KINGDOM conversations

WHEN THE UNIVERSE CRACKS

LIVING AS GOD'S PEOPLE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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GROWING A CHURCH IN THE RUINS

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For many Christians in the US today, navigating the future—a territory rendered uncharted by multiple crises—and growing a church might feel like a daunting proposition, if not an impossible one. How do you navigate the unknown? In a crisis, it is necessary for us to prayerfully pause, redirect our focus to the basics of the church's mission, deconstruct how the old "normal" hid the larger crises that the church ignored for too long, and reimagine a design by which we might build the church anew in the ruins. A crisis has the potential to open new possibilities; the hope of rebuilding the church more faithful to the mission of God may lie on the other side.

As an analogy, consider the development of modern cities. They grew not through a smooth evolution but in fits and starts, via a series of disasters. That history shows how cities might cope with the COVID-19 pandemic—cities have faced existential crises before and have remade themselves to mitigate not only the immediate crisis but also address larger ones.[1]

For instance, in 1835, after a disastrous fire wiped out Lower Manhattan because firefighters could not access the frozen river water, New York City responded by building the Croton Aqueduct. It piped in fresh water from upstate, providing an ever-ready supply of water not only for firefighters but also clean drinking water to the city's residents. The city's leadership had been aware of the water-supply problem but did not do anything about it until a disaster forced them to act. In this way, disasters became engines that drove the dynamic transformation of cities.

Similarly, our present crisis presents an opportunity to shape the church in transformative ways. It can reveal the larger crises that we have ignored for too long and provide the urgency to finally act decisively.

True, a crisis not only presents opportunity but also danger. When Youngstown, Ohio, was struck with the crisis of the manufacturing industry departing the Rust Belt, it was abandoned instead of transformed. Youngstown, whose residents were by and large working class, did not elicit the same urgency that Lower Manhattan did. As journalist Derek Thompson explains, "Not all calamities summon

forth the better angels of our nature. A complete survey of urban disasters might show something closer to the opposite: 'Status-quo bias' can prove more powerful than the need for urgent change."[2] This applies to churches, too. Insisting on as speedy a return as possible to large public Sunday gatherings during the pandemic despite obvious public health hazards is an instance of "status-quo bias" at work.

If we can find a way to overcome this bias, however, there is an opportunity for the church to re-emerge from calamity better than before.

The Crisis That Revealed a Greater Crisis

In March 2020, as the American public was only beginning to grasp the growing scope of the global pandemic, we suddenly went into a shutdown. We were instructed to stay home and work remotely. Our children could not go to school. And churches could no longer meet in person—many scrambled to find ways to broadcast their Sunday services online instead. Initially, many of us thought (wishfully, as it turned out) that the shutdown would last a few weeks and we would return to normal. But the shutdown dragged out for months—as of this writing, although many restrictions have eased here in Philadelphia where I live, we are in shutdown week thirty-two.

Pastors began wondering out loud to me if their churches would survive financially. They fretted about their buildings, sitting empty week after week. They worried about drop-off in online service attendance. They were concerned about

giving amid sudden job losses and economic downturn. There is much cause for deep anxiety, and some have pushed for as quick a return to the old normal as possible.

But I don't believe that this time is one that we simply need to recover from. As the wildfires ravaging the western states—each year more deadly than the year before—portend the larger crisis of global climate change, the crisis faced by churches in the pandemic points to larger crises.

At this point, I feel it necessary to show my cards. In *The Shaping of Things to Come*,[3] Frost and Hirsch issue a call for the Western church to pivot from a Christendom mode to a missional mode appropriate for post-Christendom. The culture has undergone a massive paradigm shift; but the church in the West has largely failed to shift with it—status-quo bias at work, surely. Hence a slowly developing crisis has been overtaking the church. The pandemic, though, can present a moment of clarity to perceive our need for reinvention for the sake of mission. Many church leaders may find themselves disagreeing with my analysis, and since I lack the space here, I would encourage you to wrestle with Frost and Hirsch directly. Generally speaking, the closer you are to a postmodern cultural context, the more you will resonate. But even if you are firmly in the Bible Belt or living among neighbors with a modernistic outlook (as opposed to a postmodern one), culture change is likely on its way. It might be good to prepare now.

