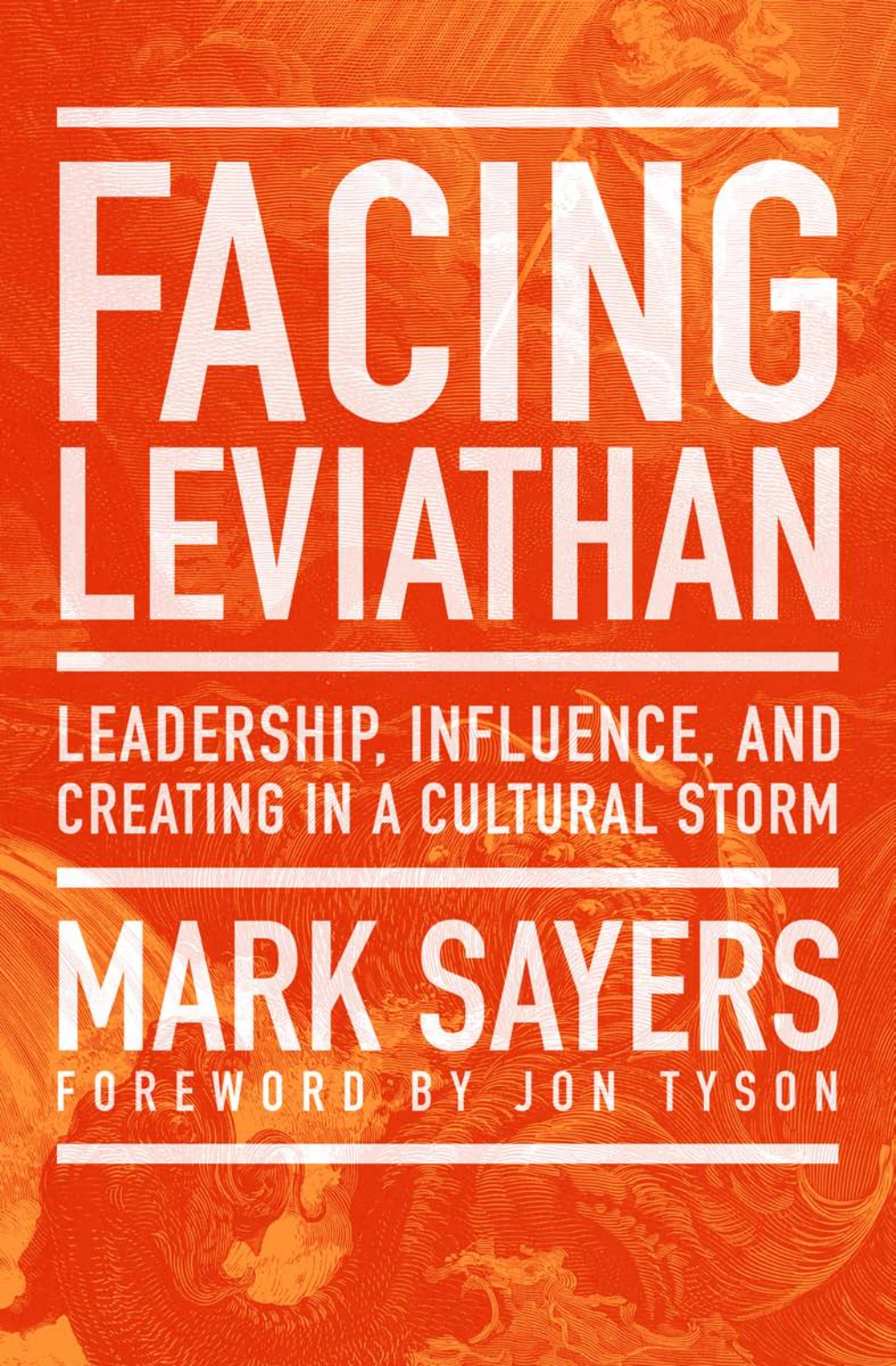
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