An unscripted, live shooting represents an actual event, a one-time occurrence that shows its imperfections as well as triumphs...Instead of a clean, linear story that has a clear ending, reality T.V. tells many stories simultaneously, and the ending is often messy and unfinished...It seems to me that a hunger for authenticity and adventure drive the current trend in reality T.V.⁶⁹

The successful church of the future will be authentic, which means a departure from the current pedestrian church to a participatory church model. There will be a shift from a pedestrian church to authentic church.⁷⁰

Participatory

Many have argued that podcasts and online church will overtake the current form of church. This will happen in some cases, but the development of the voice of the

⁶⁸ Geoff White, “Nike Tour,” interview by author, June 17, 2016.

⁶⁹ Ken Tennyson, “Semiotic Awareness,” Transforming Society, April 29, 2007, <http://transformingsociety.blogspot.com/2007/04/semiotic-awareness.html>.

⁷⁰ “Leonard Sweet on the Future of the Church,” interview by Aaron Earls, Facts & Trends, May 8, 2014, <http://factsandtrends.net/2014/05/08/leonard-sweet-on-the-future-of-the-church/#.WFQ9EHeZNE5>.

individual would seem to suggest that people desire to have a voice or personally know the voice that they listen to (blogs, likes, comments, etc.). The satellite church will need to accommodate this paradigm shift if it will have longevity.⁷¹ Leonard Sweet calls these young generations a Karaoke Culture.⁷² People want their voice to be heard.

The younger generations have introduced a shift in the way people socialize and build relationships. Nowhere has this change been more evident than in social media platforms and coffee shops. In a CBS interview, Katie Couric asked Howard Shultz, the CEO of Starbucks, “When you look around a Starbucks, what do you see?” His response explains why Starbucks has so successfully met the needs of this social generation. “I see a deep sense of community,” Howard Schultz replied. “We’ve intended, from day one, to really kind of build a third place between home and work. And really, I think at a time in America where people are hungry for human connection, we’re providing that.”⁷³ Starbucks is currently fulfilling the need for a third place. The Church is perfectly positioned to step back into that role. The Church can become known as the friendliest place in America. Why are Christians looking to Starbucks for insight on creating an environment conducive of relationship-building when the God-man they follow was the greatest social marketer in history? And the product Christians offer is free, graceful, and available to all. This social evolution represents the greatest opportunity for church growth.

⁷¹ Tennyson, “Semiotic Awareness.”

⁷² Sweet, *Nudge*.

⁷³ Howard Schultz, “Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Is All Abuzz,” CBS News, June 5, 2012, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/starbucks-ceo-howard-schultz-is-all-abuzz/>.

This reveals another error in the way the Christian evangelistic strategy has failed.

Leonard Sweet writes,

Christians have much to learn about faith as a lived experience, not a thought experiment. Rational faith—the form of Christianity that relies on argument, logic, and apologetics to establish and defend its rightness—has failed miserably in meeting people where they live. Intellectual arguments over doctrine and theology are fine for divinity school, but they lose impact at the level of daily life experience. Starbucks knows that people live for engagement, connection, symbols, and meaningful experiences. If you read the Bible, you’ll see that the people of God throughout history have known the same thing. Life at its very best is a passionate experience, not a doctoral dissertation.⁷⁴

Later, he adds, “Today, too many Christians line up to follow God out of duty or guilt, or even hoping to win a ticket to heaven. They completely miss the warmth and richness of the experience of living with God. They fail to pick up the aroma of what God is doing in their part of town.”⁷⁵ That warmth and richness would be very attractive to Generation Z.

One of the primary changes that needs to occur in the church is a shift from rows of people judging a preacher’s theology and style to authentic, participatory circles of people discussing strategies and ideas that will touch the hearts of young people. Ben Reed, author of *Starting Small*, says, “If you are really committed to spiritual formation, you’ve got to have a system that allows everybody to participate.”⁷⁶ Circles are much more conducive to the Gen-Z priorities of fellowship, mentorship, service, and emotional support. In circles, where two-way communication is valued, hospitality comes more

⁷⁴ Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 5.

⁷⁵ Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 5.

⁷⁶ Ben Reed, “8 Lessons Why Circles Are Better than Rows,” *Life and Theology*, November 20, 2012, <http://www.benreed.net/why-circles-are-better-than-rows/>.

naturally, and relational care is superior to pastoral care.⁷⁷ These are the qualities of a church that can reach the youngest generations.

The signs of ripeness are undeniable. The potential for growth is great. As the Church shifts from assumed mission failure to optimistic hope for the future, it will realize the benefits that a positive mental outlook can have on a group of people. In order to reach new people rather than rely on addition solely by handing our faith to our offspring, the church will need to utilize the attractive and motivating qualities of positive networkers and authentic community.

Spiritually Illiterate

The church is not losing millennials and Generation Z because they have weighed the claims of Christianity and found them to be unacceptable. They are leaving the church because they are ignorant of the claims of Christianity. They don't engage with Christian ideas because they don't see a need for the church. In other words, they are resistant to Christians, not to Christ.

James Emery White says,

Apologetics, in many ways, is at its best when it finds the cultural bridges we can walk across, and then, while walking, address the questions and barriers that exists along the path...Perhaps the most defining mark of members of Generation Z, in terms of their spiritual lives, is their spiritual illiteracy...They do not know what the Bible says...They are more than post-Christian. They don't even have a memory of the gospel.⁷⁸

Part of this shift is due to Generation Z's feeling that they don't need to have spiritual or religious knowledge because of the vast amount of information so readily available on

⁷⁷ Reed, "8 Lessons Why Circles Are Better than Rows."

⁷⁸ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 131.

their devices. Due to this paradigm, Chuck Kelley, president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, points out that the new task of education is to “help students evaluate information.”⁷⁹ Young people had access to information about ISIS, but they were unable to evaluate the value and reliability of the information.

In *UnChristian*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons described the hostility of younger non-Christians toward Christianity, but in their most recent book, *Good Faith*, they say, “Yet an even more significant challenge may be that growing numbers of adults, and especially younger adults, have no inkling that Christianity matters and could matter to them. Furthermore, they have little appreciation for how Christians generate good in the world.”⁸⁰ There is now an opportunity to introduce a new kind of Christianity that actually reflects the intentions of Christ.

