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Permission given to multiply this special issue of hope and opportunities for spiritual growth

Is the Church Losing America? Declining Faith and the Drift Toward Socialism

To be clear, this issue of the *Church Doctor Report* is not about politics. Nor is it directed toward economics. It is about the massive loss of spiritual influence in the U.S. due to the decline of Christianity. It is a radical call for every Christian, every denomination, every church, to return to the priority mission of Jesus Christ to the United States. That mission is to make disciples of all people groups, beginning in our own "Jerusalem" (Matthew 28:19-20).

As I have referenced in my recent book, *Restoring Civility*, those Europeans who first landed in North America in 1620 signed the Mayflower Compact prior to landing in Plymouth, Massachusetts. It was not a constitution, but rather an adaptation of a Puritan church covenant to a civil situation. It read, in part: "Having undertaken for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith..." In their own words, they were missionaries. This is a reminder of what many churches and church bodies desperately need in America today.

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To get there from here, we need to take the diagnostic journey that we Church Doctors have used to help nearly 2,000 U.S. churches from 78 denominations, as well as

MULTIPLYING MINISTRY

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nondenominational and independent congregations. To be clear, I'm not the "genius" that developed this approach. I got it from my mentor, Lyle Schaller, the brilliant consultant who helped so many churches. The diagnostic approach: "Ask questions, then more questions, and even more questions, and drill down to the causative issues—the issues behind the issues."

As we drill, we'll start with the hot topic of socialism—as a symptom of ineffective churches. And, as a wake-up call. When there is a health issue, the *symptom* is usually the first sign. Good physicians look at symptoms, then past the symptoms, to the causative issue. Our fallen creation has built-in symptoms to get our attention. My prayer is that church leaders see the red flag so brightly before us.

The second level of symptoms reflects the decline of churches in the U.S. Depending on the research, somewhere between 70 percent and 90 percent of American churches are plateaued or declining at a rate behind the growth of their communities. In other words, we are losing ground! The closure of churches is a growing phenomenon. There are thousands of "outlier" churches that are growing. Some are attracting believers from dying churches. Others show a good margin of *real* growth of Christianity—reaching unbelievers. Yet, in total, the Christian movement is losing America.

The third level of diagnosis gets closer to the heart of the matter: Churches and whole denominations have lost their sense of mission. In theory, church constitutions do list "Reaching the lost for Christ" or "the Great Commission." However, in reality, if you follow Jesus' diagnosis, "I send you to reap a harvest" (John 4:34-38), much of the spiritual result is not a reality. It sounds negative, but for God's sake—for the sake of the Kingdom—let's be honest!

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At the fourth and basic level, there are several dimensions of issues. (1) Most pastors are not trained in missiology: the biblical disciplines for effectively reaching non-Christians. (2) Why? The majority of American churches and denominations have subconsciously defined the mission field as almost exclusively "over there," on another continent. (3) So, pastors can't equip their people to be "missionaries" in what has become, for most, their secular communities. (4) Consequently, the "mission" is primarily a "you all come" strategy of inviting someone to church—a church-of-attraction model. This is primarily ineffective in a secularized society. Forget the good old days—they're gone!

So, travel with me through the level of diagnostics. We start with an increasing and alarming sign: creeping interest in socialism.

Socialism: Does It Have Your Attention?

On February 3, 2020, Time magazine published an article, "How to Save Capitalism." It was a "Viewpoint" article by Jamie Dimon that appeared a short time before the COVID-19 pandemic hit North America.

Jamie Dimon is chairman and CEO of JPMorgan Chase. Dimon has led America's largest bank since 2005 and chairs the Business Roundtable, a collective of U.S. CEOs. He begins:

“Capitalism may be at a tipping point. For far too long, policy makers, governments and business leaders have done a poor job at helping those who have been left behind, and lost sight of how capitalism can create more opportunity for all.”

Dimon goes deeper regarding socialism:

“That might explain why some Americans and politicians are turning to the ‘hot’ new trend of socialism as a cure-all for society’s ills. Of course, socialism isn’t new, and everywhere it has taken root in the past it has failed. In the traditional socialist system the government controls the means of production, and often decides how and when the citizens work rather than leaving those decisions up to the private sector. Socialism inevitably produces stagnation, corruption and the specter of authoritarian bureaucrats maintaining power by interfering with the economy and individual lives. I believe it would be a disaster for our country. True freedom is inexorably linked with the free enterprise that capitalism guarantees, and we mustn’t forget that.”