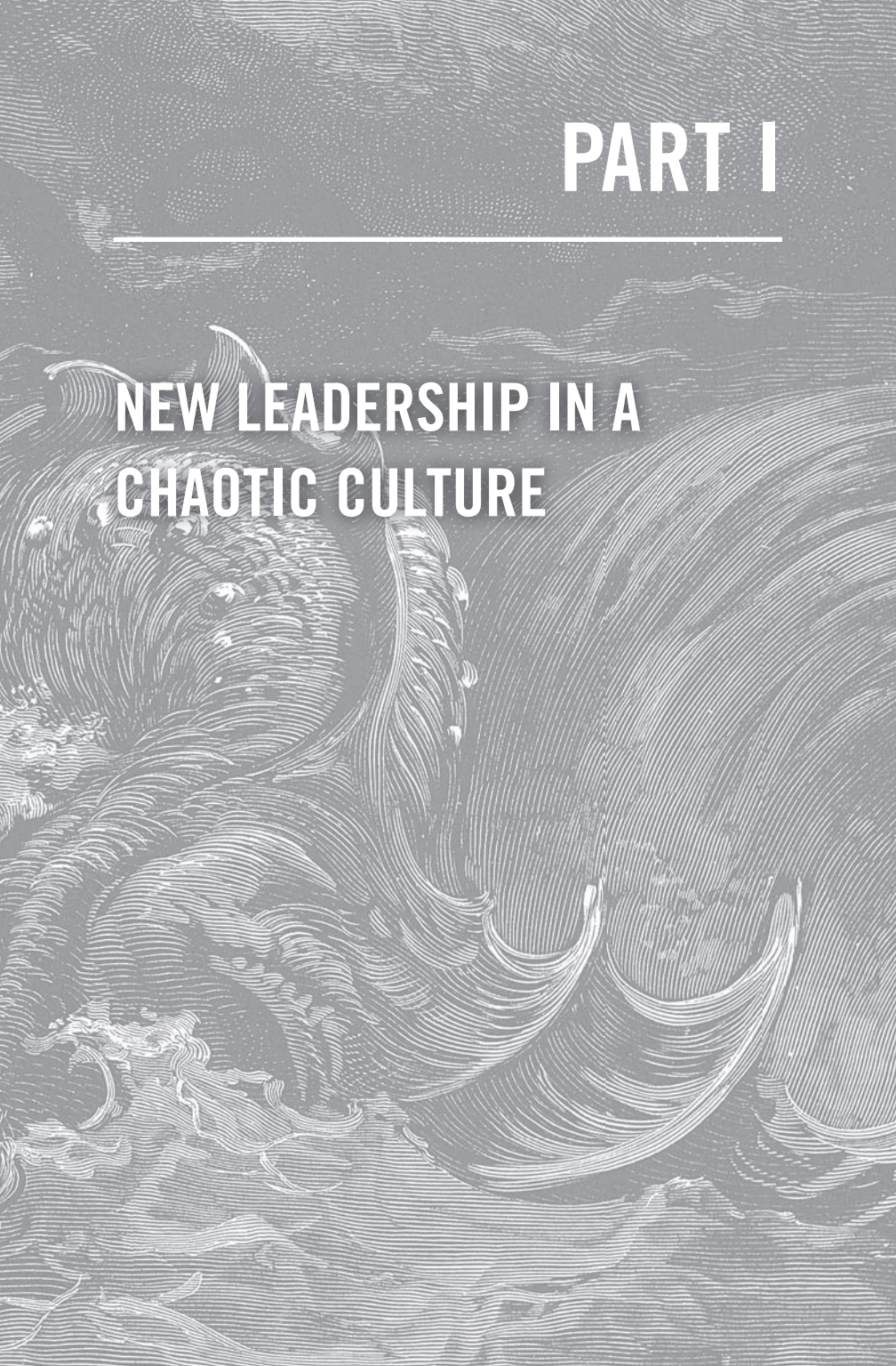
LEADERSHIP, INFLUENCE, AND
CREATING IN A CULTURAL STORM
MARK SAYERS
FOREWORD BY JON TYSON