Change

It seems harsh to say, but the church has long relied on the death of the older generations for change. On the surface, it revealed itself through battles like the worship wars that were fueled by the growing range of style preferences due to the growing number of generations represented in each church. Generation X loved their pews, but the millennials couldn’t wait to replace them with chairs. Each generation puts its own twist on theologies, adopts unique communication styles, and develops its own structures. With six generations currently alive due to longer life expectancies, change is not happening

⁷⁹ Gary D. Myers, “Theological Ed. Is ‘Being Redefined,’” Baptist Press, April 20, 2011, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=35098>.

⁸⁰ Kinnaman Lyons, *Good Faith*, 21.

fast enough for the church to do what is necessary to reach the younger generations.⁸¹

Each generation has unique tendencies, struggles, and story-forming experiences. The Church will need to learn quickly the stories that will reach the next generation. When the church is at its best, change and evolving messaging are a core value rather than a natural result of life cycles.

⁸¹ Brandon J. O'Brian, "Christ, Culture, and the Generation Gap," Christianity Today, October 23, 2012, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/articles/evangelism/generation-gap.html?start=2>.

CHAPTER 5:

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY FUELS CHURCH GROWTH

Many pastors posit that they would be happier if their church grew. Is it possible that the inverse is true, that happiness could actually fuel the growth they believe God has called their church to experience? Barbara L. Fredrickson, a leading thinker on the effects of positive psychology, shows that those individuals who are most positive are more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated, and healthy. It is these attributes that lead them to perform most successfully.¹ Increasing positive emotions is a “a key determinant” of the amount of energy individuals bring to their work.² Optimism is attractive and contagious. It is also energizing, and the Church has no reason to avoid the benefits of that mindset. This final chapter will focus on the benefits an increase in positivity will bring to the church. A positive mindset will actually help people in the Church operate more productively in their role as disciple makers. The Church is destined to grow, and it has no reason to allow fear and pessimism to creep into its messaging.

I am currently the pastor of a growing church in Gillette, Wyoming called New Life Wesleyan Church. Our church is a member of The Wesleyan Church. Like most denominations, ours is divided into districts, and there are a few districts, including the one my church is in, that are exceptionally healthy. In a country that closes 4,000 Christian churches for every 1,000 it opens, our district is growing rapidly. Why is it growing? I believe it is largely a result of courage that comes from optimistic guidance.

¹ Baraba L. Fredrickson, “The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* no. 359 (2004): 1367-1377.

² Tal Ben-Shahar and Angus Ridgway, *The Joy of Leadership: How Positive Psychology Can Maximize Your Impact (and Make You Happier) In a Challenging World* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017), 78.

The pastors of the churches in the Northwest District are backed by leaders who encourage them to take risks, believing success is possible, and district leadership blocks for them when those risks get them in trouble. The joy and confidence that results from watching sister churches grow creates a healthy competition that motivates other churches to work harder. It also creates a feeling of optimism that church growth is possible, and it can be led by seemingly normal people. Church leaders here enjoy a healthy team environment that provides encouragement when setbacks happen, and there is a collective celebration when success results. Pastors who have struggled to lead small churches in other districts have taken small churches in the Northwest District and led them to tremendous growth.

What would happen if the Christian church in America adopted an optimistic approach? If all of the churches in America were placed on a scatter-plot diagram that shows the correlation between growth/decline rates and average attendance, annual giving, or the pastor's salary, you would begin to see trends in the data, but there would inevitably be outliers. The common scientific practice is to remove the outliers and focus on the trends. Tal Ben-Shahar calls this "the error of the average."³ That's the first mistake traditional science makes. Shawn Achor says it this way: "If we study merely what is average, we will remain merely average."⁴ It's time to start looking at the churches that buck the trend of decline and ask what they are doing right to reach people with the gospel while so many others fail to do so. Focus on the outliers.

³ Ben-Shahar and Ridgway, *The Joy of Leadership*, 78.

⁴ Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*, 10.

Realistic Optimism

In *The Happiness Advantage*, Achor writes, “the more you believe in your own ability to succeed the more likely it is that you will.”⁵ If Christians are to take advantage of the benefits of a positive mental outlook, they will first need to believe that there is plenty of reason to be optimistic about the future of the Church. Achor demonstrates that before people can take advantage of positivity, they must believe success is possible.⁶

There are two types of optimism: unrealistic, or blind, optimism and realistic optimism. When this dissertation uses the word “optimism,” it is referring to the latter type, realistic optimism. Jim Collins, in his famous book *Good to Great*, gives optimism a bad name by his explanation of the Stockdale Paradox.⁷ In his telling of the story of Vietnam prisoners who were overly optimistic about the timeline of their release, Collins points out that those soldiers who believed they would be released by a specific time eventually gave up hope. This paper is not endorsing blind optimism for the Christian church or pointing to unrealistic timelines. It calls for optimism that is well-founded in the truth of biblical prophecy and the experienced faithfulness of God. This optimism can be compared to Christian faith. It has no expiration date. “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Heb. 11:1).

This chapter will highlight the negative effects pessimism and cynicism have on the Church and the positive effects optimism has on the Church, but the same is true of

⁵ Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*, 74.

⁶ Achor, *Before Happiness*, 21.

⁷ Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't* (London: Random House, 2001).

all organizations. The Christian church culture suffers from an epidemic of pessimism, believing the future will be worse than the past, and cynicism, believing pre-Christians are the enemy rather than the prize. Historically, America was seen as an optimistic country. The American dream, although a flawed objective destined to result in disappointment, gave Americans hope, something to look forward to, but that seems to be rapidly changing. Pessimism and cynicism are gripping the nation on a large scale. As commonly referenced, Heather Long points out a surprising change in trend: 57 percent of Americans believe the country is “doing poorly,” and 56 percent of Americans think the next generation will be worse off than they are financially, but is all this doom and gloom justified? In short, not really. Even though Americans are doing much better than they did in the past on multiple fronts, including finances and health,⁸ ten times more people suffer from major depression now than in 1945.⁹ The good news is that the Church is best equipped to reverse that trend.

