

# INTRODUCTION

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My professional life began in the corporate world—in advertising to be specific. It is an industry reminiscent of college fraternities, comprised mostly of creative young people who prefer to stay young and can't stand the thought of wearing suits to work. In many ways it's the youth ministry of the corporate world, except the trips to exotic locations are for TV shoots instead of mission trips, and advertisers are accountable to clients rather than parents.

I worked as an account manager and later as a strategic planner on a variety of brands. I spent time working on everything from the Minnesota Anti-Smoking campaign to Harrah's Entertainment, Inc. (i.e., casinos). However, the majority of my career was spent working on Porsche Cars North America with a team that developed, managed, and executed nearly all aspects of a multimillion-dollar communications plan.

Overall, my job and much of my training were devoted to studying media's effect on consumer habits. It was work that required me to have a firm understanding of media theory and to keep a finger on the pulse of cultural change. I became what people in the industry call a “consumer anthropologist,” an elaborate term that simply describes a person whose task is understanding various consumer subcultures, what they influence, and what influences them.

I was having a great time, but throughout my career I was aware of a nascent feeling that I wasn't doing the thing I was made for. I ignored the feeling as often as possible. After all, I enjoyed what I was doing, was well compensated, and felt I was using my talents. But as I began to study the writings of communications theorist Marshall McLuhan, it became nearly impossible to keep that nagging feeling under the surface. He opened my eyes to the profoundly negative ways advertising shapes our culture, an impact I could see in the church as well.

Ironically, my study of McLuhan was something I embarked upon in order to deepen a particular skill set for my career. It wasn't until I read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* that I realized I could no longer continue in that career; I was spending 70 hours a week devoted to something that was antithetical to my most deeply held beliefs. The most effective, award-winning, and respected advertising is that which convinces consumers that a product or service will meet

their spiritual and emotional needs. In this sense, the measure of my success in advertising was my ability to promote a counterfeit gospel.

With the encouragement of my courageous wife and input from our church community, I left advertising to attend seminary and pursue my long-held interest in theology. During my time at seminary I began to see the myriad ways in which my previous training and knowledge could translate to better understanding the challenges facing the church. It was the confluence of these two areas of interest and expertise that led to the ideas found in this book.

This is not a book intended to argue that the church needs to engage culture. Rather, it assumes cultural engagement is well underway. It presupposes that there are changes already happening in churches and that people are wrestling with difficult questions about the true message of the gospel, the balance between cultural relevancy and faithfulness to the gospel, and what it means to be the church in our electronic consumer culture. This book seeks to explore these issues and provide some insight into the often unintended consequences—both good and bad—of how we go about living as the church.

The following chapters are aimed at people who are trying new things or trying to make old things work in new ways; when forced to choose, I much prefer to hold back the stallion of aggressive change than to kick the mule of stolid church tradition. There are vast libraries of books that have done a thorough job of “kicking the mule,” and to contribute another boot to its hindquarters would be redundant at best.

## **ANTICIPATING UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES**

For several summers during college I worked as a counselor for a youth adventure camp in Michigan. One part of my job was to lead hiking and canoe trips in various parts of North America. Weeks prior to the campers’ arrival we counselors were led through a series of training exercises by seasoned outdoorsmen to prepare us for the rigors of these trips.

Like all good training sessions, this time involved an assortment of team-building exercises. One in particular stands out for me: We were to raise the camp flag. The problem was there was no flagpole, and we were given only one hour to find a solution. They provided us with some basic cutting tools, a rope, and a metal O-ring for hoisting the flag, and that was it.

Immediately, our team went into action. Some of us charged into the woods with saws and axes in search of a suitable pole. Others began digging a hole deep in the ground where the pole would be set. The deadline was closing in when our peers emerged triumphantly from the wilderness with a freshly cut and stripped

tree trunk ready for placement. Upon placing our new pole, we quickly began filling the hole with dirt. Then we implemented our most innovative idea: We stabilized the pole by wedging large stones down around its base, ensuring the pole would not wobble, sway, or ever come out. With minutes to spare the pole was secure and reaching proudly into the air nearly two stories high. All we had to do was hoist the flag.

At that moment we experienced the phenomenon of near-simultaneous epiphany. It occurred to us that we should have affixed the metal O-ring and the rope to the pole before we erected it. The head scratching didn't last long; we quickly commissioned our best climber to scale the pole with rope and ring in hand. To his surprise, he could get only halfway up the pole. Just barely hanging on, and with no other options, he affixed the O-ring to the midpoint of the pole. After he had arrived safely on the ground, we triumphantly raised the flag.

It was over. We finished on time and began throwing the customary high fives and offering noises of approval, all the while doing our best to ignore the embarrassment of our flag luffing at permanent half-mast.

The flag-raising debacle reflects my experience in the church. More than once in my church life I have enthusiastically set out to help create a new ministry, only to discover we hadn't anticipated the consequences, leaving us with a program flailing at half-mast. I am not alone in this; many people have set out to create a new worship service (or church) designed to attract non-Christians, only to discover that it attracts the opposite—well-versed Christians from other churches in search of new experiences to consume. Whether our big ideas create new problems or simply fail to accomplish our objectives, we often have difficulty anticipating the consequences of our creations.