# PART I

## NEW LEADERSHIP IN A CHAOTIC CULTURE

*Paris was vaguely aware that it had a terrible cellar under it . . . which teemed with . . . gargantuan sea monsters.*

—**Victor Hugo,** *Les Miserables*

*Myth is unmasked by the Word of God.*

—**Hans Urs von Balthasar,** *The Scandal of the Incarnation*

## THE CREATIVE LEADER

He sat silently as he looked out upon the French countryside, now bathed in darkness. It was almost one thirty in the morning. No one spoke. In the morning he would finally see Paris.

It was the culmination of a dream. The mecca for every artist. Somehow after all of this he still felt like an artist, despite the political responsibility now resting on his shoulders. He was no longer the outsider looking in, he was at the top. Yet, he knew that many of them still looked upon him with contempt in their eyes. Their looks, their intonations, their expressions made him aware that he did not fit. He knew they resented his leadership. He exposed their prejudices, brought to the surface everything that they despised. He was a foreigner, not born into privilege like them. He did not speak with their clipped, refined accent. They played by the book, followed tradition, and valued cool efficiency.

He stayed up late, hated paperwork, and was bad with details. He was emotive and unconventional. They went home to their neat houses in the suburbs with their perfect families. He, in contrast, lived a bohemian bachelor's life. While they were falling asleep next to their respectable wives in their respectable homes, he was up half the night, engrossed in music, watching films, and talking art.

That is why he kept them at a distance, surrounding himself with

friends and workmates who were different. He preferred spending time with artists and visionaries rather than bureaucrats. He was more at home with animals, out in nature, with ordinary people, away from their backbiting. He was not interested in maintaining the status quo. Instead he dreamed of creating a new future for others. He understood that through harnessing the potential that new media brought, he could change things, allow people to live rich, communal, authentic lives connected to the land.

Still no one spoke. In the distance there was the dull music of a thunderstorm.

They arrived in Paris at five in the morning on an early flight. They had one day to see all that they could. He was flanked by two friends, one an architect and one a sculptor. They flew around Paris in a car, drinking in the feast of art and architecture. They traveled down the Champs-Élysées, on to the Trocadéro, and then to the Eiffel Tower. He became elated at the beauty of the opera house. Although he had never seen Garnier's masterpiece, he knew every square inch of the building by heart. He was in a creative's heaven. An artistic tour of Paris could not miss the bohemian neighborhood of Montmartre; here the creative leader and his friends visited the Basilique du Sacré Cœur. Atop the church high above Paris was a statue of St. Michael dressed as a knight, battling the biblical monster Leviathan—a metaphor for the battles that would come to define the creative leader's life, and the entire trajectory of Western culture.

Later that night when he was alone with his friend the architect, he said, "Wasn't Paris beautiful? . . . In the past I often considered whether we would not have to destroy Paris."[1] Adolf Hitler then went to bed.

## HOW LEADERSHIP AND INFLUENCE CHANGED

This book is about leadership, influence, and creativity. When we talk about leadership in the West, Hitler's influence haunts us, palpably present though unmentioned. He is the model of leadership that we wish to avoid: a model of leadership rooted in power, abuse, violence, and coercion. The image of Hitler, standing on the podium in full military attire, spitting out venomous rhetoric, urging people on with a show of authoritarian force, changed at a fundamental level the way that we think and feel about the way leaders exert their influence. Public speaking was irrevocably altered. No longer would leaders simply tell people what to do. Any public figure making exclusive claims seemed to now be treading on dangerous ground. No longer would people look to those in authority as messianic figures with the ability to rescue society from the storms that face us. It was almost as if the poison that Hitler released into the world had infected our idea of leadership itself. The idea was seemingly tainted. It is therefore no surprise that we have turned to what appear to be new models of leadership.