Positivity Leads to Success

Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener use the terms positive psychology and positive affect to imply a general sense of happiness and optimism. They write that “the characteristics related to positive affect include confidence, optimism, and self-efficacy; likability and positive construals of others; sociability, activity, and energy; prosocial

⁸ Heather Long. “56% of Americans Think Their Kids Will Be Worse Off,” CNNMoney, January 28, 2016, <http://money.cnn.com/2016/01/28/news/economy/donald-trump-bernie-sanders-us-economy/index.html>.

⁹ Robert Edwards Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 22.

behavior; immunity and physical well-being; effective coping with challenge and stress; and originality and flexibility.”¹⁰ It is this line of reasoning that will lead to the conclusion that a Christian’s positive or negative emotions actually affect them in such a significant way that their ability to fulfill the Great Commission is affected.

Achor writes an appealing introduction to the beneficial effects of optimism and happiness. He says,

For untold generations, we have been led to believe that happiness orbited around success. That if we work hard enough, we will be successful, and only if we are successful will we become happy. Success was thought to be the fixed point of the work universe, with happiness revolving around it. Now, thanks to breakthroughs in the burgeoning field of positive psychology, we are learning that the opposite is true. When we are happy—when our mindset and mood are positive—we are smarter, more motivated, and thus more successful.¹¹

As referenced before, Sonja Lyubomirsky, the author of *The How of Happiness*, argues that happy people show “more flexibility and ingenuity in their thinking and are more productive in their jobs. They are better leaders and negotiators and earn more money. They are more resilient in the face of hardship, have stronger immune systems, and are physically healthier. Happy people even live longer.”¹² Advocates of Church success would have no problem recognizing the benefit that would result if Christ’s disciples and clergy exhibited those characteristics, and as advocates of the gospel and representatives of Jesus Christ, all Christians would increase their effectiveness if they were consistently and lastingly happy.

¹⁰ Sonja Lyubomirsky, L. King, and E. Diener, “The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?” *Psychological Bulletin* 131, no. 6 (2005): 804.

¹¹ Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*, 37.

¹² Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness*, 24.

The most successful people, those people who just seem to always get lucky, are almost always those people who are most positive. For them, happiness isn't something that they hope to have someday. It is a necessary commodity of the journey. In general, they get farther in life, and they have more fun doing it. This is not to say that all success is achieved entirely by a positive mental outlook, but it is one of the most helpful and universal tools available for achievement and perseverance. "Study after study shows that happiness precedes important outcomes and indicators of thriving."¹³

So why has the world failed to recognize the benefits of a positive mental outlook, or what Achor calls "the happiness advantage"? A majority of psychologists agree with the findings of Achor, but the business world, political and religious leaders, and educators cling to their false idea that success leads to happiness and not the other way around. Many workers say that happiness is a necessary casualty of success, and they sentence themselves to a lifetime of excruciating toil. For some, happiness is even seen as a weakness, and as they avoid it, they miss out on the achievement they seek. They continue to drown themselves in effort, perhaps hoping for happiness, while those who are most happy pass them on the ladder of success.

In "The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?" Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener also argue that "positive affect," or positivity, produces success.¹⁴ They analyzed the results of over 200 studies performed on almost 275,000 individuals and discovered that happiness leads to success in almost every area of life,

¹³ Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener, "The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect," 804.

¹⁴ Sonja Lyubomirsky, L. King, and E. Diener, "The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?" *Psychological Bulletin* 131, no. 6 (2005): 803.

including marriage, healthy friendships, community involvement, creativity, careers, and business efforts. They conclude that “research on well-being consistently reveals that the characteristics and resources valued by society correlate with happiness.”¹⁵ But it is not correlated in the way most people assume. Most individuals assume that “success makes people happy.” The opposite is true.¹⁶ Happiness and positive emotions, like optimism, “lead people to think, feel, and act in ways that promote both resource building and involvement with approach goals.”¹⁷ When optimism is the predominant emotion that a person feels, the person is led to see things in the world that are going well, and when all is going well, people can “expand their resources and friendships; they can take the opportunity to build their repertoire of skills for future use; or they can rest and relax to rebuild their energy after expending high levels of effort.”¹⁸ Richard Branson, the famous CEO of Virgin Group, says, “more than any other element, fun is the secret of Virgin’s success.”¹⁹

Positive Mental Outlook

God, the maker of our bodies, and therefore our brains, speaks through King David when he says, “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your

¹⁵ Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener, “The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect,” 803.

¹⁶ Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*, 803.

¹⁷ A. J. Elliot and T. M. Thrash, “Approach-avoidance Motivation in Personality: Approach and Avoidance Temperaments And Goals,” *Journals of Personality and Social Psychology* 82 (2002): 804.

¹⁸ Barbara L. Fredrickson, “The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden-and-build Theory of Positive Emotions,” *American Psychologist* 56 (2001): 218.

¹⁹ Ronald H. Humphrey, *Effective Leadership Theory, Cases, and Applications* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 200.

heart” (Ps. 37:4). David connected delight and achievement in that order. “Theologians and scientists alike are beginning to understand the important intersection of spiritual formation and brain research.”²⁰ Making a connection between delight, or happiness, and success is not a new construct. The Apostle Paul also seems to tap into the benefits of optimism. He writes to the Corinthians, “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the ‘super-apostles,’ even though I am nothing” (2 Cor. 12:10-11). Even when the future seemed grim to the world, Paul was able to see the glorious future that God had in store.

Perhaps it was the positive mental outlook of Christians that caused persecution to advance and rejuvenate the followers of Christ. Acts 8:1-8 shows that some of the original success of evangelism came as a result of persecution. As the Church was persecuted, they spread out geographically, taking the gospel with them. In Luke 21:12-13, Jesus warns His disciples of persecution, but He also encourages His audience that persecution would give an opportunity for evangelism. Tertullian famously said, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”²¹ To dismiss the postmillennialist’s interpretation of Scripture due to a lack of Christian suffering during the rise of Christianity is overstating the Bible’s warnings of suffering. It also requires a great watering-down of the word “suffer” to imply that all Christians in America face

²⁰ Christine M. Mutch, “Sustainable Faith: How the Neuroscience of Emotion Promotes Spiritual Transformation” (DMin dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2014), <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/77>, 13.

