

Foreword by Len Hjalmarson



# THEY'RE JUST NOT THAT INTO YOU

*The Church's Struggle For Relevancy in  
the 21st Century*

STEPHEN R. HARPER

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## Preface

Almost everyone who has experienced the break up of a relationship or watched a romantic comedy is familiar with the line, "It's not you, it's me." What this person is really saying is that, "I'm not really that interested in you and I want to let you down easy." It's a common break up line, but when verbal communication fails, non-verbal cues take their place. When non-verbals are employed, the person in question will simply stop calling you or taking your calls. As strange as it seems, this is the situation that the church finds itself in today. As the cultures of Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have shifted to become secular, there has been a clear message sent to the church. Except this time, the message that they are telling us is the reverse of the classic breakup line. They are saying, "It's not us, it's you."

The days of the church sharing a high degree of resonance with the surrounding culture are over. The world that we live in now is one that boasts myriad cultural expressions all contained within a complex secular matrix. This has left the church scratching its proverbial head, wondering why people don't attend anymore. The reason that people aren't going to church anymore is that *they're just not that into you*. To some, this can seem quite confusing because we live in a very "spiritual" age. Currently, there is a high interest in God, as evidenced in the Canadian context by a recent poll stating that

87 percent of Canadians still believe in God,<sup>1</sup> however they are less and less interested in being part of the church with each passing year. Can anything be done about this? The good news is, yes! The solution is two fold. If the church is going to once again have a voice in Canada, North America and the rest of the western world, the first thing that it must do is realize how much the world around it has changed in the last few decades, and adjust its methodologies to match. Secondly, the church must pull itself away from the comfort and trappings of its subcultural expression and re-engage the culture around it. It's only after it address these key issues that it will be able to re-engage western culture with the gospel in a significant and meaningful way.

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<sup>1</sup> Bricker, *What Canadians Think*, 80.

# Chapter 1

## *The Times They Are A-Changin'*

Ever since Jesus gave the command to, “go and make disciples,” cultural engagement or evangelism, as it has been referred to over the years, has been one of the foundational tasks of the church. We in the evangelical wing take the task particularly seriously. We devote much time to it, spend vast sums of money both developing programs and then training people to implement those programs, not to mention the countless books written on the subject. Yet in spite of all of these efforts, we have seen fewer and fewer returns on our investment of time, talent and treasure over recent years. In fact, we have not only seen a decrease in the effectiveness of our cultural engagement methodologies in the last forty years, but we have also experienced a dramatic decrease in both church attendance and the overall amount of influence that the church has on society. The sad truth is that within the context of the western world, most people are just not that interested in the church. To put it into more colloquial terms, “they’re just not that into us.” So what happened?

What has happened, as Bob Dylan noted in one of his songs, is that *the times they are a-changin’*.<sup>2</sup> These observant words that Dylan penned in 1964 are as true now as they were then. In fact, Dylan’s words carry with them both a prophetic

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<sup>2</sup> Dylan, *The Times They Are A-Changin’*.

and a profound value today. The problem, simply put, is that the world has changed. “The ‘modern’ world which has prevailed since the enlightenment – with its cardinal principle of radical doubt, its broad rejection of the supernatural, its elevation of rationalism, its empiricism and its conviction that human nature is basically good – is on the way out.”<sup>3</sup> We have shifted, and are still in the process of shifting, from the “modern” era to what has become known as the “postmodern era.” Postmodern thought, which was first postulated by philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, has been around since the nineteenth century, but most sociologists agree that postmodernity started to pick up steam in the early 1960s after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and John and Robert Kennedy.<sup>4</sup> After these watershed events, the social climate of North America seemed to become increasingly cynical.

The church has not been without its share of events that have contributed to this growing sense of cultural cynicism. The failings of religious leaders like Jim Jones, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker and Ted Haggard, just to name a few, have all contributed toward a negative public perception of the church. As a result of these and other betrayals of trust, there has been a growing feeling of suspicion and cynicism that has become a part of the social fabric of the United States and Canada. In fact, in a recent Canadian poll almost ninety

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<sup>3</sup> Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Halter and Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 63.

percent of Canadians say they trust their doctors, but only sixty-five percent said that they trust church representatives.<sup>5</sup> This distrust of its leaders has far-reaching ramifications for the church.

