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RADIANT
CHURCH

RESTORING THE CREDIBILITY
OF OUR WITNESS



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THE CALL TO RADIANCE



“YOU’RE NOT ONE OF THOSE born-again Christians, are you?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that question. Was it a trap? What did they think “born-again” meant? I leaned over the fence that stood between my neighbor and me, and we both watched our children play together in the yard. “What do you mean by that?” I tried to ask in the most nonjudgmental tone as possible and instead take the posture of curiosity. “Well, those born-again talk about a God who loves you, but they live their lives as anything but loving. They only care about their own political agenda and not the people that they have politicized.” I can’t remember exactly how I navigated the conversation that day, but perhaps it’s familiar to you.

Some circles project hostility between the church and culture. While plenty of people have the opposite and more loving view of the church, I think it’s safe to say that there’s a growing tension between the church and culture in the Western world.

There’s been a pulling away of sorts, however. No longer do we enjoy easy approval from Western culture, and going to church

on Sunday mornings is no longer the thing to do. According to Gallup, the most dramatic shift is those who don't identify as religious at all.¹

Aside from decline, our reputation has been put to the test. If we were to dial the conversation back to 2007, David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, noted this from an outsider to Christianity, "Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders, they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who does not believe what they believe."² A few years later, in 2011, David Fitch declared that evangelicalism was coming to an end. He writes, "Evangelicalism's influence within American society is painfully on the wane. As recent as just this past decade, evangelicalism had carried a significant amount of political influence within society and seemed confident of its identity as a church in America."³

The influence the church once had is waning, the light that once shined bright is diminishing, and the salt that was once salty is losing its saltiness.

Over a decade ago, as many influential church leaders and theologians saw the future of the church they gathered to create manifestos. Many called for a redefining, a rebirthing, and a re-identification of the church. It was time for renewal and revival, and for the evangelical church to embrace the God who births new things. Fast forward a decade and it would appear that the church has missed the moment, or perhaps it's something that "gets worse before it gets better." Either way, I think it's safe to say we have reached a crisis moment.

The crisis, however, is not just the decline of those who declare faith in King Jesus—though that is certainly to be lamented. The crisis, instead, is an issue that must be dealt with in our own family room. This is not the time to point the finger outward, and it's not the time to blame the world. Instead, I pray that we take this opportunity to look in the mirror.

SYMPTOMS OF THE CRISIS

Moral failures. In the last few years, moral failures of pastors and so-called Christian politicians alike are being brought to light at a rapid rate. But what's troubling is how quickly we defend the perpetrator rather than the victim. Perhaps even more troubling is that at times the *world* is defending the victim while the *church* defends the perpetrator. This was an alarming reality when Bill Hybels was first accused of sexual abuse and harassment from a number of female staffers at Willow Creek. The leadership was sadly quick to defend their pastor and blame the victims. Rachel Held Evans tweeted this about the #ChurchToo movement, “The Church in America, and specifically evangelicals, are going to have to muster up some humility and take a serious look at how patriarchy, sexism, and toxic masculinity have infected their culture.”⁴

In many ways it would appear that the curtains have been pulled back on systems of power—power often held by my brothers in Christ—that are wrapped in toxic systems. We have learned in recent years that behind closed doors things weren't what they appeared to be behind the glimmer and glamor of the large auditoriums, fog machines, and rapid growth of butts in the auditorium seats. Maybe all along the very things we anointed as success weren't successful after all.

Then we started to hear whispers from the mouths of trembling, broken, and fearful women. At first we asked them to keep quiet; we must not ruin the witness of the church. Some quieted down, and some got louder. When American culture started the #MeToo movement, the church had its own movement, #ChurchToo. Thousands of stories emerged—gut-wrenching, painful, and devastating stories. Take a moment to scroll through Twitter’s #ChurchToo feed and grab a box of tissues while you read. If it doesn’t make you weep, I don’t know what will.

Many did gather ’round to listen while others continued to silence the voices of the hurting. Some who held the power had plenty of opportunities to call for the church to repent, apologize, and work toward reconciliation. I was especially grateful for leaders like Dan Meyer, senior pastor of Christ Church of Oak Brook, JR Rozko, director of Missio Alliance, Rich Villodas, pastor of New Life Fellowship in Queens, New York, and New Testament scholar Scot McKnight for the ways they and countless others prophetically called the church to confession, lament, and a better way.