²¹ Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, *Apologeticus*, Chapter 50, s. 13.

persecution and suffering for their faith. Persecution cannot be seen as a requirement for membership in Christ's Kingdom. The topic of ongoing persecution and suffering of the Church is an important debate, and the fact that Christian suffering does not always detour the success of the Great Commission does not mean suffering is the only way the gospel can spread.

When his builders were tempted to give up, Nehemiah held a church service and delivered an uplifting message of hope and strength that comes from the joy of the Lord:

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. ¹Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8:5).

The Christian's hope does not come from constant success, but from knowing God and His sovereignty. The joy of the Lord is their strength. His power gives optimism and hope for the future that goes beyond logical understanding.

Worry

Most successful people have also learned how to temper worry. Shawn Achor says that "the belief that worrying will prevent bad things from happening is one of the

greatest enemies of positive genius.”²² Christians should have no problem with that statement, as it so closely reflects a statement made by Jesus in His sermon on the mount: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt. 6:34). Jesus’ proclamation has been proven by many modern-day scientists. Researchers at Harvard and other institutions discovered that anxiety destroys the proteins at the end of our chromosomes called telomeres. This change rapidly accelerates the aging process.²³ On the other hand, when people spend time focusing on positive feelings for a few minutes, they significantly lower their levels of worry and pessimism. This does not only decrease anxiety; it also raises performance on tests of memory and critical skills by 10 to 15 percent.²⁴

Celebration

Another effective aspect of a positive mental outlook is the importance of celebration, joy, and appreciation. Too often, success is under-celebrated while failure is over-bemoaned. Taking time to appreciate accomplishments is not only gratifying, “it also leads to better performance.”²⁵ Tal Ben-Shahar and Angus Ridgway point out that “one of the best ways to enhance positive emotions and restore energy is to write about

²² Achor, *Before Happiness*, 176.

²³ Ahola K, Sirén I, Kivimäki M, Ripatti S, Aromaa A, Lönnqvist J, et al., “Work-Related Exhaustion and Telomere Length: A Population-Based Study,” *PLoS ONE* 7, no. 7 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0040186>

²⁴ Gerardo Ramirez and Sian L Beilock, “Writing about Testing Worries Boosts Exam Performance in the Classroom,” abstract, *Science*, January 14, 2011, <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/331/6014/211.abstract>.

²⁵ Ben-Shahar and Ridgway, *The Joy of Leadership*, 79.

positive experiences.”²⁶ A primary benefit of success is the gratitude that can be shown after a victory. Messages of appreciation contribute significantly to the happiness of the giver and the recipient. They also improve the relationship of the parties involved. This concept should introduce us to the benefits of celebrating successes in our prayers.

Emmons and McCullough performed studies that demonstrated how writing down things for which we are grateful each night before going to bed leads to higher levels of happiness and optimism, as well as to better performance and improved health.²⁷ If the Church continues to encourage a theology that doubts the potential of successes to be celebrated, a lack of celebration will stifle growth and create an inability to recognize potential successes. Similarly, if the Church doubts the sustainability of victories that are touted, a lack of appreciation will restrain achievement.

Perception

After looking at the results of some recent research, Achor concludes, “changing how you perceive the size of your target—that is, how you perceive the likelihood of success—can have the same cognitive benefits as increasing your perceived proximity to it.”²⁸ It seems like common sense to say, but believing that a goal is achievable helps people achieve that goal. In addition, perception of the difficulty of reaching a goal affects an individual’s ability to hit that goal. In an experiment published in 2012, golfers were asked to putt a ball into a hole. The researchers then used other, larger circles to

²⁶ Ben-Shahar and Ridgway, *The Joy of Leadership*, 79.

²⁷ Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2007).

²⁸ Achor, *Before Happiness*, 122.

create an optical illusion that made the hole look smaller, and the golfers' success rate declined. Then they used smaller circles to make the hole look bigger, and the golfers' success rate improved. Even though the hole size never changed, the golfer missed their mark more often when the target was perceived as more difficult to hit.²⁹ Perception affects performance.

Achor points out in *Before Happiness* that only when individuals choose to believe that they live in a world where “challenges can be overcome, our behavior matters, and change is possible can we summon all our drive, energy and emotional and intellectual resources to make that change happen.”³⁰ Individuals whose brains are more regularly focused on positive thoughts have a greater chance of succeeding, and individuals who believe that success is possible are more likely to find the path to success. Those people are not blind to the negative realities of life, but they also recognize they have the potential to do something about it. Social scientists have long discussed the true predictors of success. They disagree about whether grades in school, standardized testing scores, physical attractiveness, work ethic, emotional intelligence, or mental intelligence is the best forecaster. The reality is that all of these matter to a certain extent, but it is a person's mindset, his or her grit, that knits all of these qualities together. The question then becomes, “how can we learn to harness and apply all of the various

²⁹ J. K. Witt, S. A. Linkenauger, and D. R. Proffitt, “Get Me Out of This Slump! Visual Illusions Improve Sports Performance,” *Psychological Science* 23 (2012): 397-99.

³⁰ Achor, *Before Happiness*, xvi.

intelligences?”³¹ Success is not about how much intelligence you have. It’s about how much of that intelligence you believe you can use to accomplish something desirable.³²

A positive mental outlook is more than blind happiness or irrational optimism. It is optimism that is rooted in an individual’s power to accomplish something. The famous analogy of the half full or half empty glass paints a picture of an optimist who sees the current situation as good and a pessimist who sees the current situation as bad. There is, however, a third option. A successful person will seek a pitcher of water to fill the glass. Achor labels these people “positive geniuses,” people who can see a great range of opportunities, possibilities, and paths to success.³³ Positive geniuses recognize that theirs is not the only vantage point and other interpretations of reality exist. Then they choose to believe or pursue the most valuable reality.

Positivity and Semiotics

One of the most important criteria of a successful world-changer is the ability to understand the world or read the signs of the times. Sweet says, “Disciples of Jesus must learn to read the sign-language of the Spirit.”³⁴ If we are unable to read the signs of the times (see Matthew 16:2-3), we will miss opportunities to join Jesus in His continuing mission. Pessimists either lack the ability or the desire to see or validate good potentials.

³¹ Achor, *Before Happiness*, 7.

³² Achor, *Before Happiness*, 11.

³³ Achor, *Before Happiness*, 14.