As we learn to endure what feels like a perpetual metamorphosis in culture, the tasks of ministry are growing increasingly difficult. The changing pressures and complexities of forming God's people take a toll, and the experience we gain from one moment feels irrelevant for the next. Even mundane tasks take on new dimensions we never considered, like creating stable small group structures in a profoundly mobile and commuter culture or teaching a Bible study when our attentions rarely span beyond 10 minutes. Commenting on this reality, theologian Eddie Gibbs once observed that if you have 20 years of ministry experience, it's really more like having one year of experience 20 times.<sup>1</sup>

These challenges can be overwhelming, yet we charge ahead, unaware of the problems we may be creating for ourselves. This book is an invitation to pause before we put the flagpole into the ground and to ask important questions about unintended consequences. In doing so, we will better anticipate possible outcomes and bring new freedom to the challenges and mystery of ministry in our age.

## THE NEXT GREAT AWAKENING

For decades our cultural landscape has grown increasingly unfamiliar to the church. We are living through tumultuous chaos and spiritual upheaval typically called postmodernity. The changes in philosophy and culture have altered the place of the church in society. Depending on one's perspective, this shift and its attendant impact on the church is dangerous, irrelevant, wonderful, or just plain terrifying.

In response to changes in our cultural climate, a burgeoning number of churches are experimenting with new forms of worship, new ideas about leadership and community, and a new understanding of the message of the gospel. These churches are commonly known as “emerging” churches. Responding to both the megachurch model of market-driven growth and to the mainline liberal model of church as a “place where the sacraments happen,”<sup>2</sup> emerging churches and their leaders have sought to become dynamic and organic people on a mission. While these churches tend to be rooted in the evangelical tradition, the participants are no longer bound by it. Moving beyond old debates of liberal versus conservative, they are loosening theology from the constraints of evangelical tradition and striving toward a more holistic understanding of what it means to live as Christians in the world. In the process, they are casting off old assumptions about media and technology and engaging culture on its own terms. In many ways this inclination to recast the place and purpose of the church marks the dawn of what I believe will be another great awakening.

## THE “WHY?” QUESTIONS

Fueled by changes in our culture, descriptions of and prescriptions for responding to the chaos are being churned out at blender speed. A host of books and articles have been written on *what* has changed in our culture and *how* the church ought to respond to these changes. However, few writers have made a serious effort to understand *why* these changes have occurred. Why are we seeing such drastic changes in our philosophy and cultural topography? Why is postmodernity gaining a foothold in the church? Why do many Christians increasingly see conversion to the Christian faith as a process rather than an event? Why are congregations showing a preference for nonlinear experiences and mystery over propositions and reason?

Answering these questions means going beyond simply describing the changes. When an earthquake hits—and for many the changes in our culture are indeed an ideological earthquake—we must try to understand what caused it and dig deeper to see if there is a way to predict the next tremor and perhaps ride it out with less upheaval.

The answers to these *why* questions are immensely complex. This volume is not intended as an exhaustive understanding of the answers. Instead, it identifies and traces one contour of the mystery. I propose that the answer to the question of why these changes have come about can be found in part by exploring the nature and effects of media and technology on culture.

## A CATALYST FOR CONVERSATION AND CREATIVITY

If you have attended conferences or done any reading on the topic of postmodernity and faith, you will find that those empathetic to the postmodern ethos are wary of offering universal solutions for highly contextual dilemmas. I am no exception to this phenomenon—thus I am reluctant to offer hard and fast solutions or answers. This book is more concerned with identifying broader issues that impact the ways we live as the body of Christ. At the same time, it is by no means a simple exercise in abstract thinking. I believe such an exploration would be in vain if it did not yield some pragmatic suggestions for navigating our current cultural context. With this in mind I will make periodic recommendations, some by asking what I believe to be the right questions, others by offering specific examples. All of these should be held with an open hand and assessed in the cultural and theological context of your congregation.

I also want to make it clear that I am not a wholly uncritical advocate of the ways in which the church is responding to cultural change. There are as many challenges for churches who forge ahead blindly as there are for churches who hold on to the old ways out of fear. My desire here is to exhort all of us to slow down and ask different questions as we move forward with discerning minds, authentic hearts, and faithful feet.

This is not simply a book about “how to use media.” Rather, it seeks to provide the tools to help us interpret our electronic culture and understand the implications for our faith and our corporate life together. Behind everything that follows is a conviction that within the *forms* of media and technology, regardless of their *content*, are extremely powerful forces that cause changes in our faith, theology, culture, and ultimately the church.

Whether we have been suspicious of or enthusiastic about the cultural changes and innovations in the church, we have developed a shortsighted, two-dimensional view of how electronic culture and media are shaping both the church and the message of the gospel. By listening in on the conversations of a long-forgotten prophet like Marshall McLuhan and revitalizing his wisdom for our times, we restore our ability to perceive both distance and depth amid the wonder and mayhem of our electronic, postmodern culture.