Allegiance. And then the curtains were pulled back on our own allegiance. I think somewhere along the way we got confused. Of course, the history of this is deeply rooted. Is it God and country? Is my citizenship first in the kingdom of God or in my country? Or are they the same? Flags on altars next to the cross were on equal footing, and the gospel according to the empire began to collide with the gospel of King Jesus. The church fell in love with the empire, and the witness suffered because it wasn’t sure which was which. Patriotism trumped the values of the kingdom, and eventually it seems we developed multiple personality disorder. On the one hand, we loved Jesus and the gift of salvation, and on

the other, we sought more power, more strength, more dominance, more prestige, more wealth, more flourishing, and more gain. Eugene Cho warned,

I would submit that the greatest challenge is actually within Christianity: It's the temptation to build the structures and institutionalism of Christianity but without the parallel commitment to Jesus. It's politicians and even Christian pastors and leaders who sprinkle on a pinch of Jesus into our thinking, speeches, or sermons but often in a way that fulfills our agenda or goals. In other words, using Jesus to promote nationalism is simply not the way of Jesus.⁵

We abandoned the imagination of Scripture and instead adopted a Western political imagination that we tried to keep firmly hitched to the Christian way. But if we were honest, it's a dimly lit version of the early church—if lit at all.

A polarized church. Instead of falling to our knees, we took to larger platforms and louder megaphones to make our views known. We took to Twitter with hateful words and memes. Instead of peacemaking, we took to dividing and violent speech. We were more interested in being right than unified, so we drew harder lines in the sand and pushed the weak, marginalized, and hurting away.

Meanwhile, young ears were listening, and young eyes were watching. What was meant to be beautiful slowly eroded away. As the pastor of the second oldest church in my denomination, many grandparents are lamenting over the decline of the attendance of young people, and many are fearful for the future of the church. Perhaps many decided that the radiance of the church wasn't what they thought it was.

IT'S NOT THEM; IT'S US

No longer can we point the finger away from ourselves and put the blame on culture wars. No longer can we say, “It’s because they took God out of our schools,” and, “That generation is ruining everything!” Instead, dear Christians, we have a few things to sort through and talk about.

We’ve been exposed, and the curtains have been pulled back. Instead of saying, “To hell with the church!” I cling to the promise of Scripture that declares, “The gates of hell shall not prevail against [the church!]” (Mt 16:18 KJV). I know how this story ends, and I know that the bride of Christ will never fully crumble. I hope that this exposure would lead us to our knees, crying out for the Spirit to birth something new, alive, beautiful, and radiant.

I believe this more than anything: what isn’t revealed can’t be healed. It’s time to embrace what has been revealed and lean into a new kind of healing that can only be explained by the faithful presence of Jesus.

BORN-AGAIN

Somewhere in the mid-1990s, when I was a new Christian, I came across a popular bronze statue by Dean Kermit Allison. The sculpture was called “Born Again,” and it depicted a man shedding his old self with a bronze layer of skin, and his new self was being born anew as a radiant, glassy, crystal version. I remember staring at that statue mesmerized and in tears. I was the statue, I thought. Newly in love with Jesus and recently beginning my life in Christ, God was doing a radiant new thing in my life. But today, that statue seems more prophetic, and it tugs at my heartstrings as I long for the church of the future.

I pray that the church would begin to see, acknowledge, and name the bronze layers that are saturated with worldly beliefs and behaviors and flee from them. I pray that the church would know that we have not been destroyed—it's not too late. I pray that we would reclaim, be renewed and revived, and allow the work of the Spirit to birth something new and radiant. Like the bronze statue, may the layers of our own systems that have hurt and harmed others begin to peel away, and may the lamp of truth, love, and righteousness be placed firmly on its pedestal and shine in all of its illuminating beauty. Not beauty for the glory of ourselves but for the glory and majesty of our King and Creator. May we shine in such a way that instead of hard lines in the sand being drawn, those who once felt excluded are now drawn to the radiant light of the church.

But birthing isn't easy work. It's painful, it's laborious, it's long, and it literally brings blood, sweat, and tears. On the early morning of April 17, 2010, I woke up at 6 a.m. to discover that my water had broken. Fortunately, I wasn't feeling any pain yet, so I decided I could take a shower, put on makeup, and grab breakfast on the way to the hospital. By the time my husband and I arrived at Panera to pick up some breakfast on the way, the labor pains began to kick in. I'll also confess that I had no idea that when the water breaks, it isn't just a one-time occurrence; rather, it keeps on coming. This was rather problematic standing in line for my bagel. After a minute or two of waiting in line, I turned to Jeff with my lips curled and my teeth together and said, "We have to go *now!*"

By the time we got to the hospital, I was in full-blown labor. Before having Caleb, I thought of myself as a tough woman with high pain tolerance. Turns out, labor was much more painful and

difficult than any friend or textbook or Lamaze class could have prepared me for.

