

# I

## The Church in the Twenty-first Century



### *An Overview*

*"We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power  
as no other nation. But we have forgotten God."*

— ABRAHAM LINCOLN

**W**e are living in post-Christian times. By this I do not mean that there aren't enough churches in America. There are. Our towns and cities are full of buildings designed for the worship of God, and in some cases still used for that purpose. Nor do I mean that there aren't very many Christians in America. We still have plenty of those, too. The vast majority of Americans believe in the existence of God, and many claim to be "born again." Nevertheless, we are living in post-Christian times, when Christianity no longer exercises a prevailing influence on the mind and heart of our culture.

There was a time when America *was* a Christian nation, at least in several important respects. There was a time when the leaders of this New World sought to establish a "city on a hill," a community for Christ and His kingdom. There was a time

when our fundamental notions of freedom and justice were firmly embedded in the bedrock of biblical truth. There was a time when the Bible held a central place in the curriculum of the public schools and when our leading universities cultivated the Christian mind. There was a time when average Americans knew their Bibles well enough that biblical teaching had a strong influence on what people thought and how they behaved. In short, there was a time when Christianity shaped the social, political, moral, religious, and intellectual landscape of these United States.

We should be careful not to glamorize the past. From the very beginning, our nation was corrupted by sin, especially through the institution of slavery. And the church has always been weakened by nominal Christianity. So although it is true that America in some ways was a Christian nation, in other ways it was also a non-Christian nation.<sup>1</sup> Yet in spite of our past failings, we cannot help but lament the passing of a time when God still mattered in American life.

### THE NEW BARBARISM

Now the barbarians are at the gates. Charles Colson has made the provocative statement that

today in the West, and particularly in America, the new barbarians are all around us. They are not hairy Goths and Vandals, swilling fermented brew and ravishing maidens; they are not Huns and Visigoths storming our borders or scaling our city walls. No, this time the invaders have come from within. We have bred them in our families and trained them in our classrooms. They inhabit our legislatures, our courts, our film studios, and our churches. Most of them are attractive and pleasant; their ideas are persuasive and subtle. Yet these men and

women threaten our most cherished institutions and our very character as a people.<sup>2</sup>

There are many ways to prove that American culture is under attack from this new barbarism. One is to review the titles of the books that thoughtful people are writing: *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, *The Culture of Disbelief*, *No Place for Truth*, *The Twilight of American Culture*, *The End of Democracy*. Needless to say, the authors of these books are not optimistic about the future of American culture. Another way to see what is happening is to watch television, with its voyeuristic presentation of sexuality and suffering. Still another way to show that our nation is in trouble is to study the cold, hard statistics: the breakdown of marriage and family, the rise in crime and violence, the decline in community involvement. Then there is the callous disregard for life at the margins—in the womb and at the nursing home.

Meanwhile, we are moving faster and faster, always buying more products and constantly demanding better entertainment. And as we live in this Late Great Planet Hollywood, we are too distracted to notice what is happening to us spiritually. “Don’t you understand, Richard?” asks a character in Douglas Coupland’s *Girlfriend in a Coma*. “There is nothing at the center of what we do . . . no center. It doesn’t exist. All of us—look at our lives: we have an acceptable level of affluence. We have entertainment. We have a relative freedom from fear. But there’s nothing else.”<sup>3</sup> The reason there is “nothing else” is that the new barbarism leaves no place for the soul.

The new barbarians do not look very threatening, at least from the outside. They do not wear animal skins or bang on the cultural gates with wooden clubs; instead, they talk on their cell phones and drink designer coffee. And, of course, they would not think of themselves as barbarians. But what is on their

minds and in their hearts? Whether they admit it or not, their minds reject absolute truth, and in their hearts they love themselves more than anyone else, especially God. To use more precise terms, these post-Christian times are characterized by relativism and narcissism. And this is barbaric to the extent that it signals the death of a culture based on objective truth and civic virtue.

