

What Is the Future of the Church? **by Jack Price**

Good morning! My name is Jack Price and I am the senior pastor of Crossroads Church in Kansas City. Crossroads is a faithful member of the Alliance of Baptists and this organization is our sole denominational connection. Before coming to Kansas City I served for nineteen years as an associate pastor for another Alliance congregation -- Vienna Baptist Church in Virginia.

I was asked speak to you regarding a recent article by Alliance staff member Chris Copeland in the Alliance newsletter. I was asked because of the positive reaction I had to the article. I liked it so I e-mailed Chris and told him so. Chris expressed a core tension shared by many who work in the church – maintenance of the institution vs. a vital church experience that “centers on relationships, authentic experiences of God, and the natural flow of justice and compassion.”

The issue for me was not so much Chris’ struggle with his feelings about church work. The larger issue is the struggle, shared by the Alliance and other churches, to find a genuine experience of church within organized religion in the twenty-first century. I contacted Chris in response to his article because the feelings I heard him express resonated in me. These views are also widely held by many faithful Christians.

There is a problem in the Christian Church! It’s a problem that raises a serious question: “What is the future of the Church?” Two young men, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, work in the field of market research. They are both committed and evangelical Christians, have published a book with the dubious title *UnChristian*. It offers a perspective on Christianity as viewed by 16-29 years olds who are not currently active in a church. Many of these *outsiders* actually grew up in the church, but they are now outside the church.

According to their extensive research, there has been a sharp increase in the amount and the depth of animosity toward the Church over the last decade. The perception by most of those surveyed is that Christians are anti-homosexual, too involved in politics, judgmental and intolerant of other faiths, and out of touch with people today. Now, you may agree with those surveyed or you may not agree. The truth that is hard to deny is that the perception of anywhere from half to almost 90% of young people outside the church today see Christianity in an unfavorable light.

This information is not a surprise to those who have watched people leaving mainline denominations in droves. This needs to be, however, a wake up call to Christians today. The very people we need to reach most desperately with the message of God’s love are feeling more and more disconnected from church. This is happening at the very time the world seems to be desperately in need of the peace, justice, and hope that were basic to Jesus’ message. The perceptions of the young people surveyed might be erroneous, but if this is what they are perceiving, then it is less likely they will be open to hear the message of Jesus.

The task of each new generation of Christians is to renew the faith, to own it for ourselves, and to find that place where the life of faith intersects the language of the current culture. The challenge to Christians in the 21st century is to rediscover the core identity of what it means to be followers of Jesus. We are living in a time of tremendous change in society and culture. *Post-modernism* is the name given to this period of transition from the values of modernism – of the Enlightenment – to whatever will come next.

The church reflects this general societal and cultural change. Add to that, recent developments in biblical scholarship, archaeology and other sciences, and the widespread information that is so readily available on the internet. There is a lot of new thinking and new feeling going on! One church leader, Bishop John Shelby Spong, compared the current situation to the Protestant Reformation except, he said, the current reformation makes that one look like a tea party!

We are not living in a world that has forgotten Jesus, but we are living in a time in which the role of the Christian Church is changing significantly. Doctrines and perspectives that were just assumed for centuries are now being questioned not only from outside the church, but also from within it.

Does the church have a role to play in today's *flattening* world? Absolutely!

The need today for God's love – for peace, justice, and good news of liberty for the oppressed (Jesus' own mission statement) is tremendous. The church is still called to live, represent, and interpret God's new creation in today's world to people with diverse backgrounds, faith traditions, beliefs, and non-beliefs.

The theme of journey is powerful for the life of faith. Churches can be places where people explore and seek an understanding of their faith in an atmosphere of trust and safety. People need the shared journey that churches can offer -- where people ask hard questions in love, share their developing understandings, and seek to integrate their actions and their beliefs. The very process of asking honest questions really matters. Asking them right out loud even in church is an energizing process. People care because the questions are honest and because the questions are theirs.

Jesus is still the way, the alternative way to conventional wisdom in a consumer society. This way lies at the intersection of the church and the marketplace. It is as much there as here. This is what is compelling about church today. Jesus is not our possession to sell to the world. He is the way we know about God, the way we see God more clearly. He is the eternal God with a human face. Our calling is to let others see Jesus in our faces. Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow has suggested that the role of church in the twenty-first century is less telling people to "come in here" for the answers. What the church can do is identify where God is at work in the world now, lifting that work up, and naming the Spirit's presence.

The more clearly we frame the deepest questions of our lives and invite people to ask their most meaningful questions, the more powerfully we all will be able to find living answers. This is the hope we have to offer the world. Despite what we may think about these questions, they need to be asked. They also need us to live into our answers as honestly as we possibly can in Jesus' name.

Problems Facing the Church

1. Negative feelings
 - Church leadership burns out – feeling responsible without power to make changes
 - Church membership drain – feeling of failure

2. Time of change
 - Church dying or dead – weight of its own history?
 - Need for resurrection/new birth
 - Possibility of the end of church
 - Postmodernism
 - Critical condition
 - New Reformation – implications of Tillich, etc.
 - What are we wanting to happen?
 - Preserve institutional church vs. new creation
 - Challenging new information, scholarship, etc.

3. Role of the 21st century church
 - What do we offer that people need?
 - What is compelling about church?