

Reclaiming the Great Commission

A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations

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Chapter 1: Spiritual Hunger in America

"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

--Jesus Christ (Matthew 4:4)

In the final, prosperous years of the twentieth century, no hunger seemed deeper within the American soul than an unsatisfied longing for spirituality. The new century and the new millennium have brought no end to this spiritual yearning. Surveys consistently indicate that a large majority of American adults remain dissatisfied despite the material rewards they have accumulated, the physical pleasures they have experienced, and the leisure time they have taken (Barna, 1995, p. 22). Americans are reeling emotionally from daily life in a society traumatized by too much violence, too many divided families, and too little job security. The pain and isolation caused by reliance on material things and on human resources alone has grown unbearable. People are searching for something more meaningful and more enduring. As a result, tens of millions of unchurched Americans are open to a set of spiritual truths that will free them from the burdens of materialism and the shackles of worldliness. Increased sales of religious and spiritual books, spirituality touted as a solution to corporate problems, and advertising references to spirituality characterize this new century as various segments of society seek to capitalize on the nation's spiritual hunger.

Even science has entered the spiritual arena by confirming the relationship between faith and health and offering scientific support for the medical value of a spiritual orientation. For example, at a Houston conference sponsored by Harvard Medical School on spirituality and healing in medicine, physicians heard how "belief in a higher power and prayer can give comfort from suffering, speed healing and improve health" (Jones, 1998, p. 8E). Consider these research findings, reported at the same conference:

- Open-heart surgery patients are twelve times more likely to survive if they have religious faith and social support.
- Mortality rates are 25 percent lower for men and 35 percent lower for women who attend religious services once a week or more.
- People who attend church or synagogue once a week are more likely to live longer.
- One-third of the medical schools in the United States now offer courses on medicine and spirituality. As reported by Jones (1998, p. 8E), Larry Dossey, a former Dallas internist and author of *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, says that the medicine-and-spirituality movement is "just exploding."

Some religious experts have suggested that America is on the verge of another great awakening—a prolonged period of religious interest that has occurred every so often in history. Michael Novak (1998, p. 11), writing in the *New York Times*, predicts that "the

21st century will be the most religious in 500 years," and he quotes George Gallup as having observed that "the focus of the 20th century has been on outer space, but the focus of the 21st century may well be on inner space" as spirituality receives increased attention in the new millennium.

And yet the incipient great awakening of the twenty-first century is already proving to be substantially different from previous awakenings. Why? Because this awakening is being driven, not by Christian religious denominations, but by spiritual individualism that honors spiritual values, discipline, and ethics while often rejecting the traditional religions from which they are derived. Tragically, the mainline denominations have not effectively responded to America's spiritual hunger, nor are they positioning themselves to do so. As Kew and White (1997, p. 20) have observed, "People are persistently asking spiritual questions for which the churches seem to have either mislaid or forgotten the answers." Thus spirituality in the new century is not necessarily grounded in established religion and may even be hostile to it.

As might be expected, the growth in unmet spiritual needs has paralleled declining membership in the mainline denominations over the past three decades. This decline is reflected in absolute membership and, more dramatically, in the number of members as a percentage of the American population. For example, the United Methodists are losing approximately forty thousand members per year and have shrunk from 11.1 million to 8.5 million over the last thirty years (Vara, 1999, p. 1E). Various denominations in the 1980s undertook initiatives to reverse these declines. In 1984, the United Methodist Church approved the objective of doubling its membership by 1992, the United Church of Christ made evangelism a priority from 1989 to 1993 (Hadaway and Roozen, 1995, p. 10), and the Episcopal Church declared the 1990s the "decade of evangelism." With the exception of recent modest gains by the Episcopalians, the decline in mainline denominational membership continues. By contrast, the Mormons have grown an average of 43 percent per decade for each decade of the past century (Stark, 1996, p. 7). Today, 50 percent of all churchgoing Americans are not members of mainline churches (Trueheart, 1996, p. 1).

Recent polls about belief in God are also disturbing. According to Broadway (1997, p. B7), writing in the *Washington Post*, the Gallup Poll recently found that 96 percent of Americans still believed in God (by comparison with 95 percent in 1947), but the Barna Poll found that one-third of the Americans who said they believed in God did not believe in the biblical God but in a "higher consciousness" or an Eastern god or even "many gods." Between 4 and 5 percent of Americans believe that they themselves are God.