*Relativism* is radical skepticism, the rejection of absolute truth. It is the view that reality itself depends upon one's perspective. In the tongue-in-cheek words of British poet Steve Turner, "We believe that each man must find the truth that is right for him. Reality will adapt accordingly."<sup>4</sup> No one knows anything with objective certainty; it all depends on your point of view. This is part of what people mean by "postmodernism," and it represents a global shift in the way people think about truth and meaning. You have your story, and I have my story, but there is no divinely ordained story that ties them all together. The only absolute is that there are no absolutes. Your worldview is simply your opinion.

One of the troubling results of relativism is the erosion of traditional ethical and intellectual standards for science, law, medicine, journalism, and the use of technology. And when it comes to theology, relativism means that no religion can claim to be superior to any other faith. Each religion is true in its own way. Therefore, if Christianity is true at all, it is only relatively true. Exclusive claims like "the Bible is God's authoritative Word" or "Jesus Christ is the only Savior" must be rejected out of hand. In fact, the people who make such claims are probably dangerous.

*Narcissism* is radical individualism, or infatuation with the self. In ancient Greek mythology, Narcissus was the beautiful youth who fell in love with his reflection. As he sat beside the pool, gazing longingly at his own image, he wasted away and

died, and was transformed into a flower. There has always been a narcissistic tendency in American culture, but we are now entering an era of radical selfishness and unbridled individualism. What is new is that being self-centered is now considered a virtue. According to Robert Schuller, “Self-love is, or should be, the basic will in human life.”<sup>5</sup>

When people think this way (as many people do), they feel justified in doing whatever seems to be in their self-interest, without showing much compassion or giving much consideration to their neighbors, co-workers, employees, spouses, or children. We live in a culture of takers, not givers. In his landmark study *The Culture of Narcissism*, sociologist Christopher Lasch discovered that ordinary Americans now display many of the same character traits that are usually associated with pathological personality disorders. Narcissism has become normal.<sup>6</sup> One sign of our self-absorption is that it is becoming increasingly difficult for our nation to do anything that requires widespread cooperation or personal sacrifice, such as combat poverty, improve education, reform our health system, or provide for the common defense.

Taken together, the relativistic mind and the narcissistic heart explain a good deal about what is wrong with America today. People who do not know what is true (or who wonder if anything is true at all) are unable to do what is right and just and good. Intellectual skepticism quickly leads to moral relativism. And because people who live for themselves are unable to establish loving communities, many Americans end up feeling alienated and abandoned. In the rising generation there is a deep pessimism about the possibility of love and romance, to say nothing of marriage and family.

As we reflect on America’s cultural situation in the twenty-first century, we appear to be living in the times that the apostle Paul described for Timothy when he said: “Mark this: There

will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. . . . For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine" (2 Tim. 3:1, 2a, 4b; 4:3a). What Paul said serves as an apt description of our own narcissistic and relativistic times, when people serve themselves and are skeptical of the possibility of truth.

Historians now generally regard the twentieth century as the American Century. It is too early to tell what they will call the next hundred years, but in America it may well be the first post-Christian century. Of course, it is always possible that a new wave of reformation and revival will sweep across our land. Then again, our country may come to a sudden and catastrophic end, precipitated by an energy crisis, a financial meltdown, or an enemy attack. But what seems most likely is that what is perhaps the most powerful nation in the history of the world will undergo a long, slow, demoralizing decline before finally collapsing under the weight of its own decadence.

### NOW HOW SHALL WE LIVE?

It is understandable for Christians to be dismayed by what is happening in America and to be pessimistic about its prospects for the future. However, as Christians it is not our responsibility to save our culture, if indeed it ought to be saved. So this is not a book about trying to recover the past. But we do need to discern what is happening in America so that we know what it means to live for Christ in our times. As our civilization continues to decline, the church will have unprecedented opportunities to show the world what a difference it makes to be a Christian. The question is, How should a Christian live in post-Christian times? What does it mean to be a city on a hill today?

The temptation is to think that we need to find a new way

of “doing church.” This is exactly what happened in the last decades of the twentieth century. Many evangelicals were scrambling around trying to find something that would work. They realized that America was in trouble and that the traditional denominations were in decline, so they tried to make Christianity more relevant. They got involved in politics, lobbying against abortion and trying to get prayer back into the public schools. They entered business by marketing Christianity to the masses, turning Christ into a commodity. They even tried their hand at entertainment, seeking to make their services appeal to a secular audience.