## WHY WE WANT TO BE ACTIVISTS, CREATIVES, AND INFLUENCERS, BUT NOT LEADERS

Today many of us want to influence, but not many of us wish to lead. We describe ourselves as activists, consultants, creatives, and entrepreneurs. We shy away from calling ourselves leaders, or even worse: managers. In the past, certain jobs carried a sense of prestige that flowed from their authority and responsibility; doctors, judges, clergy, bankers, and professors held tremendous weight in society. Their social influence was rooted in their perceived trustworthiness, their respectability. Virtually no one today desires respectability above

all else. Such a term seems daunting. Ask yourself if you would rather that people described you as respectable or as cool, fun, and creative. Today, most people prefer hipness to prestige.

When we are given leadership positions, we try to dilute the hierarchical overtones of our roles with ironic job titles. The business magazine *Fast Company* has made popular such a practice by researching innovative companies and reporting actual leadership titles such as Head Monster, Master of Disaster, Crayon Evangelist, or Idea Ambassador. Pastors have not been immune to this trend. When asked about their roles, many downplay their jobs with all kinds of rhetorical wriggling. When we do have to lead, we attach a caveat to any hint of traditional leadership, which downplays our authority. We have "rockstar CEOs," "hipster pastors."

While we may have an aversion to leadership and organization, we still wish to influence, to effect change, and to create meaning. Technological advances like social networking have given us the impression that we can now have influence minus responsibility, leadership, and organization. Ori Brafman's book *The Starfish and the Spider* attempts to show how companies can be leaderless. Books such as Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody*, Seth Godin's *Tribes*, and Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams's *Wikinomics* describe a world in which traditional modes of leadership and organization are superfluous, or at least are outmaneuvered by online mass movements. Shirky explains it as, "Never have so many people been so free to say and do so many things with so many other people."[2]

## FROM LEADER TO INSPIRER

Journalist David Brooks, writing about this reimagined era of influence, notes that in this new environment, the leader "is no longer a chess grand master, an imposing, aloof figure moving pieces around the board. Now he or she is likely to be portrayed, and to portray

himself or herself, as an inspirer, a motivator." Brooks argues contemporary influencers "want to show they are playful free spirits. . . . They are creators. They . . . experiment and dream."[3] The desire to avoid being seen as "normal" or "mainstream" is paramount. Our desire to be different flows down from leaders into their organizations, shaping corporate culture and especially reshaping how we arrange our buildings and workspaces into open planned offices that seemingly eschew the hierarchical implications of closed offices. A kind of bogeyman model of leadership operates in most people's minds, a set of Hitlerian cultural values to avoid.

## OLD ("BAD") LEADERSHIP VS. NEW ("GOOD") LEADERSHIP

Today, if we do have to lead, there is an unspoken yet powerful set of attributes that we must conform to. To put it simply, there are a set of leadership attributes that are passé that we will call *the mechanical* and a grouping that are in fashion that we will name *the organic*. I choose the terms because they represent the widespread yet rarely articulated mood in our culture in which we prefer the natural, the warm, and the authentic rather than the cold, calculating, and the mathematical. So we watch commercials by technology giants filled with human faces, images of nature, and earthy folk music. Corporate coffee chains sell their coffee in a way that makes you feel like you just handpicked the beans yourself with the Ethiopian coffee farmer. The Christian philosopher Roman Guardini noted that this move reflected the desire in Western culture to find a new ethical way from the traditional Christian conception of biblical revelation to the natural, in which anything natural was automatically good.[4]

As we will discover, despite Guardini's warnings, so much of the contemporary Christian church has bought into this dualistic view of life and leadership.

| MECHANICAL | ORGANIC |
|---|---|
| Power | Creativity |
| Mainstream | Radical |
| Dogmatic | Flexible |
| Task-Driven | Relational |
| Duty | Love |
| Dictatorial | Collaborative |
| Formal | Casual |
| Traditional | Revolutionary |
| Materialist | Spiritual |
| Directives | Conversation |
| Stability | Fluidity |
| Linear | Holistic |
| Conventional | Imaginative |
| Work | Play |
| Prestige | Cool |
| Organization | Communal |
| Success | Authenticity |

Our culture has come so far toward the values of the new organic leadership listed on the right that they are unquestionably taken as correct. Countless books are written urging CEOs, leaders, and pastors to make the move personally and organizationally from the mechanical column to the organic column. Leaders must be more creative, more innovative, more relational, more spontaneous, more instinctive, more authentic. Organizations must become networked, more flexible, more fun, more fluid. The fear is that if we do not make this shift, leaders and organizations will fade into an obscure death. Thus, to make these changes leaders must embrace their hordes of consultants and experts to secure this much-needed transition.