³⁴ Jon M. Sweeney, “Leonard Sweet on Signs, Signals, Churches and the Current State of Starbucks,” ExploreFaith.org, 2011, http://www.explorefaith.org/faces/my_faith/leonard_sweet.php.

Their vision of the future is therefore obscured. Positive people are able to see both the good and bad potentials and are energized by the pursuit of the good.

Beth Kuhel says, “Positive thinkers always see the big picture and they tend to be the most grateful people.”³⁵ Pessimism and negative affect may actually cause Christians to fail to read the signs of the times. A study at the University of Toronto concluded that our mood can change how our eyes, more specifically our visual cortex, process information. In that experiment, individuals were made to feel either happy or sad, then they asked those individuals to look at a series of pictures. Those people who were made to feel sad failed to process many of the details of the images, but the individuals who were made to feel happy saw much more. This conclusion is similar to the conclusion of eye-tracking experiments. The positive emotions that test subjects experienced improved their ability to recognize details in a picture.³⁶

For people who think negatively, the range of possible outcomes of a situation is limited. In her book *Positivity*, Barbara L. Fredrickson writes about her research that shows that when the brain is negative, it operates in fight-or-flight mode, but when your brain is positive it can use its full range of intellectual, social, and emotional resources to recognize new ways of finding solutions.³⁷ “Thus a more positive employee is more

³⁵ Beth Kuhel, “Positive People Attract People and Breed Successful Careers,” Personal Branding Blog, November 10, 2012, <http://www.personalbrandingblog.com/positive-people-attract-people-and-breed-successful-careers/>.

³⁶ Taylor W. Schmitz, Eve De Rosa, and Adam K. Anderson, “Opposing Influences of Affective State Valence on Visual Cortical Encoding,” *Journal of Neuroscience* (June 3, 2009), <http://www.jneurosci.org/content/29/22/7199>.

³⁷ Barbara L. Fredrickson, *Positivity: Groundbreaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009).

likely to see avenues for job advancement in a company. A positive entrepreneur is able to see more open niches in the marketplace. A positive student is able to see more fellowships or scholarships to apply for. A positive athlete will see more players to pass to on the field, and so on.”³⁸ Carmine Gallo writes that “optimists see the big picture” when other people are distracted by the way things are and the potential for things to get worse.³⁹

If we lack the ability to read the signs, we will not only fail to recognize how to participate in God’s active work in the world, we will also lack the ability to communicate with the world. David Banks asserts that “the Church must make use of semiotically aware imagery to communicate how this message [that though we are broken, God, in His mercy and through Jesus Christ, offers to graciously put us back together again] is real for us.”⁴⁰ But how will Christians do this if they are unable to see the signs because they are skeptical of the possibility of a church with a bright future? It is through an image-rich communication of the gospel that Christians will successfully incarnate the good of news of Jesus Christ to the world.⁴¹ Images make the message powerful, memorable, and emotional. They connect us to the story, and that emotional connection is a primary key of lasting discipleship. Christine Mutch claims that,

in order for people to be transformed into the image of Christ in a deeply personal and sustainable way, practitioners must intentionally capitalize on the brain’s

³⁸ Achor, *Before Happiness*, 100.

³⁹ Carmine Gallo, “5 Reasons Why Optimists Make Better Leaders,” *Forbes*, August 8, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2012/08/08/5-reasons-why-optimists-make-better-leaders/>.

⁴⁰ David Banks, “Image of Grace: Seeing and Sharing the Gospel through Imagery” (DMin dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2012), <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/31>.

⁴¹ Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 52.

emotional system, the powerful network which drives attention, memory, motivation, and decision-making, as well as one's ability to engage in transformational relationships with others and with God.⁴²

A famous experiment performed by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons asked students to count the number of times a ball was passed in a game of catch. The students were so fixated on counting, about half of them completely failed to recognize that a person dressed as a gorilla walked through the scene. In their book, Chabris and Simons write, “we vividly experience some aspects of our world, particularly those that are the focus of our attention. But this rich experience inevitably leads to the erroneous belief that we process all of the detailed information around us.”⁴³ If an individual is watching for signs of decline and decay, he will see them, while failing to recognize the signs of improvement and health.

At the back of the eyeball, the part that cannot absorb the light coming into the eye is called the blind spot. There are always unknown areas in a person's reality, and each person can choose to assume the contents of those areas are good or bad. Pessimists assume that the areas they can't see are filled with dangers, dead ends, disease, and failure. Irrational optimists choose to believe that blind spots are filled with ease, comfort, and predictability. “The positive genius fills in the blind spot with information that is true and valid and that leads to positive growth.”⁴⁴

⁴² Mutch, “Sustainable Faith,” 2.

⁴³ Christopher F. Chabris and Daniel J. Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla: and Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us* (New York: MJF Books, 2012), 7.

⁴⁴ SAchor, *Before Happiness*, 57.

Positive Psychology in Groups

Perhaps the most valuable news for the Church about the productivity of a positive mental outlook is that the discoveries of positive psychology apply to the production of groups, not just of individuals. The principle that pleasant and unpleasant emotions fuel and deplete energy transfers almost indistinguishably from individuals to groups.⁴⁵ Groups whose emotions are mostly positive are more motivated, more creative, and harder working. They are better learners and more adaptable to the pace of change. They are more physically healthy, and they have better group cohesion and organizational commitment.⁴⁶ How do forward thinkers lead groups to a positive mental outlook and set a tone of optimism? They make their own joy and optimism visible—and therefore contagious.

V. S. Ramachandran discovered the existence of mirror neurons, as documented in *The Neurons That Shaped Civilization*, when he discovered that neurons in the frontal and parietal cortexes of macaque monkeys fire both when a monkey grabs something and when the monkey watches another monkey grab the same item.⁴⁷ Further research has shown that these neurons exist in humans, and those neurons are not limited to the motor cortex.⁴⁸ What conclusion did that lead scientists to? It revealed the existence of

⁴⁵ Humphrey, *Effective Leadership Theory, Cases, and Applications*, 80.

⁴⁶ Fredrickson, “The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions,” 1367-1377.

⁴⁷ Vilayanur Ramachandran, “The Neurons That Shaped Civilization,” TEDIndia, November 2009, video of lecture, 7:37, https://www.ted.com/talks/vs_ramachandran_the_neurons_that_shaped_civilization.