Some church leaders think a pragmatic approach is necessary. Peter Wagner, the guru of the church growth movement, writes,

The greatest change in the way of doing church since the Protestant reformation is taking place before our very eyes. . . . The radical change in the sixteenth century was largely theological. The current reformation is not so much a reformation of faith (the essential theological principles of the Reformation are intact), but a reformation of practice. A major difference was that the sixteenth century reformation came in reaction to a corrupt and apostate church. This current reformation is not so much against corruption and apostasy as it is against irrelevance.<sup>7</sup>

If irrelevance is the enemy, then churches constantly have to figure out how to stay relevant. Wagner offers a number of suggestions for doing this, but perhaps the most significant is reducing theology to the shortest possible list of essential doctrines. Theological instruction is said to be irrelevant, especially if it is thorough and precise. This is in sharp contrast to the original Reformation, which was all about theology. The Protestant mottoes were *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *solus Christus*, and *soli Deo gloria*: Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in

Christ alone, so that God alone gets all the glory. This is what the reformers taught because they believed in *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone—which is where all these great doctrines are found. What, then, is the motto of the so-called new reformation? At times it seems as if some churches are opting for *fiat quidvis efficiens*: “Do whatever works.”

When churches make relevance their primary goal, they are vulnerable to the twin perils of postmodernism: relativism and narcissism. They succumb to relativism because they are willing to sacrifice biblical principles for popular success. And they are guilty of narcissism because they crave the acceptance of secular society, as if “the interests and ambitions of the unconverted can somehow be harnessed to win their approval for Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

I do not think for a moment that the church should aspire to become *irrelevant*. There is always a need for Christians to speak the gospel into their own context. Rather, my concern is with the ever-present danger of *over-contextualizing*. Consider what happens to a church that is always trying to appeal to an increasingly post-Christian culture. Almost inevitably, the church itself becomes post-Christian. This is what happened to the liberal church during the twentieth century, and it is what is happening to the evangelical church right now. As James Montgomery Boice has argued, evangelicals are accepting the world’s wisdom, embracing the world’s theology, adopting the world’s agenda, and employing the world’s methods.<sup>9</sup> In theology a revision of evangelical doctrine is now underway that seeks to bring Christianity more in line with postmodern thought.<sup>10</sup> The obvious difficulty is that in a post-Christian culture, a church that tries too hard to be “relevant” may in the process lose its very identity as the church. Rather than confronting the world, the church gets co-opted by it. It no longer stands a city on a hill, but sinks to the level of the surrounding culture.

So what should we do? The leaders of the so-called new ref-



ormation begin with the future and then look to the present. This is in contrast with traditional church leaders, who begin with the present and then look to the past. So where should we look? If we only look to the future, we run the risk of abandoning our spiritual heritage. However, if we look to the past, then we may live in the past, and thereby fail to serve God effectively in our own times. What we should do instead is live in the present, learn from the past, and anticipate the future, while always looking to the Bible.

### THE FIRST-CENTURY CHURCH

When we look to the Bible we see God's plan for the church at all times and in all places. So to understand how to live for Christ in the twenty-first century, we need to go back to the first century. This is not traditionalism; it is not irrelevance; it is not living in the past. It is timeless Christianity, which is founded on Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb. 13:8).

The first church was founded on the gospel. After Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, raised from the dead, and ascended back to heaven, His followers remained in Jerusalem. God poured out His Holy Spirit and they began to preach. Their message was salvation in Jesus Christ. They spoke of His atoning death, how Christ died on the cross for sinners. They emphasized the reality of Christ's resurrection and exaltation, coming to this climax: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

People responded the way sinners ought to respond when they learn about the grace that God offers in Jesus Christ. Their hearts melted and they asked what they should do. The apostle Peter told them to turn away from their sins and put their faith in Christ. He said, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you,

in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). He pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation” (Acts 2:40).

That last statement is significant because it shows that the first Christians lived in the same times that we live in. Not exactly the same, of course, because they were pre-Christian rather than post-Christian. But like us, they were living in a corrupt culture, and thus they can show us what it means to live for Christ in declining times. Here is what they did:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47)

The first Christians were saved by turning to Jesus in faith and repentance. Once they were saved, they formed a teaching, worshiping, and caring community that, by the grace of God, also became a growing community.