What are the contours of the larger crisis that this pandemic has revealed?

One, we have become overly dependent on a mode of church that invests most of our time, efforts, and resources on large-gathering productions on Sundays.

When church leaders switched over to online platforms, they faced the blank eye of the camera. There was no feedback, interaction, or engagement. Pastors found themselves seemingly preaching into the void. But isn't this the way things had been for a while? The goals of "doing church" had been polished worship experiences, marketing the church to visitors and members alike, featuring one-way monologues by preachers relying on their oratorical skills and personal charisma to get the gospel message across and build a ministry.

This attractional model of church had already been failing to connect with the younger generation of Christians,[4] as well as with the "Dones"—longtime Christians who had become disillusioned with prevailing models of church and dropped out.[5] Why? One of the Dones explained, "I'm tired of being lectured to. I'm just done with having some guy tell me what to do."[6] This speaks to the problem of clericalism and the disengagement of the laity. The pandemic only accelerated the disengagement already underway.

Two, we have become addicted to money and its representations, like buildings. Instead of resources being used for the common good and to meet the needs of the community's most vulnerable, church resources had been mostly tied up with buildings, staff, and programs.

When the pandemic hit, we found ourselves suddenly cash strapped. The financial challenge had been a growing

one for the church, however. It is a common sight to see church buildings getting remade as condos. Many seminary graduates, finding traditional employment in the ministry drying up, opted for the bivocational route or no ministry position at all. When churches could not use their own buildings due to the pandemic, they became portraits of a top-heavy church budget, spending more on itself than it could afford.

Three, the church has a massive witness problem. Outside the confined world of churchgoers, it has been increasingly difficult for the church to be seen as a credible source of truth. This is not only because the culture at large has been overrun by secularism—much of the damage has been self-inflicted.

In the midst of the pandemic, the nation was gripped by racial unrest and calls for justice. The response of the evangelical church was mixed at best. As one wry observer noted, "I'm afraid evangelicals are more concerned about Critical Race Theory than they are with racism."[7] This highlights the larger history of racism in the American church.[8] As long as this denial persists, the gospel message of the new community of Christ will continue to be undermined.

Four, pastoral ministry has been in need of reform; the pandemic has further exposed this. Pastors were expected to major in personal-celebrity appeal and dynamic leadership. A consolidation of power and, too often, its abuses have been the result, as was the growing disengagement of the laity. With the arrival of the pandemic, pastors' isolation from the rest of the faith community became palpable, but it had already

been there. The new center of spiritual life, worship, and discipleship became more clearly the home—but the spiritual leader could only speak into it, one way, through a screen. A discipleship that grows spiritual leaders in every household had been absent in too many churches.

These are some of the interrelated manifestations of a confluence of crises: The church lives in a post-Christendom world but has not kicked its Christendom habit of power, privilege, and wealth; the church seeks to carry out its mission via church-industrial complex philosophy and methodology—a modern, mechanistic worldview ill-suited to our postmodern world; and the church is invested in a consumerist spirituality that lacks a sense of prophetic calling and so has lost credibility and spiritual authority. These crises have been pointed out, analyzed, and talked about for years, but a sudden cataclysm may be what finally brings the church to a point of paradigm shift.

The Opportunity That Arises from Crisis

In 2011, when David Kinnaman surveyed the bleak landscape of Millennials' disengagement from church, he nevertheless struck this hopeful note:

> Tensions between faith and culture can give rise to new forms of cultural and social engagement, and the decline of the celebrity-driven Christian subculture creates space for local, real-life relationships with genuine Christ-followers.[9]

This hopefulness comes from an understanding of Christianity that is missional. The mission of God moves forward not because the church enjoys worldly power and privilege but because the Spirit of Christ safeguards and leads his church to new life—in sometimes surprising, fresh ways!—through hardships and crises. By "missional," I don't mean tacking ministries and programs that serve those outside the church onto a come-to-us, attractional ministry of Christendom. With Frost and Hirsch, I want to see churches rediscover their mission and sentness to the world, rearrange everything for the sake of reaching their post-Christendom context, and become go-to-them, incarnational churches. As Paul said, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). This applies not only to individual missionaries but to the whole people of God, with implications for the way we do church.