## WHAT IF THE NEW IS NOT NEW?

These organic values represent the ideology of our day. They tell us something profound—not so much about how the world works but rather about how we *want* the world to work.

**WE WANT TO MOVE AWAY FROM THE MORE RIGID MECHANICAL STYLE OF LEADERSHIP BECAUSE IT REPRESENTS THE RECENT PAST—MODERNITY—A STAGE WE HAVE "EVOLVED BEYOND."**

We are told repeatedly that such values will not work in our time because they were shaped by a particular moment in history, the modern era. Yet the question that very few ask is: How have the highly prized organic values been shaped by *our* moment in history? What do they tell us about our unacknowledged prejudices and flaws? Is there a downside to our new mode of influencing, our trendy, "innovative" style of leading? As we will discover in this book, history tells us that there is.

## HOW WE GOT IT WRONG

My entire life in ministry has been shaped by attempting to live out the values embodied in the right-hand, organic column. I can still

clearly remember the moment when it all fell into place for me. It was the early to mid-nineties and I was young and fresh into ministry. I was attending a conference on mission in my hometown of Melbourne, Australia. The overwhelming theme that came through at the conference was that we were in "postmodern times"; out with the old modern era, in with the new postmodern era. Being the son of an architect, I had heard my dad use the word *postmodern* to describe buildings, but I had no idea what the term meant. The various speakers at the conference used the word to describe drastic shifts in our current culture. Gone were the modern period's values of reason, objective truth, homogeneity, and progress (the mechanical column), and rapidly replacing it was the postmodern period; one characterized by emotion, subjective truth, pluralism, and a suspicion of progress, structure, order, and control.

What was most shocking of all was the revelation that the church, particularly the contemporary evangelical church, had it wrong. The speakers shared their belief that the contemporary church was deeply shaped by the values of modernity—its systems, structures, and orientation. An orientation more informed by mechanical efficiency, models taken from the business world rather than from the Bible, and cultural cues shaped by marketing and mass culture. With the coming of the postmodern era, the contemporary evangelical church would find itself horribly irrelevant, conference speakers assured us. The solution was to first examine and deconstruct the ways in which contemporary Christianity had been co-opted by modernity. Second, to reach the new "postmodern generation" we must extricate ourselves out of the mechanical vices of the modern era and "incarnate" into postmodern culture; we must become postmodern Christians, postmodern churches, and postmodern leaders.

My head spun, not in shock but in delight. For someone who loved Jesus but felt culturally alien in the contemporary church, this

was great news. For someone who at high school preferred alternative and indie music to mainstream music, who did well at art, drama, and literature but poorly at math, science, and well . . . generally that whole being organized thing, this was a ticket to freedom. For someone whose friends were miles from mainstream Christian culture, the rapidly oncoming influence of postmodernism was very welcomed. This was some kind of heavenly news. History was seemingly tilting in my favor. Freed from the mechanical vice, I could finally breathe.

This conference was just the tip of the iceberg. The trickle of Christian books announcing the coming of the postmodern epoch turned into a flood. I devoured most of them. At the time I was at a traditional church, so to reach this mysterious emerging group I decided to plant another congregation—a postmodern one. We ditched anything that seemed to reek of "contemporary church." Out went singing. In its place: experiential, multisensory worship. The traditional sermon went too, replaced by dialogue and clips from movies. We even changed the physical space in which we met, for a while creating an indoor faux-forest in which we sat around, elucidating upon the mysteries of Scripture, while ambient techno chirped along in the background. This was postmodernism in action. It was fluid, it was organic, and it was life-giving.

