

When Church Stops Working Book Study, Presbytery of Niagara
Chapter 3: Stop All the Having and Just Be

Summary

- All we *really* have is the moment we're in and the people we're with.
- The trouble in the secular age is the pursuit of *more* with no end in sight.
- We seem to run faster just to stay in the same place.
- We are always forward looking, paying attention to whatever is next, not to what is right now, in front of us.
- As long as the crisis is decline, we always need to go faster and do more. (Remember, though that decline is not the crisis, but a symptom)
- When we disconnect from what is right in front of us, we end up alienated from ourselves and from the life we're living right now.
- The secular age is so rushed that we can no longer just *be*, embracing life as a gift.
- We tell ourselves that we have to move faster, that we don't have a choice in the matter, or we'll miss something.
- We don't have time to stop and ask questions.
- We believe that the busiest church is the best church.
- Acceleration is a disease that promises victory over the crisis of decline but ends in spiritual disaster. (Decline is not the crisis!)
- Depression (as a social reality, not a clinical diagnosis) arrives when burnout meets the feelings of moral failure.
- Churches feel they have to do more and more not to fall behind, running out of energy to overcome the crisis of decline.
- True rest (Sabbath keeping) is not merely a chance to recharge batteries to work harder the other 6 days.
- Doing more is always the way of acceleration, and it will always end in depression and burnout.

Three steps to "Being, Not Having"

Step 1 in Being, Not Having: Humble Death

- Being is a very different action than having
- The only way to escape the treadmill of speeding up is to die
- We believe that dying is bad, that it goes against what we think God wants.
- If the only way to stop acceleration is to die, something is deeply wrong.
- But: the authors claim that *only* dying can stop acceleration.
- Only in dying can the church find its way beyond the crisis of decline, which is a fake crisis, and into the *crisis of God's action in the world*.
- There is a good way and a bad way to die.
- The good death brings us into humility
- The power of humility lies in that it seems like surrender, like giving up.
- Humility is central to the ethos, or spirit, or feel of a waiting church

- Humility is foundational because it is how Jesus lives in the world.
- False humility is passive humility that is either forced from the outside or languishing on the inside of a person.
- True humility is a surrendering to God, stopping and confessing that having more cannot save us or our church.
- You die to yourself by confessing you're in need of a saving that you can't accomplish from your own striving for more.

Step 2 in Being, Not Having: Confession

- This good kind of dying leads to confession, thereby creating new possibilities
- A confession is different from an apology; confession moves to restoration of a broken relationship
- Confession is letting go, stopping, admitting, and waiting
- Jesus calls the Acts 1 church to wait – for the deep connection with God – spirit to Spirit
- We need to confess that our attention has been on accelerating to ward off decline or to achieve gain rather than attending to the connections right before us.

Step 3 in Being, Not Having: Gratitude

- When we confess and someone else receives it, even when it is a small connection, the response of the confessor is gratitude.
- Confession is an act of humility
- Dying in humility, confessing, is not a one-time event but continual.
- Gratitude comes from being seen and heard in the moment of humble death
- Connection is at the root of gratitude.
- In the move from having to being, to dying, humbling ourselves, and confessing, we dwell not only with each other; we dwell with God.

Being, Not Having: The Waiting Church

- A waiting church is waiting for God.
- Our crisis becomes the crisis of God's action.
- As we wait for God's action, we wait by ministering to one another in the present moment, in humility
- We're released from acceleration, which only wants us to spend energy for future resources, when we confess our loss and need in the now.
- The confession that is made, heard, and shared connects us deeply.
- The waiting church lives in the present, attending to relationships, in gratitude. This is how we are alive and attentive to the arrival of God.
- The rise and fall of Mars Hill in Seattle is an example of a church caught up in the secular age. People were used for the goal of more.
- When the ends justify the means, every church that buys into this logic of acceleration cannot encounter a God who comes to us in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

An Invitation to the Waiting Church

- The authors consider the waiting with a dying grandmother analogous to the waiting of the church, not avoiding decline, but facing death head on, grounded in the present.
- The waiting church finds life not by giving attention to the future and the resources needed to escape decline but by stewarding human connections. Then the future will take care of itself.
- The invitation to wait is difficult, but it is calling us to something meaningful

Resonance: Worship and Prayer

- The waiting church is one of worship and prayer, which are ways of life that seek connection with God in a community
- This kind of waiting can be called resonance
- Resonance is a way of being in the world that stays in the present because it doesn't get distracted by the future of more.
- Resonance seeks depth, participation, and union
- The best parts of life, the actions that change us, are uncontrollable, coming to us as the actions of resonance. We must wait for them.