⁴⁸ Christian Keysers, Bruno Wicker, Valeria Gazzola, Jean-Luc Anton, Leonardo Fogassi, and Vittorio Gallese, “A Touching Sight: SII/PV Activation During the Observation and Experience of Touch,” *Neuron* 42, no. 2 (April 22, 2004): 335-46.

emotional contagion. Individuals are constantly and involuntarily adopting the emotions of others. Paul told the church in Corinth that “bad company corrupts good character” (1 Cor. 15:33 NLT). He was right. In addition, individuals mirror the emotions and actions of their leaders more strongly than they do other group members.

Tony Schwarz points out that “the more you’re able to move your attention to what makes you feel good, the more capacity you’ll have to manage whatever was making you feel bad in the first place.”⁴⁹ If this is true not only about individuals but also about groups, that should give organizations the power to change the course of their businesses using a positive mental outlook, but promoting positivity does not mean “living in denial, operating on blind faith, or ignoring problems.”⁵⁰ It means groups would be wise to pursue a good outcome to a difficult situation and believe that a good outcome is possible.

Clergy are frequently familiar with effective methods of tone-setting and vision-casting. Their tone of communication can come across as enthusiasm, motivation, and exhortation, or it can fall into the tempting tones of correction, warning, or even conspiracy theory. The balance of tone has shifted too often to the latter. A congregation inundated with negative potentials, alarmism, and fear-mongering will drift quickly toward negativity. The danger of this common habit of religious communication cannot be overstated. Not only will it lead individuals to unhealthy habits; it will also hinder their ability to be disciplined and to serve as advocates for the Christian mission.

⁴⁹ Tony Schwartz, “Overcoming Your Negative Bias,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2013, <https://mobile.nytimes.com/blogs/dealbook/2013/06/14/overcoming-your-negative-bias/>.

⁵⁰ Ben-Shahar and Ridgway, *The Joy of Leadership*, 81.

Leaders cannot force people to think positively, but they can instill positive realities into their thinking. Shawn Achor gives three strategies for transferring positivity to groups. They are success franchising (coming up with a positive behavioral change that is easily replicated), script writing (changing a prevailing social script by making it positive), and creating shared narrative (creating value and meaning by appealing to emotion).⁵¹

Proverbs 13:20 says, “Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.” Not only will these strategies introduce more positive people to the organization, but it is also far easier for an individual to sustain positivity when he or she is surrounded by positive people. Positivity is contagious in both directions. This does not mean that the church should avoid disseminating negative feedback or facing undesirable realities. Instead it should avoid unnecessary negativity.

Firefighters and Pastors

With so many fires, line-of-duty deaths, and other critical incidents, in addition to the wear and tear of daily life, the firefighting profession is among the most stressful jobs. It is widely believed that firefighters are at a greater risk of developing mental health difficulties, and firefighters commit suicide at a higher rate than the rest of society. Colleen Martin argues that these factors interfere with firefighters’ ability to have healthy relationships, perform their jobs, and take care of themselves.⁵² It can be argued that the

⁵¹ Achor, *Before Happiness*, 183.

⁵² Colleen Martin, “Depression & PTSD Shown to Be Strongest Predictors of Firefighter Suicide,” Firehouse.com, November 25, 2016, <http://www.firehouse.com/article/12280354/depression-ptsd-shown-to-be-strongest-predictors-of-firefighter-suicide>.

life of a pastor is similar to the life of a firefighter. Although the suicide rate of the pastors is below the average of the societies in which they reside, presumably due to a biblical foundation, the stresses of the pastorate are significant. This stress is compounded by the dominant belief that it is the pastor's job to express God's displeasure with and imminent demolition of the world.

In light of the evidence of the benefits of a positive mental outlook, the depressing culture that clergy operate in will not help them reach their full potential to reach as many people as possible with the good news of Jesus Christ. One might argue that finding ways to make the occupation less depressing is watering down the calling, but maybe that line of reasoning is what caused half of all employees to leave their job to get away from their manager.⁵³ The 1,500 clergy who leave the pastorate every month were not able to rely solely on their biblical foundation as a source of excitement for the mission.⁵⁴

In an excellent direction for pastors, John Piper writes,

Whatever measure of pessimism a pastor may feel or I may feel about our own society as Christians, we should be long-term optimists. And I think premillennialists and amillennialists can say this with as much or more confidence than postmillennialists, though everybody can say it in those three camps. Sooner or later Christ is, in fact, going to break into this world and put everything right. He is going to cast the weeds into outer darkness, and he is going to establish his kingdom, and the world will be full of the glory of the Lord like the waters cover the sea, and righteousness and justice and peace will kiss all for the glory of Christ. That is coming and we should be deeply, deeply confident and optimistic about it.⁵⁵

Christians should be long-term optimists.

⁵³ Ali Robins, "8 Reasons Why You Might Be a Bad Boss (And How to Fix It)," Officevibe, May 11, 2017, <https://www.officevibe.com/blog/facts-about-bad-bosses-infographic>.

⁵⁴ Daniel Sherman, "Pastor Burnout Statistics," PastorBurnout.com, September 2011, <http://www.pastorburnout.com/pastor-burnout-statistics.html>.

⁵⁵ John Piper, "Gospel Hope for Cultural Pessimists," Desiring God, March 17, 2016, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/gospel-hope-for-cultural-pessimists>.

Pessimism

Causes of Pessimism

Social scientists have shown that some individuals are wired with a disposition toward a positive mental outlook, and some are wired with a bend toward a negative mental outlook, but genetics only accounts for half (or less) of the factors that lead a person to be pessimistic or optimistic. No matter what their genetic predisposition, humans have the ability to express whichever psychology they choose.⁵⁶ We can overcome our genetic programming, and happiness is a state of mind that can be achieved.⁵⁷ Happiness can be found even in dark times. In order to accomplish anything difficult in life, effort is required. Unfortunately, the church seems to have dedicated its efforts to convincing the world that a life of pessimism is the desirable option.

As a result of recent declines and poor eschatological considerations, the American church is pessimistic, causing a lack of long-game strategy to lead all people to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. The Christian church must adopt long-game strategies that optimistically seek to create systems to foster growth. In order to accomplish this, the American Christian church would be wise to do away with under-developed theologies that cause it to use short-game strategies to reach a few people in the days before the building collapses and instead adopt long-game strategies that trust the building's foundation while they are used by God to reach many people.

