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Bigotry, Riots, Looting: Have Christians Lost America?

Not all “cops” are bad. Not all “Christians” are racially respectful. Absolutes are dangerous! It’s complicated. No one is perfect except Jesus. Yet, Christ-followers are forgiven. That is a miracle! Life is not an event. It’s a process. Faith is a growth journey.

My confession? Writing my recent book, *Restoring Civility*, I wanted to help Christians improve their lives and change their churches. Healthier churches impact society. My confession is how writing the book changed me.

As a church consultant with a passion for more impactful congregations, I have traveled a lot. After the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York, life changed. Now, I had to go through airport security. In the early days, security wasn’t very private. I went through an airport in the Southeast, and the security guard made me take off my belt. I had recently lost some weight, and my pants fell down—in front of a line of travelers in a crowded hallway!

Honestly? My attitude about the “security hassle” wasn’t very good. And these people were actually protecting my safety—as well as

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Lessons from the Master (www.restoringcivilitybook.com). Kent is also the chief architect of the SEND Movement, a renewal experience for church members who want to become missionaries among those who are unchurched in their social networks (www.thesendmovement.com).

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the safety of others! How absurd, I'm embarrassed to admit.

While researching for the book, I learned that “civility” means “respect”—something to think about from every angle of today's news reports. So, I made a decision. Instead of having a bad attitude about the security hassle, I decided to speak to each security agent I encountered: “Thank you for keeping us safe.”

My point? Many of the security people have had positive responses as I was *civil* to them. However, *practicing civility did something to me*. It sounds a little nuts, I know. But I began to look forward to passing through security! And, my blood pressure was greatly decreased. Yet, I wonder, “How are Christians impacting our nation?”

The Christian Point

As I studied Scripture and as I wrote *Civility*, it became clearer than ever before: Jesus had a lot to say about respectful behavior. So did Paul, James, Peter, and other biblical contributors. There's a lot in Scripture about how society functions with respect—or not!

Most of my career has been dedicated to helping churches become healthier congregations with more effective mission outreach to their communities. So, when I see our troubled nation, it's only natural to wonder: Is the Christian movement losing ground? Have you ever thought about that?

If not, you should give it some thought—and prayer. While there are some healthy, growing churches in the U.S., reaching unbelievers, many churches are plateaued or declining and aging. A Gallup poll last year reflected that only 50 percent of Americans practice faith.

PRESCRIPTIONS FROM THE CHURCH DOCTOR PODCAST

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Statistics can be complicated and misleading, yet, for the last three decades, I've asked believers if we Christians are losing the country. Almost everyone agrees: “...by just about every measure, yes—we are losing.”

Spiritual Cycle

By the end of the second century A.D., the Mediterranean world was substantially Christian. Today? Not so much! Europe has hundreds of beautiful cathedrals—evidence of a time when Christian worship was a high priority. Today? They are primarily tourist attractions. Faith communities are few and far between. In England, there is a renewal movement among a few hundred churches. For the past two decades, we have taken groups to the U.K. each year, to see, feel, and experience what God is doing. Renewal is more “caught” than taught. For most of our North American travelers, it is an uplifting, spiritual experience. It also gives us ideas for our own churches. It is a model of what could happen here in the United States.

My Theory

How did we get here? What happens when the Christian faith is “white-hot,” then cools—and loses impact on a society? My understanding represents a lifetime of asking that question, searching Scripture, and working with almost 2,000 churches from 78 denominations and independent and nondenominational congregations.

When I went to college and seminary, I had “spiritual heartburn” to reach lost people for Jesus. I wanted to learn everything I could on how to do it. I never got it! So, I continued my schooling and went on to graduate school at the seminary. After almost 12 years and a PhD in theology, I learned: (1) a lot of great doctrine and (2) how to *manage* Christians in an established church. And that’s it!

I was sent to pastor my first church: a rapidly declining, aging, all-Anglo church in an inner-city community that was about 70 percent unchurched African American families. I learned very quickly: I did not have the training to reach out or equip my church to grow. Since then, I’ve discovered that most pastors in the U.S.—of any tradition—have NOT had outreach training. I later learned that the few classmates in my seminary class who felt “called to the mission field” went on to study at a “mission school.” They were all sent to “foreign lands.”

So, as a pastor in Detroit, I decided to go to mission school for two-week intensive sessions, three times a year, for three and a half years. It changed my life! It changed our church. It helped our church reach our community. I thought, “If it worked here, it would work anywhere.” And I believe that!

Here is what I think has happened. After a while, the believers in a “Christianized” place in this world drift into the false notion that “everyone is a Christian.” The “mission field” becomes “a place over there.” So, most training institutions for pastors equip them to manage Christians. Most pastors do not learn *missiology*. Therefore, they can’t train the members of their churches in how to do mission—how to do practical outreach. So, churches try one program after another—with meager results. Why? Because they’re “church members” and have never had the opportunity to also become “missionaries.” Churches decline and close. That area of the world, after many years, is left with a remnant of believers who are ineffective to reach unbelievers. In North America, most churches are on that path.

Practical Steps

There are several steps you can take. If God is speaking to you to become part of the mission movement desperately needed in most churches:

- 1) Ask God to break your heart for what breaks His: lost people for whom Christ died.
- 2) Read your New Testament with a focus on how to reach lost people: many of the parables and teachings of Jesus, the Book of Acts, the New Testament letters written by the mission-minded apostles.

KEY RESOURCES

Great, J.D. *Gaining by Losing: Why the Future Belongs to Christians That Send*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2015.

Hunter, Kent R. *The Jesus Enterprise: Engaging Culture to Reach the Unchurched*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004.

Hunter, Kent R. and Tracee J. Swank. *Restoring Civility: Lessons from the Master*. Corunna, IN: Church Doctor Ministries, 2020.
www.restoringcivilitybook.com.

Hunter, Kent R. and Tracee J. Swank. *Who Broke My Church? 7 Proven Strategies for Renewal and Revival*. New York, NY: Hachette/FaithWords, 2017.

The SEND Movement.
www.thesendmovement.com.

- 3) Take the 12-day “mission” trip to England and visit formerly near-death churches now exploding with growth. They are now reaching the unchurched because they have caught the missionary lifestyle. They have wall-to-wall young people on fire for Jesus. It is contagious. Catch the holy infection for mission.
- 4) Talk with other Christians. Identify those believers who have a passion to reach people who have “fallen away” or “never showed signs of faith.”
- 5) Ask God for a willingness to change two roadblocks in many churches and in the minds of many Christ-followers. They are New Testament teachings that will “redesign” the way most churches operate:
 - #1. Every Christian has spiritual gifts given uniquely to them by the Holy Spirit. They help you discover your place in the body of Christ, your mission and ministry.
 - #2. Every Christian is a minister. “Staff people” equip Christians for ministry by discipling them. (This is a huge difference from “doing ministry for them or to them.”)
- 6) Check out the SEND Movement for your church. It is basic training for those believers who want to become missionaries to others (without leaving home).
- 7) Recognize that changing your church to a mission posture is not a top-down “program” for everyone. Start small, with those who are ready *now* to grow and learn. This is a movement that spreads from one person to another. It is not a top-down effort imposed on the entire church. Jesus started, primarily, with 12.

Commit to the long haul. Jesus worked with the disciples for three years, then left. Be willing to equip, empower, let go, start over, and over, and continue the movement. Jesus’ movement is not a quick-fix program. It is a lifestyle. It works. It can work for you—and for your church.

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