American society has "edited out the sense of the 'spiritual' or 'holy' which pervades the lives of people in more traditional societies at every level and which was once an essential component of our human experience of the world" (Armstrong, 1993, p. 4). In so doing, Americans have divorced themselves from their spiritual nature. Ancient pagans, like contemporary Christians, believed that human beings were derived from the same divine substance as God. Until the Enlightenment, a few hundred years ago, it had always been assumed that human beings were innately spiritual, and divine involvement in human affairs was taken for granted. Although the origins of religion remain hidden, the idea of God is a constant presence in those human civilizations of which any records remain. Through the millennia, the world's organized religious traditions have embodied humankind's primary effort to give form and practice to its sense of the spiritual. Through the myths, stories, and religious doctrines that developed around their worship of gods, human beings have attempted to find an explanation for the mystery of their lives and the wonder of the universe. They have sought to experience what Rudolf Otto has called the numinous, the *mysterium tremendum*. The reverence for new life that we experience in the presence of a newborn infant is fundamentally religious, a

manifestation of the religious dimension of our existence. The birth of a new family through marriage brings a similar experience of joy and reverence. Both provide a glimpse of the love and presence of God, to which we react at the deepest level.

Spiritual hunger can be understood as the deep yearning of the human soul for contact with God—the yearning for awareness of an ongoing relationship with the Transcendent, more profound than anything available in the material world. From this relationship with God flows a satisfying relationship with oneself and with others in the world. This desire for spiritual contact is a reflection of the call of the Creator to the created. It is a call that must be answered for life to be meaningful. The absence of spirituality can be described as a hole in the center of one's being that not even fame, power, wealth, beauty, or intelligence—the greatest prizes of the material world—can fill. This yearning for completeness, for the joining of human life and experience to the power and love of the immanent and transcendent God, exists in all human beings. It may be denied or rejected, but it is nevertheless defining, initiating in each human being a search for the divine or for some material substitute that might provide meaning and purpose.

Every human being worships at some altar. It may be at the altar of God, or it may be at the altar of fame, wealth, power, pleasure, or a hundred other forms of idolatry. Human life always has a reference point, something that is central and determining. Every human being has such a reference point—a faith relationship with something, whether this relationship is stated or not. A faith relationship entails trust in and loyalty to centers of value that are of ultimate concern to human beings and to the images of power with which they align themselves, centers of value and images of power on which people act in order to survive in an uncertain world. (This definition of a faith relationship is adapted from one developed by Fowler, 1991, p. 23.) Whether these centers of value and images of power are spiritual or purely materialistic, faith in them as the ultimate concern of life drives, directs, and motivates human behavior. The spiritual hunger in America is a reflection of faith relationships centered on material concerns rather than on spiritual truths. Christ's admonition that one cannot live by bread alone speaks directly to this point.

The hunger that drives this search for spirituality in America has several sources. One source of this famine of the soul is the absence of a meaningful relationship with the eternal God. Another source of spiritual hunger is the deeply felt need among the unchurched for hope and healing. As human weakness is exposed in the trials and tribulations of life, the resources of our humanity are overwhelmed and, intuitively, we turn for assistance to some greater power. One has only to read the newspaper or watch the news to find persistent evidence of the demonic in society. To rise above the self-defeating elements of existence and reject the false idols of the material world will require spiritual help. The psalmist writes, in Psalm 30:2, "O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me." Such spiritual healing, like physical healing, is a form of glorious personal transformation.

A third source of spiritual hunger is found in those who have felt, however briefly, the divine presence and want to experience more of it. Such men and women begin searching for someone or some institution to guide them along a spiritual path of which they as yet know very little. They are open to spiritual development and eager for it, but they do not often hear the call of God in the words and actions of the mainline Church. Instead, they search elsewhere and become prey to others who do reach out to their urgent hunger with promises of spiritual food.

In the first century, the Church proclaimed the answers to spiritual questions and sought to feed the spiritual hunger of the people. The story of the Christian Church is a story of

self-transcendence and glorious transformation. Transcendence of the self leads to humility and to a sense of the interconnectedness of all things and of the sacredness of human life. With self-transcendence, we are relieved of some of the burdens of materiality, and we commune with the divine aspect of ourselves, which is beyond the pain and sorrow of mortality. By touching the eternal, we are empowered to find the joy that eludes us in our "lives of quiet desperation," to use Thoreau's famous phrase. Churches can foster such transcendence through their focus on God, love, and the need to serve others. Moreover, churches can provide a medium that makes it possible for such transcendence to occur. In the words of Christ, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11).