⁵⁶ Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness*, 24.

⁵⁷ Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness*, 24.

Scheier and Carver prove that “optimism confers benefits on what people do and what people are able to achieve in times of adversity.”⁵⁸ They go on to say that

people’s actions are greatly influenced by their expectations about the consequences of those actions. People who see desired outcomes as attainable continue to strive toward those outcomes, even when progress becomes difficult or slow. Alternatively, if outcomes seem sufficiently unattainable (regardless of the reason for the difficulty), people withdraw their effort and disengage themselves from the goals that they have set, even if the consequences of such disengagement are at times severe. Thus, we see people’s expectancies as a major determinant of the disjunction between two general classes of behavior: continued striving vs. giving up and turning away.⁵⁹

If “optimism is also correlated with measures of personality characteristics that are more positive in nature such as self-mastery, locus of control, and self-esteem,”⁶⁰ and happiness leads to success, why has the church failed to recognize this obvious contributing cause of numerical and influential decline?

Pessimism Doesn’t Look Good

A University of Massachusetts study showed that “positive affect tends to increase more when visual and auditory emotional information is congruent versus incongruent.”⁶¹ In this study, individuals were shown positive visual stimulation and

⁵⁸ Michael F. Scheier and Charles Carver, “Effects of Optimism on Psychological and Physical Well-Being: Theoretical Overview and Empirical Update,” *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 16 (1992): 202, <http://doi.org/10.1007/BF01173489>.

⁵⁹ Scheier and Carver, “Effects of Optimism on Psychological and Physical Well-Being,” 202.

⁶⁰ Scheier and Carver, “Effects of Optimism on Psychological and Physical Well-Being,” 215.

⁶¹ Xenia Levayah, Sarah Izen, and Vivian M. Ciaramitaro, “Mood Changes After Brief Exposure to Emotional Information: Positive and Negative Affect Changes in Relation to Visual and Auditory Emotional Information,” Baby Lab, Poster presented at the Massachusetts Statewide Undergraduate Research Conference, April 28, 2017, Amherst, Massachusetts, https://umassbostonbabylab.weebly.com/uploads/6/4/9/3/64936741/umassamherst2017_bethancourt_mood_panas_final.pdf.

negative visual stimulation, and the positive visual stimulation produced positive emotions. Pastor John Burke, author of *No Perfect People Allowed: Creating a Come as You Are Culture in the Church*, wisely observes, “Generally, emerging generations do not ask, ‘What is true?’ They are primarily asking, ‘Do I want to be like you?’ They see truth as relational. If I want to be like you, then I want to consider what you believe. If I don’t see anything real or attractive in you or your friends as Christ-followers, I don’t care how ‘true’ you think it is, I’m not interested.”⁶² We cannot forget the negative effect pessimism has on the way the world sees the church. It’s not attractive, and considering our primary objective to “make disciples of all nations,” our pessimistic attitudes are unhelpful.

Beth Kuhel says, “Positive people tend to be some of our biggest influencers in society and some of the world’s most successful people. Their special charisma comes from how they react to difficulty and challenges and how they use every experience as a stepping-stone toward a better future.”⁶³ This obvious fact should lead us to adopt a positive tone in order to more effectively influence society. This is not to say that we should adopt a fantasy Christianity that claims following Christ will only result in easy living and incessant positive emotions. Rather, optimism for the future of Christianity will attract people. It’s difficult to trust a sinking ship.

⁶² John Burke, *No Perfect People Allowed: Creating a Come as You Are Culture in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 42-43.

⁶³ Beth Kuhel, “Positive People Attract People and Breed Successful Careers.”

CONCLUSION:

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE LEADS TO A HOPEFUL FUTURE

Positivity in the Real World

As the pastor of the largest church in our town, there is no shortage of people telling me what I should actively take a stand against. Many people believe I should regularly warn our people that the end of the world is near, that my message should be one of fear of fire. I have instead chosen to adopt a message of love and hope. I grew up around churches that preached legalistic holiness in such a way that it scared most of the kids I grew up with away from the Church. I grew up around churches that expected the world to get worse and worse until eventually it got so bad that Jesus got tired of us and would come to burn everyone who lacked holiness. It's no wonder that the church in America is declining numerically. That's what we predicted many decades ago. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is energizing to remember that the *Left Behind* books are not part of the biblical canon and the Church does have a bright future after all.

It has become cliché to say that the Church should be known more for what it is for rather than what it is against, but that sentiment has not pierced the selfish, human desire to make everyone else in the world look and act like we do. That rhetoric has not yet caused us to change our methods in such a way that we lead with hospitality and grace. We can say we want to be known for what we are for, but we should then follow it up by saying what exactly it is we will stop being against. We have to be for more than just filling seats, building big buildings, and impressing peers. Our passion for the gospel should be obvious. Our excitement about the life-giving power of a relationship with God should be irresistible. Our grateful joy for the lives we get to live should make pre-

Christians desire to follow the one who taught us how to truly live and become who we were created to be.

Optimism produces perseverance. In the same way that Nehemiah told the tired temple builders to allow the joy of the Lord to be their strength, the Church should spur Christians on with the confidence that comes from knowing that God will be victorious. My brother, Billy Wilson, the District Superintendent of the Mountain Plains District of the Wesleyan Church, told me that “the greatest attribute of a good leader could be resilience.” He reminded me of an experience in which we heard Bill Self, the great coach of the Kansas Jayhawks, respond to a question right after he fell short of making it to the Final Four in 2007. The interviewer asked if it was hard to gear up for another run after such a disappointment. Self replied, “If you’re a true competitor, you don’t have a choice.” The next year, Bill Self took the Kansas Jayhawks back to the Final Four, but this time he didn’t have to respond to questions about failure because the Kansas Jayhawks won it all.