Soon what I was doing was discovered by older heads, who were proclaiming a new missionary approach to our postmodern culture. I became a supposed example of a genuine postmodern doing a new kind of ministry—a vision of the future. Still unformed and largely untested as a leader, yet with a whiff of the new circulating around me, I began to receive speaking engagements and invitations to speak into the future of churches and organizations. I was sought out to interpret the landscape of this bold, new, postmodern terrain.

Through the postmodern movement, an alternate Christian universe was growing up alongside mainstream church culture. Where

the latter was steeped in theological structures and dogma, the former was defined culturally. It took very seriously the culture we inhabit and to which we are called to witness—the postmoderns. For the church to have any relevance in this new era, it was vital that it relinquished older patterns and structures and embraced the postmodern. Thus the word *postmodernism* seemed to take on a power of its own in the Christian world, operating something like the Jedi mind trick, used to justify any kind of reformist agenda.

The organic values stem from this postmodern era. Dogma gave way to flexible exploration, hierarchy was replaced by a network of laterally defined relationships, authority and authoritative claims were viewed with suspicion. Eventually, we believed that mainstream culture would disappear altogether, replaced by the way more appealing, easier-going organic principles.

Still green and in my early twenties, I traveled to the United States to speak about this brave new postmodern world to an American evangelical organization. Soon America would join this conversation, where it would expand and amplify, spawning whole movements and vast libraries of books. For the next fifteen or so years, I lived out the conviction that the postmodern world had changed everything. Through my leadership I would attempt to embody the organic values in a variety of missional movements and innovative plants. Yet, something was amiss. The organic values were not delivering the idealized world that they had seemingly promised.

I had delivered speeches. I had started ministries. I had embodied the fluid, the creative. I could criticize the status quo like a champion. I was a poster boy for a new kind of young, emerging leader. Except that after a decade of launching, birthing, and pioneering, there was little left standing.

## SWAMPED BY CHAOS

I was confronted by the surprising fruitlessness I felt after I took a position as the senior leader of a missional church renowned for its creativity and innovation. I had been with the church for some time, yet now leading the church I began to wonder if we would survive. We embodied all the highly esteemed organic values, yet chaos seemed to be overtaking us. Despite the alarm bells I ignored this reality, insisting that the organic values would eventually become a catalyst for growth and change within the church.

One day not long after the birth of my first child, my wife, Trudi, turned to me and asked if our church was going to be around when our daughter was fourteen. I was silenced by this question as I was forced to confront the answer: a resounding no. Although strong on the fluid, the relational, and the creative, we did not have the organizational strength or resilience to continue. We were recognized for our revolutionary spirit, our imagination, hipness, and creativity, but we didn't have the structures and the leadership to sustain, cultivate, and grow it over the long haul.

By this stage the postmodern movement had been progressing for over a decade. However, the average community centered upon its philosophy only lasted an average of three years. Our church was one of the few still remaining and I could not stand the thought of pouring so much pastoral and ministry energy into it only to have it slowly fade away. In essence we knew what we did not want to be—a modern, mainstream contemporary church—but conversely, we also did not know what we wanted to be. This was all new terrain and it was starting to show serious cracks. Just as disturbingly, when I looked around this new Christian cadre of which I was a part, it may have been filled with highly esteemed, creative, innovative thinkers, but it also was filled with broken lives. Instead of growing disciples, we were giving people permission to grow lax

in their faith. We had heroically rallied together to reach what we saw as the chaotic postmodern culture, yet ironically instead of us reaching it, its chaos had seemingly swamped us. I was left dazed, disorientated, and confused.

I started to experience a faith crisis—not my faith in Christ but my faith in the organic values I had become well known for. I began to ask questions in the context of our postmodern Christian culture and realized that if my church was going to survive—if I was going to survive—I could no longer blindly lead from the postmodern, organic values.