Imprisoned souls cry out for release from materiality and false gods. A spiritual rescue in which someone is saved from depravity and restored to wholeness and strength is the province of the Church and the work of God. Psalm 81:7 is a reminder of God's ever-present concern: "In distress you called, and I rescued you." The divine rescue finds its parallel in the eagerness of loving parents who restore their wayward child to a state of freedom so that the consequences of some ill-advised action will not be permanently damaging.

Less dramatic but no less important than a spiritual rescue are transformations that result from the acceptance of life's challenges. Such acceptance recognizes that suffering and struggle are part of psychological and spiritual growth and that divine assistance and comfort are available to strengthen and encourage the faithful. Christ's Resurrection after His acceptance of death on the cross illustrates the blessing that results from a commitment to the attainment of something larger and more significant than oneself. This lesson of struggle and sacrifice is a primary lesson of Christianity, and its validity is confirmed daily in Christian life.

Christianity is not a way to escape the trials and tribulations of mortal life but rather a way to overcome them, to handle them effectively and meaningfully and so find purpose in the pain they bring. Christ Himself was not denied freedom from suffering. He embraced it for the purposes it served. The way of the cross-of acceptance, love, and transformation-that Christ exemplified is the pathway to fulfillment and to the realization of our potential as God's creatures. It is one of the great promises of the Christian faith that is always kept in the lives of the faithful. Christianity leads us, through the example of Christ, to accept our own crosses, those burdens given specifically to us through which we grow in faith and service. As Christians, we are not called to ignore or deny the pain and suffering of the world but rather to find, in overcoming them, a transformation of our souls. With faith and the Holy Spirit, we need not cower before the uncertainties and difficulties of human life; rather, we can be reconciled to them. In such reconciliation, we encounter the presence of God and experience transcendence. And we are remade.

The early Christian Church was filled with stories of God's transforming power. Pagans became disciples, not because of what they read in the Bible (which did not exist in the earliest days), but because of what they experienced in the Christian community. And what they experienced was the awesome power of the love of God, expressed through the community of believers and felt directly in the depths of their souls. Pagans heard stories from Christians about miraculous changes in their lives, and they came to experience those changes themselves. People were converted because they saw and felt the power of God, were loved, and were healed. It is the experience of the Holy Spirit that changes people, and it is this experience that the unchurched seek. The Christian faith will satisfy spiritual needs in marvelous ways. To feed the spiritually hungry in the midst of so great a famine in America, however, will require the mainline Church to return to its roots, to the early Church, to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission of our Lord,

Jesus Christ. It will mean a return to the experiential, to knowing the power and love of the living God in everyday life.

The role of the Church, therefore, is not to create a demand for religious experiences within people but rather to address and effectively satisfy the demand that already exists. This point is crucial in understanding the importance of evangelism in Christian life. Evangelistic activities are carried out in answer to a plea, even though the plea may be disguised or unstated. Evangelism is not intrusive; it is responsive. To reject evangelism is to reject the plea and ignore the hope of alienated individuals who are looking, through a relationship with God, for some meaning and purpose in their lives.

Spiritual development is a process. It unfolds through an organized program that provides instruction and that supports disciplined effort. Spiritual development occurs within an individual, but not in the absence of others. It is the product of interaction with other human beings and with God, who often uses human beings to carry out the divine work. Spiritual development is not an event but rather a way of life that leads to a deeper and more powerful relationship to God. Even sudden conversions are merely antecedents to spiritual work. There is no graduation from the Christian faith, just an ever-deepening experience of the eternal and its manifestation in the world. Spiritual development takes time, effort, and patience. It is both a commitment and a dedication.

The Church is particularly well qualified to direct spiritual development, understanding as it does the process that is involved and the structure that is necessary. As a community of spiritual wisdom, the Church holds thousands of years of knowledge about the myriad ways that God is present in our lives. As a depository of these spiritual experiences, the Church can support the unique journey that characterizes each individual's spiritual development.