At one point during labor, my husband and parents were in the hospital room having a good old time, sharing, eating, laughing, and watching *Ghostbusters* on TV. I was angry that I was suffering and they were enjoying the moment. My husband came over to me with an angelic and peaceful look on his face, gently put his hand on my shoulder, and said, “Hey, babe, I was thinking that the next baby . . .” and before he could even finish his sentence, I angrily interrupted him with what probably seemed like demon eyes and the voice of his worst nightmares, “*Next baby? Next baby? You think I’m going to go through this again? There will be no next baby!*”

Perhaps the scariest and most challenging moment came during what many call transitional labor, which is the stage between active labor—labor pains that are a few minutes apart—and actually having to push for delivery. It’s intense, and the only way for any sort of relief is to *push and potentially scream*. I did both. The nurses and my family surrounded me saying things like, “Breathe, and keep your eye on the prize! Caleb is coming! Breathe; keep your eye on the prize! Focus! Caleb is coming!”

Breathe. Keep your eye on the prize. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Dear church, creation is groaning. The labor pains can no longer be ignored. It’s time to push and birth something new, something radiant, something wrapped in love, truth, and grace.

There is nothing glorious about labor; there is nothing easy about pushing. It hurts. It’s hard. But push we must. That is, we must repent, we must name, we must rid ourselves of toxic systems, and we must abandon the imagination of the principalities and powers of this world. Let us push, breathe, keep our

eyes on Jesus, press in, lean in, and reclaim the radiant vision that comes alive in Scripture.

A CALL TO RADIANCE

In Matthew 5, Jesus steps on a mount and begins to teach. His prophetic words are drenched in love and wrapped in vision. It was a sermon unlike any other that has now found its home in what we call the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7). In it, Jesus shares his dreams for the already-but-not-yet people of God in Christ. He paints a vivid vision of how the people of God are to live, love, act, and care for one another. His words are no doubt piercing, and they likely make us squirm at times, but what Jesus proclaims is an illuminating and radiant vision for the bride of Christ.

Jesus' words are no mere suggestion; rather, they are passionate and piercing commands for the people of God to live into no matter where they live.⁶ That is, those who are citizens of the kingdom of God.

Following Jesus' declaration of those who make the list of the blessed life, Jesus calls the church to lean into the radiant vision of the church. He calls us salt and light.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Mt 5:13-16)

Like other popular passages of Scripture, we sometimes miss out on the fullness of what Jesus is calling us to. Often we read this passage through the lens of *I* instead of *we* and then interpret it as, “I should do more good deeds.” However, this prophetic declaration of Jesus should push and pull the church into the radiant church it was meant to be. While one star is certainly something to behold, a sky full of sparkling stars is stunning. Our witness is corporate, found within congregations and communities. Our witness is a collective presence and voice and light rather than individuals.

This passage isn’t a random call to do good things; rather, we are called to lean into the missional imagination of the triune God—that is, the imagination that unfolds beginning in the book of Genesis.

WE ARE THE STARS

In the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the problem of sin, brokenness, darkness, and evil is rather glaring. Murder, betrayal, division, pride, and havoc, even from Mother Nature, are just a few examples. However, we don’t observe a planless God scrambling to heal God’s broken creation, and neither do we observe God lashing out in anger. Instead, we discover a redemptive God who moves in with acts of love and grace. By the time we arrive at Genesis 11, we discover the beginnings of God’s rescue operation. God doesn’t run from the problem of sin; rather, God moves in and addresses it.

God calls Abram and Sarai to a foreign land, a place of discomfort, in a posture of trust. Without the full picture, Abram shows us a life of faithfulness, even in the midst of ruggedness and the unknown. God then unveils this grand plan:

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.” (Gen 12:1-3)

Through a series of trials, tests, and tribulations, Abram and Sarai learn the radical call to faithfulness. Though they constantly sought reassurance from God and showed many symptoms of doubt and distrust, they continued to put one foot in front of the other. God appeared to Abram with a fuller and more radiant vision of the role Abram’s family would soon play: “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir” (Gen 15:2-3).

But then the Lord responds and assures the doubting Abram: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” The Lord took Abram outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then the Lord said to Abram, “So shall your offspring be. Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:5-6).

Abram and God then partake in an incredibly bizarre but telling covenant ceremony that included blood and animal halves.