A Christendom understanding of mission has to do with expansion, occupation, and conquest, in line with colonialist policies of old European empires. The mission of Christendom is thus inherently triumphalistic; it naturally grasps for comfort, power, and privilege for the church. The assumption that the church has a right to the center of culture is behind the centrality of big Sunday gatherings, power-consolidating clergy, and bias for the status quo against prophetic calls for reform and justice. In contrast, in the missional stance, the mission of the church is inherently cruciform; in this paradigm, the mission finds its home, its true self, within a crisis. Growing bigger, doing more, or

having a larger influence is not the point; to be in solidarity with the marginalized is, because the church, and its Lord, is marginalized in this world (Hebrews 13:12-14).

David Bosch said, "It is . . . *normal* for Christians to live in a situation of crisis."[10] It is to its detriment that the church doesn't acknowledge this reality because it became too comfortable and lost sight of its identity and mission. Bosch continues, "Let us also know that to encounter crisis is to encounter the possibility of truly being the *church*."[11] These are words for our time.

You still might not be convinced. Besides wrestling with Frost and Hirsch, and with Bosch whom I quoted, I would suggest you listen to the young people who have left church, as described by Kinnaman. Take time also to listen deeply to why non-Christians might like Jesus but not his church. The way we have been doing church—and not Christ and his gospel message—might be why.

I hope you can see why I believe that our present crisis could be an opportunity for the church to reset, pivot from Christendom, and wholly embrace the journey of becoming its true self for such a time as this. The church has been granted the theological imagination to reinvent and rebuild. For people of resurrection, death becomes a doorway out of which a new life emerges. So we do not pine for a return to normal as our deliverance, but we long for a resurrection that overshadows the old life. A crisis might not be a grave but a womb. Our resilience comes from our theology of resurrection.

The Shape of a Church Forged by Crisis

What are the new possibilities opened for the church, now that we have been afforded a crisis? I offer a few strokes of a sketch.

Pastors Will Reframe Their Roles in the Church

Instead of Sunday preaching their major work and visionary, charismatic leadership as CEO their chief metaphor, pastors will shift their focus to discipling, developing, and deploying other leaders, cultivating the gifts of the whole congregation, and convening the community to seek the leading of the Spirit for the body. There will be a pivot from consolidating power to decentralizing it.

The recent rise of the bivocational pastorate makes this pivot almost necessary. In this framework, the ministry is not the pastor's alone; the ideal is the priesthood of all believers. The missiologist Roland Allen had this in mind when he spoke of "the spontaneous expansion of the church"—what happens when the church is freed from clericalism and the laity becomes essential actors (not spectators) in the common missional life of the Spirit.[12]

Related to the shifting role of the pastor is a shift in our theology of church.

Our Theology of Church Will Shift

We are in the habit of thinking of churches as institutions housed in buildings with a class of professionals running them. But the pandemic has shown just how frail the linkage between the church as an institution and the Christian

household isolated during a pandemic can be. Moving forward, the apostolic DNA latent in each household needs to be activated. This is a possibility when every believer in the church is already on the discipleship path of cultivating and exercising their leadership gifts in community. Spiritual leadership in households becomes a natural outflow.