Who are the “true competitors” in God’s Kingdom? They are the eternal optimists among us. They are the pastors who partner with pastors from other denominations to tell a community that Jesus loves them. They are the saints, like my friend Joy, who play on the worship team because they know it reaches young people even though they don’t really like the style of music. They are prayer warriors, like my friend Richard, who demonstrate that the Christian mission is worth sacrificing for. They are the lay-evangelists, like my friend Lyle, who see every pre-Christians as a future child of God, even if they don’t know it yet. They are the Sunday School teachers, like my friend June, who write letters with their students to people in prison, encouraging them with messages

of God's unconditional love. They are the church board members, like my friend Jim, who push us to believe we can reach more young people with the gospel. God is the prototypical optimist, and look at His track record. Christians, follow His lead.

Time and time again, the church gets distracted by the pharisaical desire to make everyone in the world conform to our standards before they even believe in Him who we claim made those standards, and many of those standards are conjured with little biblical support. In fear of swinging the pendulum too far away from living moral lives, we cling to our rules like the Pharisees, forcing healthy living on a world of people who would be drawn to the guidance of Scripture if they first surrendered to its Author. We must not see ourselves as the morality police but as the proclaimers of good news—the best news. If we are driven by our disdain for the behavior of those we hope to reach, the credibility of our “come as you are” messaging will be lost. It will drive people away, and it will fulfill our prophecy of the demise of the church.

Assured Longevity

A positive, optimistic message can and will aid in the reversal of the decline of the Christian church that is built on the solid foundations of Jesus Christ, who assured its longevity. Jesus says in Matthew 16:18-19, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Christians have much reason to have faith in the endurance of the Church, and the optimism that faith will cause will actually improve the odds of a successful outcome. Christian theologians who deny the

hopeful message of Scripture are leading their Christian followers to unnecessary failure because their belief in inevitable failure has decreased their chances of success.

The optimistic church of the future will take a cue from Jonathan Edwards and other postmillennialists who foster a spirit of excitement for the future of the Church rather than anger at and seclusion from pre-Christians. It will graciously reach out to millennials and Generation Z with language they can understand while being less distracted by arguments about secondary theologies and political concerns, and it will allow optimism itself to open its eyes to the full range of future evangelistic possibilities.

The decline of the church in America should not be seen as a future certainty, prophesied by either Old Testament or New Testament prophets. There is plenty of reason to believe that the Christian church in the United States will see a revival, even soon, and that optimism itself could actually be part of the solution the Church is looking for. When the Church became militant toward and angry at the world, it caused the world to see the Church in a very different way than it saw Jesus. The good news is that the youngest generations are ready to hear Jesus' message of hope and grace, and the hope that is caused by knowing that there is reason to be optimistic about the future will actually develop a positive mental outlook that will help the church achieve the goal of the Great Commission.

Where We Go from Here

In the year 2000, when the elders of MetroChurch in Edmond, Oklahoma made the kingdom-minded decision to become part of the Life.Church congregation, the pastor of Life.Church, Craig Groeschel, made the optimistic decision to try something he had never seen succeed: he launched a second campus. That brave decision has not only

played a huge role in making Life.Church one of the largest churches in the United States, it also changed the way many churches think about reaching new people. At the time of the expansion, Groeschel said, “The church needs to adapt, to provide people with options of times, locations and worship options.”¹ Groeschel later said, “There’s an epidemic of negativity around the world...I’m not optimistic based on what I feel. I’m optimistic based on what God says.”² He recently preached a teaching series called Stay Positive. The description of that series includes the following: “Cynicism and negativity may be the easy choice, but they’re not the best choice. If you seek what’s good, you’ll see what’s good. Let’s embrace the way we’re created to think and stay positive.”³

Optimism can open avenues for future church growth by producing confidence, as it does in the best entrepreneurs. When Paul made the unpopular decision to extend the Christian invitation to the Gentiles, he expanded the reach of Christianity (Acts 9:15). When the printing press was used to make the Bible more readily available, the world became more aware of the Christian message.⁴ The church grew when Whitefield and Wesley broke with the norm by investing in field preaching.⁵ When optimistic Christians

¹ Tamie Ross. “MetroChurch Members OK Life Church Merger,” newsok.com, January 8, 2001, Edmond, OK, <https://newsok.com/article/2726022/metrochurch-members-ok-life-church-merger>.

² Craig Groeschel, “I’m Optimistic,” Life.Church, Edmond, OK, <https://www.life.church/media/stay-positive/im-optimistic/>.

³ Life.Church, “Stay Positive,” Open.Life.Church, accessed January 8, 2019, <http://opn.rs/cs/g/yi>.

⁴ Rita Kennedy, “What Impact Did the Invention of the Printing Press Have on the Spread of Religion?” Synonym, accessed November 30, 2018, <https://classroom.synonym.com/impact-did-invention-printing-press-spread-religion-6617.html>.

⁵ John Singleton, “At the Roots of Methodism: Wesley Discovers Field Preaching,” ChristianPost.com, March 28, 2003, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/at-the-roots-of-methodism-wesley-discovers-field-preaching-6006/>.

do what is out of the ordinary because they believe it can produce growth of the body of Christ, they participate in the advancement of the Great Commission.

The Christian who risks his or her reputation to try something unpopular to produce the next great Christian revival will not be a pessimist. The congregation that discovers how to reach Generation Z with the gospel message on a large scale will not be pastored by a cynical person. The next Martin Luther will see potential when others fear change. The next Jonathan Edwards will believe the Great Commission is achievable, and the next Billy Graham will believe Jesus' promise that nothing can overcome His Church (Matt. 16:18).

APPENDIX A:
SUPPORTING MATERIAL

Answer Choices	Responses (Percentage)	Responses (Count)
Hostility toward Christianity in the world is increasing.	81.36%	48
Sinfulness in the world is increasing.	69.49%	41
Violence in the world is increasing.	62.71%	37
Hostility toward Christianity will continue to increase until Jesus returns.	69.49%	41
Sinfulness will continue to increase until Jesus returns.	64.41%	38
Violence will continue to increase until Jesus returns.	54.24%	32
Hostility toward Christianity in the world is decreasing.	8.47%	5
Sinfulness in the world is decreasing.	3.39%	2
Violence in the world is decreasing.	11.86%	7
Hostility toward Christianity will continue to decrease until Jesus returns.	1.69%	1
Sinfulness will continue to decrease until Jesus returns.	1.69%	1
Violence will continue to decrease until Jesus returns.	3.39%	2
Total Respondents: 59		

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