

“Life in the Hinge Times”

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I want to start this morning with a quotation from Mark Dyer, an Anglican priest who died just a few years ago. In the early 1990s, Dyer wrote these words:

Christianity has had five significant yard sales. Each one has had to do with the church’s struggle to resist the temptation to domesticate God’s vision, to settle for change when God seeks transformation. The sixth [yard sale] is [happening] now. It’s something that seems to happen every three or four hundred years. In Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, God empowers the church to discover its roots and its center, and transform itself in new, exciting and wonderful ways. Jesus announced the first yard sale. Then Benedict, in the sixth century. Then the Franciscan Spring in the thirteenth century. Then Martin Luther and the reformers in the sixteenth century, the only yard sale led by an ordained person. It’s time once again for a massive yard sale, a transformation led by lay people. Our four hundred years are up.

I agree with Mark Dyer. History does indeed suggest that organized religions—Catholicism, Protestantism, even Judaism—tend to rise and fall in cycles lasting somewhere between three and five hundred years. Partly this cyclical process is in response to changes in our secular lives—culture, government, economics, education, technology, and so on. The good news is that this breaking open of the organized Church makes room for renewal and new growth to occur. Christianity is gradually changing all the time, but true transformation happens only in these hinge points between one cycle and the next.

So two thousand years ago, we had the birth of Christianity, which became the official religion of the Roman Empire and spread throughout the Mediterranean and Europe. Five hundred years later, when the Holy Roman Empire collapsed, Pope Gregory essentially saved Christianity by charging monasticism with preserving and protecting it. Another five hundred years passed, and the Greek Orthodox Church split off from the Roman Catholic Church in what is called the Great Schism. And five hundred years later, we have the Reformation when Protestantism splintered the Catholic Church.

That brings us up to . . . well, today. Since the mid-twentieth century, Christian theologians have been making the case that another great “yard sale” is beginning. Something new is emerging from what we have always known as the Christian Church. I want to make just two points about

these cycles that Christianity has been going through for the past two thousand years, and then I'll talk about what is driving the change today—and what seems to be emerging.

Point One: In every case, at every “hinge” between one period and the next, nothing completely died. What emerged—like Protestantism from Catholicism during the Great Reformation—was stronger than what it emerged from. But Catholicism, for example, is obviously still with us. So the Christian Church of the last five hundred years isn't disappearing, but something new—a different, transformed way of being Christian—is clearly emerging. More and more Christians are turning away from the organized Church and its professional clergy, and discovering the Sacred and Holy for themselves in many different ways.

Point Two: The question that is *always* present in these “hinge times” between five-hundred-year periods is about religious authority. Fifteen hundred years ago, religious authority shifted from the Holy Roman Empire to the Roman Catholic Church. Five hundred years ago, with the invention of the printing press, authority shifted from the Pope to the Bible. People were finally able to read the Bible for themselves, and in English—not Latin. Many Christians no longer felt the need to confess to a priest. They no longer needed a priest to intercede with God on their behalf. Now they could read and interpret the Bible for themselves.

Where is the religious authority in the Christian Church today? That question is creating a lot of confusion and anxiety. The changes happening at our church, especially over the past ten to twenty years, are happening in Protestant and Catholic churches and Jewish synagogues throughout North America and Europe. We are not unique. We are not alone.

But we are anxious, confused about what's going on, and worried about the future. And let's be honest—we have pretty good reasons for feeling this way. When I was a kid in the 1950s and '60s, most everyone that I knew went to church. Most of them, in fact, still went to the church that their parents and even their grandparents had attended. That trend that has largely disappeared as people increasingly turn away from their “inherited church” and either don't attend at all or choose a non-denominational church of some sort.

- Almost half of all Americans regularly attended church in the mid fifties.
- In 1956, over 70 percent of Americans identified as Protestant. Now that has dropped by half, to 35 percent.
- Thirty years ago, only 14 percent of Americans said they never went to church. Today that number has more than doubled to over 30 percent.

Clearly something is happening, shifting. Naturally the decline in attendance has resulted in smaller churches.

- Over the past ten years, membership in the United Church of Christ has shrunk by over 25 percent. Other mainline denominations are experiencing the same decline.
- Here at Centre Street, our average weekly attendance over the past eight years has been fifty-two. That has remained relatively consistent from year to year, but it is a significant decline from attendance in the 1980s and '90s, as some of you know.

And as we see church membership and attendance decline, that is matched by a declining number of ordained clergy. Many UCC churches across the country—particularly small, rural churches—are seeking part-time pastors, but there are very few candidates available.