Alan Hirsch has championed fivefold leadership gifting of the church to call the whole church, not just the clergy, back to its missional vocation and identity. It is a theology of church that has been dubbed "movement ecclesiology"[13] because church is conceived as a movement growing from the grassroots, not an institution that operates top-down. The leadership potential already resides within each gathering of disciples, no matter how small (even individual households), and when these groups are activated, multiplied, and networked, we have an organic movement that has the capacity to work and grow spontaneously, led by the Spirit.[14]

Movement ecclesiology is well suited for life in the ruins. When institutional superstructures become obsolete, church communities don't get hung up on status-quo bias, but rather reimagine, reinvent, and reforge a new way forward because we always had what we needed all along. This is how Jesus did his community—he shared all his life together with his disciples as they participated in ministry together. This becomes the archetype for "the organic people movement" that we call church, for our time.[15]

Tod Bolsinger, writing specifically for the kind of leadership that the pandemic calls for, notes that in order to prepare

for the unknown, we will need strong communities that nurture a high level of trust and engage in common work and life.[16] Small groups of disciples on mission can provide strong community in ways large-group Sunday gatherings cannot.

Thus we can grow our community's ability to adapt quickly and effectively, no matter what crises may come our way, without being thrown into a panic because we suddenly find that we had relied overmuch on the comforts of our institutional structures. What is needed at this time of crisis, more than ever, is a decentralization of leadership, resources, and power and detoxing from our addiction to money, building, and clericalism.

But how are we supposed to cultivate community during a pandemic, when we have been cut off from each other?

The pandemic has opened some surprising possibilities. For instance, some formed "pandemic bubbles." They entered a covenant of sorts to share a life together for the duration of the crisis and mitigate mounting stress on individual families. This arrangement has enabled them to share childcare, schooling, cooking and other chores, as well as provide an outlet for relational needs that a nuclear family cannot on its own. These bubbles point us to important possibilities for how we conceive of church.

David Brooks wrote about the history and limitations of the American nuclear family in his article, "The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake," and showed how our society has been adapting and creating new forms of family—forged families and fictive kins. These new extended families are becoming

more widespread as the nuclear family has receded. Instead of trying to hold on to the nuclear family as the ideal (which has led to increasing isolation and loneliness), it is time to welcome the new norm, Brooks exhorts. "It's time to find ways to bring back the big tables."[17]

Of course, a church is more than fictive kinship—it is spiritual kinship, a community of many made one by Christ. When the church sought to behave more like an institution than an extended family, its shortcomings were laid bare by rapid culture change and the pandemic. Might this moment signal a call to reclaim this nature of the church as a new family—a "bubble" not for the sake of convenience or survival but for the sake of an alternative community of the Kingdom?

It is interesting to examine how churches used technology during the pandemic. Some focused on producing as polished a presentation of the Sunday experience as possible. But one must question the quality and depth of long-term engagement with the church of any newcomers gained this way. As those who dropped out of church can testify, not expecting new followers to do much more than sit for service, no matter how well produced, forms us into consumers and not disciples—a pitfall of an attractional church.

But others put their focus on utilizing technology to cultivate community. Instead of broadcasting Sunday service as their main focus (without necessarily doing away with it), they instead maximized the interactive capabilities of online platforms to deepen communal connections—discussing

biblical teachings, encouraging each other in obedience, providing mutual emotional and spiritual support, and engaging in communal prayer. Some even found ways to have love feasts and communions online.[18]

These are creative ways to employ modern technology to return to churches' ancient roots of community.[19] In the process, they set up a new community to arise on the other side of the pandemic. These budding faith communities will need to be encouraged to continue following this path of cultivating kinship even when we emerge from shutdowns, in person and around physical tables, ready to welcome others in need of a hospitable fellowship of God seekers.

Missional-Incarnational Opportunities Will Be Revealed

When challenged to care for the hurting in their own neighborhoods and realize an embedded (or incarnational) model of church, many Christians have responded, "There aren't any poor in my neighborhood," and resorted to a tourist model of missions. Life of service was relegated to the occasional rather than being a daily reality. This perception of needs being absent in their own backyards often stems from a lack of knowledge of their own neighborhoods, however. A crisis can provide the church with a fresh missional-incarnational opportunity.