What we discover, however, is just how deathly serious God is about keeping God's end of the covenant. That is, that God would be faithful to bless Abram's family and bless the world through God's family.

As a result of this covenant, God's people would shine brightly as they live counterculturally in a decaying world. By living out the covenant demands, the world would see the goodness of this covenant community, and the character of God would be revealed in attractive ways.

As the story goes, however, time and again the people of God harden their hearts and fail to keep up their end of the covenant. And yet God moves in, God calls, God summons the people of God to return. But they struggle to do just that.

JESUS IS THE BRIGHTEST STAR

Then, somewhere on the margins of Bethlehem, a child is born. A bright star attracted magi from the East who wanted to see the astonishing light for themselves. Right in the middle of chaos, decay, darkness, and oppression, this child moves into the neighborhood filled with chaos and he shines. The new Israel, the second Adam, fully divine and fully human, prophet and priest, and the fulfillment of all of Israel's history, reveals the very heartbeat and character of God. And we discover just how serious God is about keeping this covenant.

This King, after living a perfect life of love, healing, revelation, and wonders, meets his death on a cross. And there on the cross, the end of an evil era collides with the nails, the crown of thorns, and the body broken. And every spring the church gathers together to proclaim the good news, "He's not dead! He's alive!" We join the chorus of angels and the sermon of Mary at the

tomb, “He’s alive!” The King is raised to new life, and the flood-gates burst forth. We discover the promises to Abram are now fulfilled, and we are the stars in the sky. No longer is ethnic Israel the only recipient of God’s blessing; the dividing wall has been destroyed, and Jews and Gentiles, men and women, and slaves and free persons are all one in Christ. The re-creation of a people of God is expanded to all who are in Christ. The apostle Paul says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor 5:17). And the apostle Peter says, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:9-10).

WE ARE CALLED TO SHINE

Paul says to the Philippians, “Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky” (Phil 2:15). We are the stars in the sky—shining in all of our radiant glory as the love of God bursts forth. We—all who are in Christ—are the royal priesthood and God’s special possession. And the news only gets better! In Christ, we begin to reflect God’s glorious image as Paul says, “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).

We are heirs of God’s promises to Abraham, and we are included in God’s blessed people. And just as God called Abraham to

faithfulness and obedience, God also called the church. As children of Abraham and sons and daughters of the King, we've distorted the story of the perfect gospel to be a ticket to heaven—or else.

But the radiant gospel is about a people leaning into and reflecting the goodness of God to an embattled world. The radiant gospel is about the people of God in Christ extending the table and gathering as an alternative community in a world gone awry. We are to embody the power of blessing—that in the middle of a chaotic, prideful, sinful, decaying, embattled, broken world, we would embody the promises of Abraham and live the vision of Jesus as salt and light. As a covenant community in Christ, we don't just randomly do salt-and-light kind of things; rather, we *are* salt and light. As salt and light, we are called to mediate the goodness, light, love, and holiness of God. What a radiant call God has entrusted to God's people.

A DIMLY LIT STAR

However, Jesus declares this word with a warning: “But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot” (Mt 5:13). A very honest, practical, and difficult warning for the church. Jesus reminds the church that there is a strong possibility of a diminished witness and impact. We see this repeatedly with moral failures in Christian leaders and pastors. When their sins are exposed, their witness abruptly crumbles and rarely returns. Let's expand this thought for the church in North America. If we damage the impact we have been entrusted with, will it ever be regained?

Dear church, we have been invited to participate in such a marvelous mission, which was first unfolded with Abraham, was

revealed in the pages of Scripture, and culminated in King Jesus. This mission is still unfolding in our weary world, and the marvelous wonder of it all is that we are summoned to participate.

Have we been too busy worrying about being correct instead of loving? Have we been consumed with being in control and in power rather than laying down our lives? It seems we have been more wrapped up in the ABCs of empire (attendance, building, cash) than we have in participating in the mission of God. Do we love the thrill of power at the expense of loving our neighbor? It seems we have bought into a warped vision for the Christian life. Money and consumerism are central to our vision for the good life. We sometimes bow at the altar of nationalism. Have we forgotten who we are?

When I was in high school, I was a competitive swimmer—very competitive. At the end of the day, I was interested in winning. During my senior year of high school, it was possible I would be conference champ in two different events. However, we knew that the results would be close.