Case Study: Red Paint

- Red paint, still wet on the church doors: What should the leadership do?
- The minister's response was confession.
- Considering what Scripture says about colonialism.

The definition of crisis that I believe the authors have in mind is this: "*An unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending.*" (from Meriam Webster) It was suggested that the Chinese characters for crisis include the concepts of danger and opportunity. Upon further research, the Chinese characters are better translated as danger and turning point. The second character means something like "incipient moment; crucial point – when something begins or changes." A crisis, then, is a dangerous moment, a time when things start to go awry, when one should be especially wary. It is *not* a juncture when one goes looking for advantages and benefits. In a crisis, one wants above all to save one's skin and neck.

We entered into a time of confession. The authors state, "True humility is a surrendering to God, stopping and confessing that having more cannot save us or our church." I invite you, the reader, to do so now as well.

Discussion:

Reflections on chapter 3:

- the concept of resonance has arisen
- Resonance puts you in the moment and helps with some anxiety in that you don't have to be thinking ahead all of the time. Enjoy it. Appreciate it.
- It's okay just to be here now.
- God does not call us to be successful but to be faithful. To be faithful involves us being present in the here and now.

- It sounds very idealistic. It's wonderful to stay in the moment. We're worried about our existence. If we keep going as we are the church is going to end. Even if we amalgamate we will just last a little bit longer but we will go down the same demise. If you're in a stable position, sure. But when you're trying to be there in the moment and also in the future moments.
- We don't necessarily need to be bigger and better, but at least stable.

The authors state, "The best parts of life, the actions that change us, are uncontrollable, coming to us as the actions of resonance." Recount a story of such an event in your life.

- Leaving insurmountable medical diagnoses bathed in prayer, in God's hands.
- "Holy detachment" – not demanding a certain outcome from God.
- When we are faithful to God, God will show themselves to be faithful
- Being open, hopeful
- In faith, handing things over to God. Sometimes something even better than what you had hoped for will happen
- Not along the lines of the adage, "If it is to be, it is up to me."

2 Questions:

1. The authors claim, "The waiting church finds life not by giving attention to the future and the resources needed to escape decline but by stewarding human connections. Then the future will take care of itself." Discuss.
 - Sometimes people complain about indoctrination in the church. We now realize that we have been indoctrinated into the secular age.
 - This waiting requires deep trust in God
 - Attending to each other during church coffee hour (renamed as friendship time)
 - Building deeper relationships in the congregation, building community, drawing people in
 - Instead of spending energy on anxiety over the future, spending it on each other in the present
 - This is very relevant for our church right now. It's a simple concept but it's something we need to embrace.
 - Let go of the idea that we're going to build the church and instead embrace the folks we have and do a really good job with those relationships. One example: "Today I had to admit that I wasn't feeling well. Three vats of soup were delivered! I can't believe the response people have given. They are my family. I'm so thankful."
 - Be in the present.
 - God works when we're in the present and not worried about the future.
2. We have read the examples of Mars Hill and the Southern Baptist Convention's failings. These churches had succumbed to the secular age in big ways. We have done so in smaller ways in seeking more relevance and resources. What are some very practical ways in which we can change from having to being? What will it take for us to implement these ways?
 - Put honest effort into helping others

- Assessing the past – church programs, etc. – and determining their usefulness in the present
- Church seems closer knit post-covid. We are resonating far more with each other coming back after covid.
- There seems to be a new way of being and enjoying each other
- More resonance
- Covid has really taught us the importance of community and how little of that is present in the secular world. Coffee hour is really valued now. It's bringing people into deeper relationship.
- Being in the moment versus reaching out, grasping at the future
- A mindset for our leadership team. We have to get our heads around that and start making our decisions with that in mind.
- Don't spend energy trying to look to the future but on our people now. That will lead to projects and outreach.
- Letting go of the past is part of accepting where we are. We can't go back. We can't spend all of our time trying to get back or to pursue the future. It's a very different time. We have to get our heads around the fact that this is where we are.
- Being in the moment is about trust instead of reaching and anxiety. Being in the moment can be very productive.