One of the primary implications of this climate of distrust is that we must now begin the process of cultivating relationships and earning confidence before people listen to us. For this reason, cultural engagement must transition from its historic presentation and attractional mode<sup>6</sup> to an almost completely relational and missional approach.<sup>7</sup> After all, if we do not have their trust, they will not hear us and if they do not hear us, how will they believe? It is because of this shift that the methodologies and practices which worked in the past will continue to become less and less effective as we move further into this new era.

Unfortunately, in the midst of these massive seismic cultural shifts, church leaders and individual Christians in most denominations have either been oblivious, indifferent or in complete denial to the obvious changes occurring around them. In fact, it seems that in Canada the evangelical church

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<sup>5</sup> Leger Marketing, “How Canadians Perceive Various Professions,” 11.

<sup>6</sup> Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 18. The attractional church can be summed up by the words, *come and tell*. It “assumes that if they build it, and build it hip and cool, people will come,” and once people come to the church the attractional mode relies on a propositional and presentational method of communicating the Gospel.

<sup>7</sup> The Missional approach can be summed up by the words, *go and be*. It is a proactive approach that is focused on going out to engage culture rather than waiting for culture to come to the church building.

has gone so far as to have retreated into itself and become a sub-culture instead of the countercultural movement it is meant to be. For example, it seems to be more and more common for Canadian Christians to have only Christian friends, read Christian books, listen almost exclusively to Christian music and send their kids to Christian schools.<sup>8</sup> Not that there is anything wrong with these things in and of themselves. However, in many cases they have become a fortress, which enables Christians to hide from the culture around them, rather than engage it. Further, it is in this context that many times cultural engagement creates conformity to the church sub-culture rather than a call to a counter-cultural life.

Cultural engagement, or evangelism in the modern world has been expressed in a variety of ways that for the most part can be put into one of two camps – mass evangelism or seeker evangelism.<sup>9</sup> The dominant method of evangelism over the last 150 years has been the evangelistic crusade. And though it has gone by other names, like tent meetings or revivals, and has had minor content updates over the years, the overall idea has remained the same. The premise is to hold a big event with a dynamic speaker and invite all of the “non-Christians” to come and get “saved.” For example, when we think of evangelistic methods, we might picture men like Billy Graham

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<sup>8</sup> A personal observation from 20 years of ministry in a variety of settings.

<sup>9</sup> Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 216.

preaching in a church building or perhaps a great arena.<sup>10</sup> In fact, in the context of mass attractional evangelism, “Charles G. Finney and Billy Graham are bookends. What Charles G. Finney, the father of modern urban mass evangelism started, Billy Graham ended.”<sup>11</sup>

In the last couple of decades, the crusade event has been replaced by an ongoing Sunday service format change called the “seeker sensitive” approach, which has usually meant toning down the content of the worship service in order to make “seekers” who may be in attendance more comfortable. Both of these approaches have been effective in the past and many have come to faith in the highly emotive environment of a crusade or the “user-friendly” environment of the seeker approach of the 80s and 90s. However, the world has changed. We can no longer expect the outside world to come to us, as we have in the past.

Virtually all the historic Protestant denominations in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States are in serious decline. In fact, it has been reported that “church attendance in Britain has declined from 7.5 percent in 1998 to 6.3 percent in 2007, and it is projected to continue declining.”<sup>12</sup> On the other side of the Atlantic, *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* places weekly attendance in

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<sup>10</sup> Green, Evangelism, 300.

<sup>11</sup> Sweet, *Soul Tsunami*, 95.

<sup>12</sup> Sine, *The New Conspirators*, 205.