- Over the past thirty years, the number of UCC ministers has declined 30 percent. More and more clergy are either leaving the ministry or just retiring.
- Over the past ten years, the number of active UCC clergy fell by 14 percent, and fewer people are going to seminary as well.

How did the Church get here? Well, let's go back to the idea of those cycles. I just finished reading a book by Phyllis Tickle, a theologian and church historian, titled *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*. This book concurs with what so many others have been saying for the past fifty years. We're living smack dab in the middle of the "hinge" between one cycle of Christianity and the next. So what has happened in the past one hundred years to bring us to this point? Here are a few of the reasons why fewer people now believe in God, identify as Christians, and go to church.

1. 1904 — Let's begin with Albert Einstein. In 1904, he offered almost irrefutable proof of the existence of atoms. Just forty years later, the world understood, for the first time in human history, that we really could destroy the earth and each other. Totally and completely. That shook Christianity to its core. What about God? Isn't God supposed to have final authority? Why would God let this happen?
2. 1906 — In 1906, a young preacher named William Seymour began preaching about baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. This was the birth of Pentecostalism, which grew rapidly. By 2006, the number of Pentecostal Christians would exceed five hundred million worldwide.

Why is this important? Well, the established Protestant denominations were Scripture-based. In church, people passively sat and listened to a minister preach a sermon based on the Bible. But in a Pentecostal church, the authority shifted from the Bible to the Holy Spirit, and

church services were very participatory and emotional. In fact, they made mainline Protestant churches look downright boring and old-fashioned.

So the religious authority began shifting from the Bible to the Holy Spirit. And the importance placed on ordained, professionally educated clergy began to give way to the “priesthood of all believers.” This doctrine, which dates back to Martin Luther and the Reformation, says that all believers in Christ share in his priestly status. There is no special class of people who mediate the knowledge, presence, and forgiveness of Christ to the rest of us. All believers have the right and authority to read, interpret, and apply the teachings of Scripture—and that’s part of what made Pentecostalism look more appealing than traditional Christian churches, where the authority rested in the ordained clergy.

3. 1908 — On Sundays, one hundred years ago, we went to Sunday School and church, ate Sunday dinner with our extended family, spent the afternoon swapping stories about what happened at church, took a nap, and then went back to church for the evening service. Then in 1908 came the Model T—affordable and fun. Over the next few decades, we saw the disappearance of the Sunday evening church service, the decline of big Sunday dinners after church, and the rise of youth sports, such as Little League, being played on Sundays—including Sunday mornings. Once everyone had cars, suddenly there was much more to do on Sunday than just go to church.
4. 1935 — Bill Wilson and Bob Smith began to formalize a method of addiction recovery that became known as Alcoholics Anonymous. This had an effect on church participation for two reasons. First, God was referred to as “a Power greater than ourselves” or “God as we understand Him.” This broadened people’s understanding of “God” and again raised the question of religious authority. And second, the sponsor system, in which AA members help each other, took the emphasis off professional experts and authorities, including clergy. In essence, the boundaries of organized religion became less clear, and spirituality became more free form. This trend accelerated over the next few decades.
5. 1965 — The Immigration and Nationality Services Act, signed into law in 1965, opened the doors to new forms of religion and spirituality, such as Buddhism and eventually Islam. Until then, American Christianity had been Bible-based, rational and logical, and neither experiential nor participatory. There was little about most church services that was emotional or spiritual. People sitting in the pews listened to a sermon, closed their eyes for a prayer or two, maybe sang along on a couple of hymns, and then headed to the Fellowship Hall for donuts and coffee. Raising your hands in the air or even clapping during a service was definitely frowned on, and few people dared to question anything that the preacher said.

Buddhism and other Eastern religions, which were able to enter this country more freely after 1965, broke open the rigid box of organized Christianity and encouraged people to actively participate in a more personal form of spirituality. And in many ways, the drug culture of the 1960s and '70s did much the same thing, encouraging people to experience something bigger than themselves, but in a free flowing, emotional, personal way that many people—including many who identified as Christian—found very appealing.

6. And finally, more and more Christians grew skeptical of the supposed inerrancy of Scripture. Paul's teachings in the New Testament became more problematic for many Christians, who found themselves supporting, for example, more liberal laws and practices concerning divorce, birth control and abortion, women's rights, gay marriage, and other issues. Women who now worked fulltime jobs *in addition to* taking care of the kids, cleaning the house, and putting supper on the table every night did *not* want the Apostle Paul telling them to be subservient to their husbands. Suddenly the Bible began looking less and less like a source of religious authority, especially on issues of justice and equality.