It was then that I was reminded of a deeply disturbing comment made at that very first conference on postmodernism in Melbourne over ten years prior. It had stuck dormant within me and now could not be ignored. It was made by one of the speakers, an older and respected pastor. He said that he felt that the shift toward the postmodern in our culture had created a climate in which a dictator could influence the current generation. I had been enjoying his presentation till that point. I vehemently disagreed with him. The postmodern, organic values that we were moving toward seemed a natural insulation against such a rise to power. Yet all these years later I would discover that there was truth in the speaker's point. Our culture shaped by the organic values was now ripe for exploitation. Just as there were dangers in the mechanical values of the left-hand column, the organic values of the right hand also contained seeds of destruction.

## THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE CULTURAL SPLIT

The mechanical and organic columns reveal a split in our culture between competing worldviews. These two visions of reality offer us two types of leadership and influence. They are both broad and hard to pin down. To understand them we must paint in broad

brushstrokes. One camp sprang from the period of Western history known as the Enlightenment, which spanned the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while the other surfaced as a reaction to the first. This period broke with the West's traditional past, which was built upon a fusion of Greek thinking and Christianity. As the term illustrates, the proponents of the Enlightenment saw themselves as bringing light to a culture living in the darkness of violence and superstition. The Enlightenment was not sparked by one moment. Rather it was a catalogue of discoveries and paradigm shifts that reconstituted the West's entire understanding of reality.

**THE ENLIGHTENMENT RECAST THE DRAMA OF HUMAN EXISTENCE WITH THE INDIVIDUAL PLAYING THE LEAD ROLE.**

This drama was guided by a newfound optimism, which was itself rooted in the rationality of the human mind. Reason would now lead society beyond superstition and that which cannot be empirically proven. New scientific discoveries aided by rapidly developing technologies would create a kind of human-driven heaven on earth. God was not immediately removed from the picture. However, a profound shift had occurred: no longer was faith directed primarily toward God. Instead, Western society faith shifted toward the power and potential of humankind. Such a worldview increasingly marginalized the Christian faith. The Enlightenment

would eventually create the possibility for people in the West to live without a belief in God or the supernatural. A machine became the most appropriate metaphor to apply to humanity, the movements of the universe, and society itself. The Enlightenment directly shaped the values of the mechanical column. Thus, in the imagination of the Enlightenment with its mechanical values, the leader par excellence is a successful hero figure: powerful, commanding, and conquering, creating with determination, organization, and systems as powerful as the hero himself.

## THE REACTION

These monumental cultural changes reshaped the West at every level. There was a desire to make a clean break with the past; inherited tradition was questioned, social structures critiqued. The modern world was being born. Naturally, those wedded to the traditional worldview of the West found this ground shift traumatizing. Some wished to return to the past, yet another group wanted a different vision of the future to emerge. This group began to find faults with the trajectory of the Enlightenment, questioning whether human reason was the only way of comprehending the world. This group wondered if the mechanical approach to life was re-creating man as a kind of robot, devoid of emotions, a sense of beauty, and meaning. They feared that the skepticism of the Enlightenment worldview robbed humans of the spiritual, the sensual, and the cultivation of the soul. They started a countermovement known as Romanticism.

In part, Romanticism arose in reaction to the Enlightenment. Yet it did not advocate returning to a Christian worldview based on Scripture and revelation. Romanticism attempted to create an alternative to the mechanical worldview. It would base its ideology on the suspicion of power and structure, a view that would pronounce the natural over the technical. They preferred emotion and experience

to reason and the empirical. They held spirituality above materialism. Essentially the organic values are shaped by Romanticism. The romantic vision, with its organic values, imaged the leader and the influencer to not be the achieving hero of the Enlightenment but rather the creative genius who influences through innovation, art, and dangerously brilliant ideas. The Romantic vision imagines the creative genius as a heretic, always pushing boundaries and breaking taboos. Thus, in the organic vision, the creative creates but they also tear down. As we will discover, this is a very different view from the biblical idea of creativity.