### *A Teaching Church*

It is significant that teaching is mentioned first, because everything else depends on the plain teaching of God’s Word. It is the Word that establishes the church by bringing people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. It is the Word that teaches us how to worship, defines the sacraments, and sets the agenda for

prayer. It is the Word that instructs us to love one another and teaches us how to care. It all flows from God's Word, which means that a teaching church will enjoy every blessing of God's Spirit.

The first Christians *devoted* themselves to the teaching of the apostles: "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts" (Acts 2:46a). One of their primary reasons for meeting was to learn the apostolic doctrine, which is what is meant by the word "teaching." The first-century church was hungry for biblical and theological instruction.

In the twenty-first century we cannot go to the temple and hear the apostles in person. There is a way to devote ourselves to their teaching, however, and that is by studying the Bible. As Peter's preaching demonstrates, the apostles based their gospel presentation on the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus one way to follow their example is by studying, teaching, and applying the Old Testament. What the apostles preached was the good news about Jesus Christ, so of course it is also necessary to know the New Testament Gospels. Then there is the apostolic doctrine itself, which is contained in Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation. The teaching of the apostles thus spans the Scriptures, which means that anyone devoted to their teaching studies the whole Bible.

The only church that will survive in post-Christian times is a church with a passion for God's Word. This means reading the Bible, both privately and in services of public worship. It means preaching the Bible by way of systematic exposition. It means studying the Bible, chapter by chapter and verse by verse. It means teaching the Bible, so that every group and every ministry in the church is guided and directed by the voice of God's Spirit speaking in Scripture. It is not enough to have a high doctrine of Scripture; the church must also make regular use of Scripture. A

church for post-Christian times is a teaching church—a church that longs to know God’s mind as revealed in God’s Word.

### *A Worshiping Church*

A church for post-Christian times is also a worshiping church. This is what the first Christians meant by “the fellowship”: “They devoted themselves . . . to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*, which means “sharing” or “participation.” Here it seems to refer specifically to their participation in public worship, including prayer and the sacraments.

The early church constantly gathered for worship. Every day the first Christians went at set times to the temple courts. There, in addition to hearing the apostles preach, they sang psalms and said their prayers in Jesus’ name. They also worshiped in smaller groups from house to house: “They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God” (Acts 2:46–47a). Privately as well as publicly, they enjoyed fellowship in its truest and richest sense, joining their minds and their hearts to give glory to God.

The application is obvious. A Christian church for post-Christian times must exalt God in its worship. As much as anything else, what defines a church is its public assembly in the presence of God. A local church is a *congregation*—a group of believers who gather around God’s throne to offer Him their praise and thanksgiving. The reason worship is at the center of church life is that in worship, God is placed at the center of our attention. This is true not only of corporate worship, but also of private and family worship.

“The fellowship,” as the apostles called it, included prayer as well as “the breaking of bread.” The first Christians were always getting together to pray, especially in times of uncertainty or

persecution (e.g., Acts 1:14; 4:24; 12:12). Prayer was part of their daily routine, not only privately, but also in public worship at the temple. They prayed because they understood that they could accomplish nothing without the work of God's Spirit.

The "breaking of bread" is of course *the* breaking of bread: the Lord's Supper. This sacrament is a great mystery containing many deep truths of the gospel. It is much more than a remembrance of Christ's atoning death; by the presence of His Holy Spirit it is also a participation in His resurrection life. But what is emphasized in Acts 2 is that the Lord's Supper is a communal meal. By eating the bread and drinking the cup, Christians are separated from the world and set apart as the community of God's people. In this connection it is worth noticing that verse 47 refers to the "number" of believers. This hints at something that can be demonstrated elsewhere in the New Testament, namely, that the first-century church practiced formal membership and discipline. This was essential if Christians were to maintain their distinct identity as the people of God.

All of these things remain necessary for the church in the twenty-first century. If we belong to Christ, then we must belong to His church. We must devote ourselves to public and private worship. We must celebrate the sacraments, reaffirming not only our commitment to Christ, but also our participation in His body, the church. And we must remain committed to prayer, asking God to do in us, for us, and through us what we cannot do for ourselves.