Now, if I'm someone who's finding it hard to resolve the apparent conflict between science and religion, and if I've come to doubt that the Bible is the literal Word of God, and if I'm no longer willing to simply do what my pastor says that I should do rather than thinking for myself, and if I have been reading about the benefits of Zen meditation, and if I simply would rather do other things on Sunday than spend a couple of hours sitting in church . . .

Well, why do I need church? Clearly, for me, the organized Christian Church is no longer the ultimate authority. For me, that authority has shifted to something that's less passive and more experiential and active, something that's less objective, logical, and rational and more subjective and emotional, something that is less word-and-brain based and more Spirit-and-heart based, something that is more fluid and less hierarchical. If I'm looking for the twenty-first-century church, not the twentieth-century church, where am I going to find it, and what does it look like?

For one thing, the Christian church that seems to be emerging in the twenty-first century pays less heed to denominational labels. Christians are seeking a more authentic, personalized spirituality that might blend aspects of several different religions from around the world. I'm a good example. I'm only half joking when I tell people that I'm about one-third United Church of Christ, one-third Catholic monastic, and one-third Tibetan Buddhist. And there are other members of the Centre Street Church family who share my mix-and-match theology.

Emergent churches are also more relaxed and informal in simple ways, such as comfortable chairs in the sanctuary rather than pews, or sitting in a circle rather than scattered around a large sanctuary that is much larger than they need. They're less focused on shared doctrine and creeds, and more open to a wide range of belief systems and ideas. They're less likely to rely on the Bible—which few of us read anyway—for guidance and instruction, and more strongly oriented toward prayer, discerning God's voice, and following the Holy Spirit's guidance. The emerging twenty-first-century church is more about how people's lives are changed for the better as a result of being part of the church family, rather than how many people joined the church this year or how much money they gave.

Emergent twenty-first-century churches often don't have their own buildings, but meet in schools, rented auditoriums, or even pubs. (Pub church is a big thing in Ireland right now, and there is a pub church in Portland, Maine.) One rapidly growing trend is house churches, which operate in the model of the New Testament church. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christianity grew and spread rapidly in the form of house churches that typically included about twenty people. The letters—or epistles—in our New Testament, most of which were written by Paul, were written to various house churches to encourage them in their ministry. New Testament churches, founded by Jesus's disciples and their followers, did not have trained clergy. The people did church themselves.

I believe that Centre Street is slowly but surely evolving into a progressive, emergent church of the twenty-first century. I've been regularly attending this church for almost twenty years, and the changes that I've witnessed in that time have been remarkable. One striking piece of data that I stumbled across in my research comes from a national survey conducted two years ago. Here's what that report says: "Of regular attendees of small churches, 81 percent express resistance to any significant change in the way their church is structured and operates." It amazes me that so many people are so afraid of change that they will desperately cling to their traditional ways of doing things, despite the fact that their church may be slowly dying. That—thank God—is not a problem that we have here. This church family is resourceful, smart, creative, and willing to follow God's call no matter where it takes us.

Being a Christian in this historic hinge time isn't easy. In many ways, organized religion is challenged with the same harsh divisiveness that permeates practically every aspect of life in this country today. It's important to remember that one primary reason why this happens every few hundred years is that organized religion becomes stiff and unwieldy, less compassionate, more focused on its own survival—just like politicians whose top priority, upon taking office, seems to

be getting reelected. Christianity needs these “yard sales” every now and then, to get rid of a lot of the institutional junk that it accumulates along the way.

Remember the quote from Mark Dyer that I opened with? In these hinge times, the church is struggling to resist the temptation to domesticate God’s vision, to settle for change when God seeks transformation. “Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God empowers the church to re-discover its roots and its center, and to transform itself in new, exciting and wonderful ways.”

Make no mistake. God is at work in the Christian Church today, and in the life of Centre Street Congregational Church as well. Listen again to God speaking, in the passage that Sharon read to us from Isaiah 43: “When you’re in over your head, I’ll be there with you. When you’re in rough waters, you won’t go down. When you’re between a rock and a hard place, it won’t be a dead end. Forget about what’s happened; don’t keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I’m about to do something brand-new. It’s bursting out! Don’t you see it? There it is! I’m making a road through the desert.”

Make it so, dear God. Make it so.