Along with many in our society, Christians have often neglected to take seriously their place and situatedness. We were not taught to be good students of our communities; instead, we were taught to be committed to the church as an

institution. The result was that we became good Christians but lousy neighbors.[20] An institution can create its own ever-increasing demand to be taken care of, instead of facilitating mission. Much energy and time is required to run the programs, fund the ministry, and build the building. So many Christians become absent from their own blocks, where young people who need mentors or families get their needs met not from God's people but from street gangs. The church must rediscover its incarnational mission and its calling to solidarity with the hurts and the joys of its parish.

But when the insatiable demands of the church-industrial complex are interrupted, we have the opportunity to look around our neighborhood and reset. Those who are struggling with hardship are now as readily apparent as food-bank lines stretching down our communities' thoroughfares or tent cities springing up in our downtown districts. As our world shrank, many of us became engaged with our immediate neighbors and their needs. We went on grocery-shopping runs for them; we displayed signs of encouragement on our windows; we formed text-messaging chains. Church buildings that were sitting empty got turned into community centers to mobilize neighbors to distribute food to the hungry and fearful, to get organized for community interests, and to simply support each other in times of need, as neighbors should.

In the wake of crisis, some churches will need to merge with others. Is it possible to imagine such a merger with an eye toward the needs of our world? I am thinking especially of racial justice. If churches are going to be reconfigured

anyway, why take the easiest possible road and keep congregations homogeneous? Instead, should we not imagine heterogeneous mergers?

It is often noted, in a rueful, resigned manner, that Sunday at 11:00 a.m. is still the most segregated hour in America. What if the pandemic is giving us an opportunity to break down this segregation? Instead of simply throwing up our hands and saying, "That's just the way it's always been," shouldn't a reset of our congregations address the nation's original sin?

If so, such undertakings will need to pay careful attention to the racial power dynamics. Past efforts at multiracial congregations have been naive to White privilege and thus produced churches that imposed a melting-pot model of racial integration, papering over the hard work of racial reconciliation and justice with tokenism.[21] Going forward, we will need to take care that multicultural congregations will feature voices of color as primary voices.

Building renewed congregations and missional communities in the aftermath of a crisis will not be easy. But our society and our churches may finally be more ready than ever for such bold, embodied gospel witness. Indeed, building such faith communities is what will give credibility to our witness.

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These are but a few sketches of how churches could rebuild in the ruins, if they are able to overcome their status-quo bias,

to reset and emerge from the pandemic as incarnational communities. Many details will vary greatly from one local context to another, from one congregation to another; there will be many unexpected surprises, some pleasant, others not as much; there will be delightful creativities and breakthroughs; there will be hardships that will require the perseverance of the saints. We will need to learn to wait and listen to the leading of the Spirit as God leads, step by step—another pivot from a self-confident Christendom mode. May the Lord lead us into the new, uncharted land with faith and expectancy. He can make everything new, including us, his church.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

A Kingdom conversation, such as the one this book is intended to start, has the potential, in small and big ways, to transform the world. As we allow God to bring his higher thoughts to bear on our limited vision and finite wisdom, we don't just interact thoughtfully; we do so prayerfully, subjecting ourselves to the sovereignty of a God who loves us and wants good for us and from us.

As such, Kingdom conversations take place both individually and collectively. We don't settle merely for personal reflection that deepens our private piety, or for dialogue that ends in chin-stroking self-congratulation. Rather, we engage in honest and humble conversation with God, with ourselves, and with others so that we can see where Jesus is leading us now to proclaim and demonstrate, near and far, that God is here, God is good, and God is for us.

What follows are questions to prime the pump for these Kingdom conversations. Almost every question is designed

to be considered personally, for the purposes of private and public reflection and confession, and corporately, in order to listen to and learn from other perspectives, to learn to love one another, and to seek God together as a faith community.

The questions are organized by chapter in case you wish to move slowly through the book together. If you wish to discuss the book as a whole in one conversation, it's best to review the questions ahead of time and focus together on the questions that help you move from curiosity to conviction, from head to heart to hands.

Introduction

- Why did you decide to read this book?

Chapter 1: What Is a Crisis?