### *A Caring Church*

Earlier I mentioned *koinonia*, which means sharing or fellowship. Besides corporate worship, there is another kind of sharing that Christians enjoy: the sharing of burdens. Like the

first-century church, a church for post-Christian times is a sharing, caring church.

There are really only three attitudes that a person can take toward material possessions. The thief says, "What's yours is mine; I'll take it." The selfish person says, "What's mine is mine; I'll keep it." But the caring person says, "What's mine is really God's, and so I'll share it."<sup>11</sup> And that is exactly what Christians did in the first century. They made a radical commitment to Christian community, which included a willingness to give time and money to meet one another's needs: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (Acts 2:44–45). We read further in chapter 4, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. . . . There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need" (Acts 4:32, 34–35).

This is a remarkable testimony to God's grace in the church. The first Christians had one heart and one mind. They had a deep sense of spiritual unity that was based on their common faith in Jesus Christ. This made them willing to sell their property and share their possessions to meet the needs of the poor.

This is all the more remarkable when we remember how diverse Jerusalem was in those days. Among the first people to hear and receive the gospel were "Jews from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). There were both women and men, for in his sermon Peter said the gathering fulfilled the prophecy, "Your sons and daughters will prophesy" (Acts 2:17). The gospel was for children as well as adults, for Peter also said, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off" (Acts 2:39). When Peter said "far off," this included the Gentiles. So

the first-century church was a multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-generational community that was united by its faith in Jesus Christ, and thus committed to care for anyone in need.

### *A Growing Church*

Notice the result: Outsiders were impressed by this caring community and wanted to join. The Scripture says that the first Christians enjoyed “the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). By the grace of God, a teaching, worshiping, and caring church also becomes a growing church.

The first-century church was unique in this respect, for it grew more rapidly than perhaps any other church in history. In order to confirm the truth of His Word, God empowered the apostles to perform miracles (Acts 2:43) and greatly blessed their preaching. Peter’s first sermon led to the conversion of more than three thousand people! And that was only the beginning, for “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47b). Needless to say, these are not events that every local church can reproduce. Yet the principle here is valid at all times and in all places: A church that follows the biblical pattern in preaching, worship, and fellowship will be fruitful in outreach and evangelism.

The Bible says relatively little about the evangelistic efforts of average Christians during the age of the apostles. It is not hard to guess what they did, however. For them evangelism was not so much a special event or a practiced method as it was an integral part of their overall life as a church. They invited their friends and family members to hear the apostles preach. They shared with neighbors in need. As they had opportunity, they testified to their own personal faith in Jesus Christ. They engaged their community mind to mind, heart to heart, and life to

life. Their God-centered way of living inevitably had a way of pointing people to Christ. People outside the church looked up on the hill and saw God's city. And as they experienced the attractive power of authentic Christian community, many of them accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

The evangelical church has begun to decline, and it is hard to imagine how it can grow in the twenty-first century. But there is a biblical method for church growth. It is to become a teaching, worshiping, caring church. Such a church has God's approval, and with His blessing, it will grow.

### WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS

The charter members of the first church in Jerusalem were a remarkable group of men and women. By the power of God's Spirit they turned the world upside down, starting the most remarkable institution in human history. Yet anyone who has ever been to a good church cannot help but notice that what they did was thoroughly ordinary. There was Bible reading and preaching. There was corporate worship, including prayer and the sacraments. There was fellowship and evangelism. They simply did the things that Christians since then have always done—which is exactly the point! Wherever Christians have joined together to establish teaching, worshiping, and caring communities, they have been able to meet the unique challenges they faced from the surrounding culture.

We see this throughout church history. During the Roman Empire when Caesar was throwing Christians to the lions, during the Middle Ages when spiritual darkness descended on Europe, during the twentieth century when Communism tried to stamp out any mention of God—at all times and in all places—Christians have “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”



(Acts 2:42). Today a Christian can go anywhere in the world and meet brothers and sisters who are doing the same thing. Whether they meet in public or in secret, whether they gather in great cathedrals or small house churches, they are teaching, worshiping, caring . . . and growing. What God has given us in the church will last as long as life on this earth. For Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18).