For the sake of clarity, for the remainder of this book I will refer to Enlightenment values as the mechanical, and the values of Romanticism as the organic. These two visions have been at battle in our culture now for centuries. The organic values do not originate in the 1960s but rather in the eighteenth century. They are still at war in our culture today and they are responsible for much of the storm of chaos that has beset our culture. They plaster over our culture a binary view of the world—counterculture vs. mainstream, hipster inner city vs. white suburbs, liberal vs. conservative, indie vs. pop, arthouse vs. Hollywood, mall vs. boutique, fast food vs. organic, Microsoft vs. Apple, the Coast vs. the Midwest.

I and so many others misread the culture when we believed that the organic values were the outbreak of a new era, that they represented a new postmodern epoch in the West. Yes, postmodernism was and is an academic movement, but it was never an epoch. When Christians bought this analysis, it deeply affected the way we viewed leadership. Many who rightfully questioned the way that the mechanical values had shaped the contemporary Christian view of leadership saw an alternative in the organic values, and they jumped across. Such a move seemed to have all the airs of a conversion experience. Thus, the language of the binary battle between the mechanical and the organic values began to invade the contemporary

Christian discussion. What on the surface seemed to be theological or missiological discussions, such as the debate between proponents of contemporary churches and emerging churches, or missional and mega churches, were in fact deeply shaped by the cultural battle between the mechanical and organic values.

This ensured that our current view of Christian leadership was also shaped by this battle between the mechanical values' model of the successful hero who builds and organizes, and the organic values' vision of the creative genius who ideates and critiques. It is my deep conviction, as this book will attest, that both the heroic and the genius models of leadership are flawed. Both are compromised and corrupted by the worldview from which they emerged: paganism. I am not speaking of the modern Wiccan movement but the dominant worldview of the Greek and Roman worlds. A worldview that the minority Christian movement found itself surrounded by. A worldview that still deeply influences our culture today. We often miss this precisely because that is part of the nature of paganism.

Historian Robin Lane Fox notes that while the Christian faith was centered on a definite sense of faith and commitment to the belief that God has revealed Himself in history in the person of Jesus Christ, in contrast, pagan belief was assumed. It held no doctrine, no creeds, and it was opposed to a breaking in of God in history. Instead, it simply existed in the air; it was part of the fabric of society that silently shaped how culture acted and behaved.[5] Thus, its influence is still with us today.

The revolt against Christianity that came with the advent of the modern world was, in the words of historian Peter Gay, the rise of modern paganism—a reaching back into the world that predated Christianity. Built upon polytheism and resting upon a myriad of different gods, paganism was a divided house. It could contain both Apollos, a heroic god of power and order, and Dionysius, a creatively chaotic bohemian god of pleasure.[6] Thus, both the hero

and the genius can be found in pagan conceptions of what it is to influence and lead.

The real battle in which our culture is engaged is not between the mechanical and the organic but rather between the pagan and Christian worldviews. A Christianity that attempts to model itself on the hero or the genius will be a faith that has little potential to speak good news to the West. Instead, we must rediscover the truly radical vision of leadership found within the Bible. A model of leadership born out of a dangerous truth that was repellant to pagan ears. A truth that dared to proclaim in pagan streets and squares that God had lowered Himself to come and live in the mess and muck of human life, within history, in time, in human flesh. The pagans wished to leave this world, to cross the divide between human and god. Whether it be through power or pleasure, they wanted to get out. But the dangerous gospel taught that the central organizing principle for leadership, for life, for the universe, was the truth that God had come to us. That He had died upon a cross, spilling His blood in love, paying a price before rising from the grave and ascending to heaven. All leadership must pass through this narrow gate. This truth that jarred with the pagan world still jars in our modern pagan world.

The pagans could not stand the idea that God acted within history. They preferred neat ideas that hung in the ether. However, to return to a biblical understanding of leadership, creating, and influence, and to understand what it is to lead in the culture of the West, we must delve back into history . . . and literature. Specifically, France in the nineteenth century.

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