- In what ways have you experienced personal/internal upheaval during a recent crisis? What about in your external world, including work, church, neighborhood, relationships, and activities?
- What did this crisis reveal about your assumptions, your emotions, your relationships, your habits, your spiritual life?
- Where and how did you experience or create communitas in the midst of this crisis? What effect did this have on you?
- Would you describe yourself as energized more by hatred or by joy? What needs to change so that your focus shifts to "the joy set before us"?

Chapter 2: Notes on a Recent Crisis

- Which perspective—panoramic, peripheral, pastoral, or personal—tends to dominate your view, and which is most challenging to you?
- Have you ever felt these perspectives in tension with each other in your own life? When and how?
- How do you feel—and then how do you respond—when other people have a differing perspective about a crisis?
- Did you experience any alignment among these perspectives? How did each support the others?

Chapter 3: Crisis While the World Marches On

- How do you feel about the exposures described in this chapter?
- Do you ever feel the tension of "double consciousness" in your own life with issues regarding race?
- What have you learned from the Black Church? What else might you need to learn?
- What part is God calling you to play—individually, in your friendships, in your church, and in your community—in working for justice and racial reconciliation?

Chapter 4: A Brief History of Crisis

- Imagine yourself living during one of the historical crises described in this chapter or from your own knowledge of history. Imagine the fears and hopes,

the uncertainty, perhaps the difficult choices facing Christians during that time. How does this inform your perspective of the crises in our own time?

- Someday, historians will write about the crises of 2020—wildfires, racial protests, the COVID-19 pandemic, the US presidential election—as a defining moment for God's people. What do you think the history books will say about how Christians responded? What do you think Jesus would say?
- What might it look like to practically live out faith during a crisis?

Chapter 5: The Bible's Catalog of Crisis

- What gives you your identity? How were these qualities affected by a recent crisis?
- What losses, big and small, have caused you to weep? Why?
- What can you do to genuinely seek the welfare of your perceived enemies when you feel like an exile or an outsider?
- What does faithfulness look like for you in this season?

Chapter 6: Jesus Wouldn't Waste a Crisis

- Is it easy or natural for you to view current events through the lens of eternity? If not, what tends to cloud your perspective?

- What is your practice regarding corporate prayer? When was the last time you gathered to pray with a group of believers? Were those prayers characterized by boldness and hope, or by fear? Why, do you think?
- Would you live differently if you knew Christ was coming back within the next month? How?
- Can you honestly say that Jesus is all you need, that you would be content if he were all you had? What gets in the way of your contentment? Be specific.

Chapter 7: A Spirituality of Crisis Response

- Which fears tend to manifest themselves most strongly in your life? What is your usual response to those fears? Do you isolate, self-protect, become angry or hopeless, or some other response?
- What is your experience with lament, both individually and corporately?
- How did your understanding of lament change or expand after reading this chapter?
- In what areas in your life are you holding on to unrealized and unexpressed grief? What will you do to move through lament and toward healing in those areas?

Chapter 8: Growing a Church in the Ruins

- What strengths and weaknesses did the COVID-19 pandemic reveal about your church?

- What opportunities do you see for your church in the coming months?
- What must be rebuilt or reset in response to these revelations and opportunities?
- What paradigm shifts will this require? What will need to be left behind? Who will need to lead these efforts? What will be your role in this work?

Chapter 9: He Has Shown Us What Is Good

- Do you tend to think of Christianity in terms of "I" or "we"? Why?
- In what ways have you seen God's people come together in response to crisis?
- How is God inviting you to join his work in the world? What will be your next steps in response to this invitation and the needs around you? Be specific.
- Who do you see as teammates in the work of the Kingdom?

Chapter 10: God Remains Good

- What are you honestly feeling right now?
- With which biblical character and his/her struggles—referenced in this chapter or elsewhere in Scripture—do you most identify? How was God there for that person? Do you believe God cares for you in the same way? Why or why not?
- How is God inviting you to join his work in the world? What will be your next steps in response

to this invitation and the needs around you? Be specific.

- Where have you experienced God's goodness in your life in the last week?
- Spend a few minutes silently in God's presence. Pray whatever response comes to your heart.

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