Here in America, as we enter our first post-Christian century, some churches will continue to do the simple things that churches have always done. And as they do so, they will discover that what God has given in the church is exactly what a post-Christian culture needs.

The prevailing mind-set is relativism, the denial of universal truth. The way to respond is by remaining devoted to the apostolic teaching of Scripture. People are looking for some other message, delivered by some other means. However, what God has appointed for the salvation of sinners and for their subsequent growth in grace is the preaching of the gospel, together with the teaching of biblical doctrine. This is God's permanent plan for the church. It also happens to be the perfect antihistamine for a culture that is allergic to truth.

The heart of post-Christian culture is narcissistic, but the Bible has a remedy for self-infatuation: God-glorifying, Christ-centered, Spirit-filled worship. In worship we turn away from ourselves to adore the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Once our hearts have turned to God in prayer and praise, we are then able to reach out to others in love and concern. This kind of Christian caring is the answer to many, if not most, contemporary problems. It is the answer to the breakup of the family, for in a caring church people learn how to keep commitments that put others first. It is the answer to racism, for a caring church is united by Christ across the things that divide. It is the

answer to poverty, for in a caring church all needs are met, including the deepest needs of the soul. Whether people realize it or not, what our crumbling culture needs most is authentic Christian community.

To summarize, what God wants the church to be and to do turns out to be exactly what the world needs. Admittedly, the world may not want to hear it, since in post-Christian times the church becomes a kind of countercultural community. To a relativistic culture, skeptical of meaning, the church preaches the truth of God's eternal Word. To a narcissistic culture, alienated by sin, the church issues an invitation to worship and fellowship. And this is precisely what a post-Christian culture needs: a church that stands out as truly Christian.

### A CHURCH FOR CHRIST

Why does it work out this way? Why is it that what the church is called to do turns out to be what the world needs most? The answer is that everything the church does centers on Jesus Christ, and this is what the world always needs: to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Each of the church's essential, Bible-based activities finds its meaning in His person and work.

A church for post-Christian times is a teaching church, a church devoted to the apostolic message. And what did the apostles preach? They preached Jesus Christ—crucified, buried, and risen. They preached Jesus Christ as Savior from sin, Lord of all creation, and the answer to every need. The apostle Paul said, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:22–24).

A church for post-Christian times is a worshiping church.

But on what basis can we approach God—in all His holiness—to give Him our praise? Only on the basis of the perfect righteousness and atoning death of Jesus Christ. And when we come to worship God, we come offering praise to Christ as our Savior and Lord. We offer prayer and perform baptism in His name. And in the Lord's Supper we remember His sufferings and death, as we wait for His triumphant return. True Christian worship is always given to the glory of God in the name of Jesus Christ.

A church for post-Christian times is a caring church, and what enables us to care and to share is the love of Jesus Christ. Whenever we serve, help, pray for, encourage, and even rebuke one another, we are demonstrating His love. To summarize, when the church does what it is supposed to do, everything it does exalts the name of Jesus Christ. The result is a growing church, a church that God will use to bring people to know Him in a saving way.

These basic biblical priorities can be summarized in a single purpose statement: For the honor of Jesus Christ, a twenty-first century church needs to develop and maintain a strong teaching pulpit, an effective network of fellowship groups aimed at meeting individual needs, a program of Christian education to promote the steady growth of God's family to spiritual maturity, and, in cooperation with other Christians, an evangelistic outreach to the local community and to the world beyond.

This purpose statement, which is adapted from the one used by Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church, can be further specified in seven objectives:

- to uphold a tradition of strong expository preaching by gifted men of God
- to worship God in a worthy manner through thoughtful words, devoted prayers, and excellent music

- to integrate every member of the congregation into Bible studies and other groups where individual needs can be met and each can minister to others
- to supply loving pastoral care for each member of the church family
- to provide an effective Christian education program to inform, train, and disciple all members of the congregation
- to advance the missionary work of the church in the local community and throughout the world
- to serve the church and its community through ministries of mercy

These seven objectives form the basis for the rest of this book. I believe that they are biblical mandates for the Christian church at every time, in every place. If so, then they can show us what it means to live for Christ in these post-Christian times, standing like a city on a hill.