What is equally important, the Church can set aside the too-easy, feel-good techniques of so-called spiritual development that are offered by some groups but that deny or minimize the existence of sin and imperfection and that reject or minimize the need for rigorous self-examination as a necessary element of spiritual growth. Spirituality is not about doing what one wants but rather about doing what God wants. Although spiritual development is not painless, it is deeply rewarding and enormously satisfying precisely because it represents a repudiation of false gods and impotent altars—a process of rededication and realignment that is not without suffering. Yet the pain of abandoning false gods is nothing in comparison to the joy of embracing the real God. Spiritual development marks a reunification of the estranged soul with its Creator, a realignment of the individual will with the divine will, and a rejoining of the beloved child with its divine Parent. Such experiences speak to the very essence of the soul, to the core of being.

The Church also provides an outlet for spirituality through the opportunities for service that it offers. Spirituality is faith carried into the world. It provides a way of dealing more joyfully and effectively with the trials and triumphs of life. Spiritual growth is not a retreat from the world but rather a bold venture into it. Churches need to reclaim everyday life and especially the workplace as a relevant setting for applying the Christian faith. The actions of Christ in the world were about the world and about the Kingdom of God in the world as well as about the life to come. Healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead, and feeding the multitudes were ways of solving fundamental problems of the world as well as of the spirit. The material world provides the field of practice in which a Christian applies and strengthens his or her spirituality and faith and so learns to face the daily challenges of life with joy and confidence.

Two broad responses have resulted from the failure of the mainline denominations to reach the unchurched and to fill the void that the absence of spirituality creates in the human soul. Each of these responses represents one extreme on a spectrum born of disillusionment and frustration; both are efforts to revise the inherited structure and meaning of the Christian Church. Religious fundamentalism, as one extreme, offers a concrete, absolute structure of belief that some find appealing, but that is ultimately restricting. Fundamentalist cults and sects unaffiliated with mainline denominations have grown up and flourished, providing rigid answers to the call for spiritual help. The other extreme has sought to discredit the theological language of the Church, even rejecting the Resurrection and denying the active role of God in human affairs. Heresies like these, long ago repudiated but recently publicized, distract the faithful from the real work of the Church.

Instead of these two empty responses to the spiritual crisis in America, a new one is needed, one that expresses the Christian faith in language that is secular enough to be understood by the unchurched but theological enough to be transformational. These goals are identical with those of Christianity in the first century, when the Church sought to spread the Good News and make disciples of the world. The primary focus of the early Church was the glorious transformation of lives. The stories of transformation that characterized the apostles and those whose lives were touched by Jesus Christ were expected to be replicated in the lives of believers. The Bible is a story of transformations. The apostles were gloriously changed by their relationship with Jesus. So were those people who experienced or witnessed His miracles—the feedings, the healings, the conversions. Jesus left this legacy of transformational power to His disciples, who were called on to continue this work. The early Church was a community where miracles of human transformation were courted and expected as a natural aspect of Christian life. In the ensuing centuries, however, the Church sometimes lost this life-changing focus; and today, at the beginning of this new century, we find ourselves in another such time. As a result, the Church is once again in need of becoming a missionary church in a largely unchurched world. Acceptance of this responsibility can be a force for liberation and empowerment, transforming the Church, its disciples, and those among the unchurched who are drawn to the promise of a glorious transformation of their lives.

Just as in the first century, the Church in the third millennium has a wondrous opportunity before it: to once again proclaim the Word of God to the world. If the Christian community can recover its sense of being God's agent for transformation, and if it can recover its passion for making disciples, it can reach out to the spiritually hungry and offer them the rich banquet of the Christian life. The spiritual hunger in America, like any other kind of hunger, will be satisfied one way or another, or the hungry will die. Spiritually hungry people can feast at the table of a mainline denomination, or they can make do with the spiritual equivalent of junk food, offered by whoever holds out the first morsel.

In the new century, the innate spirituality of the human being will find expression in some form of religion. The question for the mainline denominations is whether that religion will be in the mainline or take some other form. The answer lies not so much with the spiritually hungry as it does with us, the members of the mainline Church. We are the ones with the bounty to offer. We must choose between hoarding it and sharing it with others. This is no small choice, either for us or for them. Because upon that choice hinges the future of the mainline denominations in the new century and the lives of the people who need our help.