About now, you may be thinking: “This Church Doctor has drifted into politics. What does this have to do with the mission of the church?” Hang on! It takes patience to drill through the symptoms to get to the causative issues. We will get to the mission of the church, and it will make sense. But first, a few more comments from Dimon’s article:

“Capitalism must be modified to do a better job of creating a healthier society, one that is more inclusive and creates more opportunity for more people. This means meaningful changes like rebuilding our education system and providing skills training, affordable healthcare policies, substantial infrastructure, and sensible immigration reform and climate policies. That’s just a start.

“In August, more than 180 CEOs of leading U.S. companies signed the Business Roundtable’s new statement of corporate purpose, committing to creating economic opportunity for all of their stakeholders....

“Americans are increasingly polarized in many areas of our lives, from where we live to whom we are friends with and how we get our news. This has manifested in crippling partisanship, especially in our nation’s capital....

KEY RESOURCES

Dimon, Jamie, “How to Save Capitalism: Business and Governments Must Collaborate to Create Opportunity for All.” Time magazine: Viewpoint, February 3, 2020, p. 62.

Exponential: Church Planting and Multiplication Resources.
www.exponential.org.

Greear, J.D. *Gaining by Losing: Why the Future Belongs to Churches That Send*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017.

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

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.

Weber, Max, Peter Baehr, and Gordon C. Wells. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London, UK: Penguin, 2002.

“Capitalism has been the most successful economic system in history. But we can improve upon it to help solve society’s problems and lift up more people. Now is the time.”

The Connection to Your Church and Its Mission

To drill down to another level, let’s look at Europe, where most countries have drifted to some form of socialism. Yet our focus isn’t on capitalism, but the unique influence of Christianity and the church. Can we learn from the past? Can we learn from our European neighbors? Can we even be motivated, as Christians, to recapture *mission effectiveness*?

As you may already know, much of Europe began to drift from the reboot of healthy mission-minded Christianity that resulted from the Protestant Reformation. As you consider this, think about this: Does the Christian movement in the West today need a reformation to restore effective mission? I believe it does.

John Wesley, who was instrumental in the movement of Methodism, was also influenced by Martin Luther’s focus on grace. He was inspired at a Bible study in a home on Aldersgate Street in London. The study was on Luther’s introduction to Romans, and it fueled Wesley’s passion for mission. The rest is history.

Wesley writes, “I fear, whenever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion.... For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality.... But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches.... We ought not to prevent people being diligent and frugal; *we must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich.*” (Robert Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 2nd American Edition, p. 308).

As socialism grew in Europe, Max Weber, a German economist and sociologist, wrote the book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber refers to “asceticism,” which condemned both “dishonesty and impulsive avarice.” It condemned “the pursuit of riches for their own sake.” He says, “Asceticism looked upon the pursuit of wealth as an end in itself as reprehensible; but the attainment of it as a fruit of labor in a calling was God’s sign of blessing.”

He continues, “...the religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means to asceticism, and, at the time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of that attitude toward life which we have called the spirit of capitalism.”

What’s the Point?

For Weber, the fear of encroaching socialism was identified as a “wake-up call,” a departure from the biblical understanding of the *Christian calling*. He identified it as evidence that the Christian faith was losing influence on the people of Germany in particular and Europe in general.

The discussion of socialism to replace capitalism is a statement: The church of Jesus Christ is losing the country. Yes, the church can survive in a socialist society. It can even survive under

some forms of communism. Yet, the threat of the loss of capitalism should send a powerful message to Christians: *You are losing some of the most powerful benefits of your culture. You are failing in the mission to reach your neighbors for Jesus Christ.*

The spirit of capitalism, the concept that God has a calling for every person, is not the most important dimension of the Christian faith. However, it will greatly impact every aspect, and many blessings, of a nation influenced by Christianity. It serves as a serious wake-up call: America is a mission field. It raises an important question: *Are you ready to get trained to be a missionary to the unchurched non-Christians in your social network?* They are the unbelievers listed on the directory in your cell phone.

Look at Your Own Body of Christ, Your Church

- 1) What are the symptoms? Is your “body,” your congregation, plateaued? Declining? Aging?
- 2) How would you rate your congregation, yourself, on the effectiveness of reaching others and making disciples, from the large and growing pool of unbelievers?
- 3) Are you part of a church body—a denomination that trains and equips pastors who demonstrate the Ephesians 4 mandate to “equip God’s people for the work of ministry”? Or, do the leaders of your church do most of the ministry? Is your staff multiplying people to be missionaries?
- 4) Are you a “church of attraction,” where you are urged to *invite* people to worship the God in whom they don’t yet believe? Or, are you trained to *go*, make disciples?

The word “mission” is from the concept of “sending,” being sent. The church becomes outgoing, a sending force. You are called to be a missionary. You and your church staff can be equipped. Missiology is not rocket science. It is, however, a learned discipline. You can do this—if God has your attention!

If and when God gets your attention, check out the SEND Movement. If not now, when?

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