Like most typical angsty teenagers, I was a train wreck at home. I projected my anxious emotions onto my family and made everyone in the house miserable. Eventually, my dad sat me down and gave me a talk:

Tara Beth, we are so proud of you. We are amazed that you have made it to this place of perhaps being conference champ. But there's one important thing you seemed to have forgotten. You are a Moore. You might think that your role is to win. Winning is great. But as a Moore, your job isn't to win. Your job is to give it all you got—both at home and in the pool. Yes, you are fearless, you are strong, and you are determined. And you are also a Moore, which means your

character and attitude at home matters. It's not what you win or achieve; it's who you are.

That day, Dad reminded me of who I was. At the end of the day, it wasn't about the medals, but it was about my character and the name I bore. He interrupted my winning imagination and reminded me not to forget who I was.

Dear church, have we forgotten who we are? That is, have we forgotten who we are as mediators of God's goodness and love in this world? Have we forgotten the name of Jesus that we bear? The name of Jesus who bears the vision of humility and love, as Paul reminds us in Philippians 2,

Who, being in very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God something
 to be used to his own advantage;
 rather, he made himself nothing
 by taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness.
 And being found in appearance as a man,
 he humbled himself
 by becoming obedient to death—
 even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
 and gave him the name that is above every name,
 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father. (vv. 6-11)

This is the name we bear. I believe we have forgotten, and I believe it's time to return to the radiant vision of the gospel. It's

time to reclaim what it means to be salt and light in this world and peel away the layers of worldly bronze and be the church that draws the attention of the world in such a way that

at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:10-11).

Amen.

LET US LAMENT

But before we reclaim who we are, perhaps we must confess who we've *become*. Lament is hard, uncomfortable. And the White evangelical church often avoids it. But in order to embrace our *radiant* call, we must lament the dimly lit yet powerful status quo. Lament is a powerful intrusion to the status quo. Soong-Chan Rah notes, "Lament recognizes the struggles of life and cries out for justice against existing injustices. The status quo is not to be celebrated but instead must be challenged."⁷ We must confess what we've become, and we must lament. Coauthors Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Graham Hill remind us that for there to be healing, there must be lament: "Lament is about regretting and mourning the past and then moving toward repentance, justice, and a new life together."⁸ Come, let us lament.

How long, O Lord?

How long will we wield power in your house for our own gain?

How long will we fight for the seat of control and notoriety?

How long will we embrace a vision of the good life that is a dimly lit version of the Christian life?

How long will we hoard money for prosperity at the expense of forsaking our neighbor?

How long will we cling to toxic masculinity and femininity?

How long will we defend the perpetrator and silence the victim?

How long will we worship idols in your house of worship?

How long will we declare allegiance to gods of this world under the banner of “in God we trust”?

How long will we sell out to the powers of this world?

You have called us to shine brighter than this.

And yet you are loving, merciful, and kind. You continue to work, heal, and redeem in spite of us. When we abandon obedience to you, you’re still there to pursue us and pick us up. You promise to never leave nor forsake us. Your grace is abundant and your love unending.

Lord, we have gotten tangled up and don’t know how to untangle ourselves. We know things aren’t right, but we don’t know what to do at times, so we go back to what we know and return to the status quo. We can’t seem to escape polarization, racism, sexism, and idolatry.

Lord, we are sorry and are sad at who we have become. We have not loved you with our whole hearts, and we have not loved our neighbors. We have ignored our brothers and sisters in the ditch in an effort to protect the power that we hold. We have kept ourselves at the center when you call us to decenter ourselves. Lord, we are troubled and long to change. We have sinned against you. We have sinned against our neighbor.

Lord, we yearn for grace and mercy. Hear our cry of repentance, hear our prayers and our aches of confession. We ask that you see us and not forsake us. We pray that you would have compassion on us and heal our brokenness.

We look to you with hope, adoration, and trust. Thank you that you don’t abandon your children but draw near to us. We

know that we have been dimly lit, and we thank you that you have continued to shine bright.

Rescue us, Lord.

Redeem us.

Heal us.

We need you.

Thank you, Lord, that on the cross you had compassion on the abusers, though it was not deserved. Thank you, Lord, that on the cross you thought of us. Thank you, Lord, that from the cross came resurrection, and you call us sons and daughters of the resurrection! Resurrect us from our slumber, and transform us into the radiant bride you believe we can be.

Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

1. If you were to imagine a “radiant church,” what does it look like?
2. When you think of “born-again Christians,” what comes to mind?
3. What is the perception of “born-again Christians” in the community where you live?
4. Do you agree or disagree that the witness of the church is waning? If or if not, why?
5. What grieves you about the symptoms the author describes in this chapter?
6. When you imagine new things birthing in the church, what do you imagine?
7. What will it take for the church to shine brightly?

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