Canada at 18 percent and at 35 percent in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Pollsters like Darrell Bricker back up this fact. In his book *What Canadians Think*, he claims that since 1949 weekly church attendance has dropped in half from 40 percent to a meager 20 percent.<sup>14</sup> Bricker goes further, saying that while Canadians' belief in God is still quite high at 87 percent, a full 81 percent of Canadians "agree that you don't have to go to church to be a good Christian."<sup>15</sup> This would indicate that for Canadians the problem is not so much with God but with the church. The fact is – the church has an image problem.

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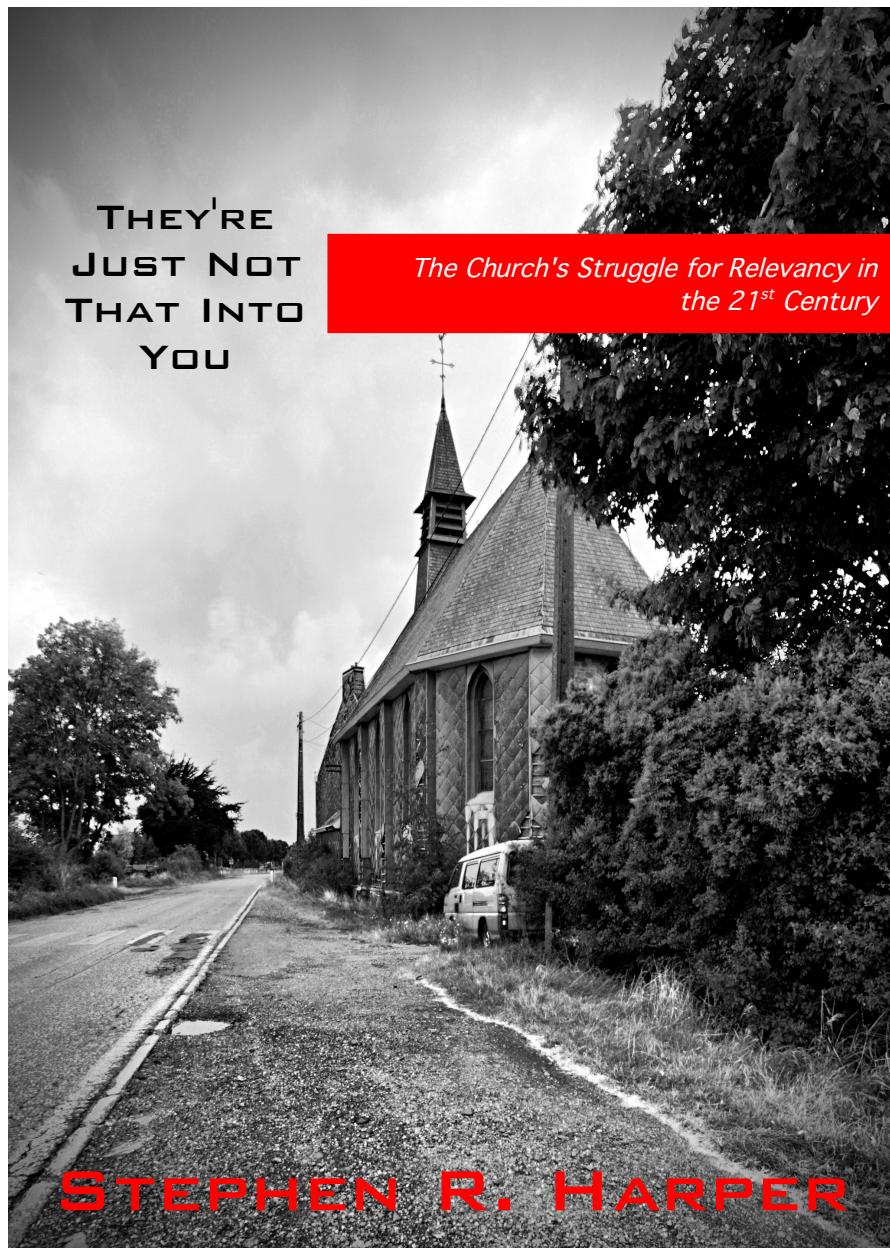
<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *What Canadians Think*, 80.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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