

## CHAPTER 4

### WESTERN SKEPTICISM

There is an enormous anomaly afflicting the Church of Jesus Christ today. In most of the world, the church is expanding rapidly. In nearly every territory of the world where Christians are free to share their faith, and in a few where they are not, the church is expanding at possibly three times the rate of the population,<sup>1</sup> but in Western countries, like the United States, Canada, France and Great Britain, little progress is evident. In fact, growth rates of churches in the United States, Canada and Western countries are so radically different from the churches in non-western cultures that they can hardly be charted together.

Where western missionaries—or churches substantially influenced by western missionaries—evangelize, growth rates are lethargic in comparison with their non-western counterparts. Ed Silvano notes:

The greatest growth of Christianity in the Third World has occurred when the cultural and theological dominance of the Church in the West has been replaced by the indigenous Church's own cultural and theological initiatives and worldview.<sup>2</sup>

This is one reason that indigenous congregations will always outperform their imported counterparts; however, this was not Silvano's point. He goes on to state:

If we track on a world map the “hot spots” where the Church is growing rapidly today, we will find that in each one of those areas, such as Korea, China, Guatemala, Nigeria or Argentina, the national churches have an understanding of the heavenlies, or the spirit realm, quite different than the one historically held by the Church in the West.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Haggard in *The Life-giving Church*, 45, certainly excludes Catholicism from his operating definition of the church, especially in Latin America. It probably is more accurate to suggest that Protestantism is approaching such growth rates in most places beyond Western influence. Whether he would further qualify his claim of burgeoning church growth to Evangelical churches is unknown.

<sup>2</sup> Silvano, *That None Should Perish*, 103-104.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

That was the observation of John Wimber. He noted a striking contrast between the churches on the mission field and those in the United States. They differed dramatically in the results of their efforts, experiencing explosive church growth; but they also differed significantly in another way. Those churches driving Christianity's expansion held a radically different attitude toward the supernatural and engaged in markedly different practices than those with myopic growth.<sup>4</sup>

Charles Kraft says, "Non-western peoples are frequently concerned about the activities of supernatural beings;" but about Americans and North Atlantic peoples he declares, "The wide-ranging supernaturalism of most of the societies of the world is absent for most of our people."<sup>5</sup> He further notes that westerners may retain a vague belief in God. Most, however, either deny the existence of other supernatural beings or disregard their influence on people and events.<sup>6</sup> We westerners are unique in that we actually divide life up into what we call a natural realm and a supernatural realm; then we explain everything in terms of the former and utterly ignore the latter.<sup>7</sup>

Because this contrast is the key factor that separates cultures where there is dramatic growth from cultures where growth, if at all, is lethargic, the question arises does this view of life make westerners more resistant to the Christian faith than other populations? Or does this view infect and cripple the western church so that it is less able to evangelize any population? Does the difficulty reside in the mission field or in the church?

### **The Impact of the Enlightenment**

In the first chapter we discussed how the advent of the Enlightenment or Modern view of reality formed a basis for the rise of Protestant denominations. Denominations are western phenomena. Although the modern missionary movement has given them a presence on every continent, their existence and vision rose from the same soil as Enlightenment thinking. Kraft writes:

For centuries a supernaturalistic perspective was an important part of the worldview of the peoples of the northern Europe and those from among them who fled to America to escape religious persecution. People were, to

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<sup>4</sup> Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Kraft, *Christianity with Power: Your Worldview and Your Experience of the Supernatural*, (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1989), 27.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

be sure, often quite superstitious and uncritical concerning accounts of purported miracles. Accounts of demonic manifestations and of witchcraft often even produced panic. And unscrupulous religious leaders and others were often quick to take advantage of such credulity. In fact, an important part of the reason for Luther's revolt against the Roman Catholic Church lay in his deep concern about some abuses in church practice that played on certain superstitions. Yet during the centuries following the Reformation, this revolt broadened into one against any institutionalized religion and then one against any expression of supernaturalism.<sup>8</sup>

By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, this rationalistic movement had become so dominant in intellectual circles, that philosopher Immanuel Kant celebrated in an article.

[The] Enlightenment was man's coming of age. It was man's emergence from the immaturity which caused him to rely on such external authorities as the Bible, the church, and the state to tell him what to think and do. No generation should be bound by the creeds and customs of bygone ages. To be so bound is an offense against human nature, whose destiny lies in progress.<sup>9</sup>

Protestants had challenged the authority of Roman Catholicism. They appealed to Scripture, their conscience and their reasoned views. Nevertheless, they tethered their life to the teaching of Scriptures rather than the shifting conclusions of human reason. However, western intellectualism was heady with success and had no such tie. Instead, they had the printing press, which made knowledge accessible. They enjoyed many new discoveries and technologies. These were the achievements, the trophies, the gifts of reason. Reason was god and they were her priests!<sup>10</sup>

Enlightenment teachers developed a core of beliefs that challenged the orthodoxy of Christianity. They believed that what separated humans from the beasts was not their creation in God's image but their capacity for reasonable thought. They believed that people were basically good but became corrupted by an oppressive environment. Thus, if we fix the system, the rationality and goodness of people will surface. Enlightenment thinkers saw the supernatural as optional, if not specious, and God as irrelevant. They believed people could base their morality on reasoning alone without the aid of divine revelation. Reason was sufficient equipment for them to build and manage cities and societies. Science and

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

education would bring liberation and inevitable progress, for all problems were solvable over time. They affirmed a *Natural Religion* that was rooted in a common religious consciousness within the human heart and contended that the deeper you go in each religion, the more similar they become.<sup>11</sup>

Although these beliefs about reality were not fully embraced by all western people, they exerted greater influence than any other religious system including Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

Charles Kraft declares:

In reacting against the excesses of extreme religious credulity, Enlightenment thinkers threw out, or at least raised serious questions about, belief in anything that could not be rationally understood. And these assumptions have become a part of our worldview so that quite unconsciously we have all imbibed their influence from birth. Because such Enlightenment influence has become so strong in our societies, modern Westerners—both non-Christian and Christian—now find it extremely difficult to believe in angels, Satan, demons, and even God. Whether or not real spiritual power can be exercised through prayer, then, is seriously questioned both outside and inside our churches. For the spiritual real is not considered scientifically or rationally verifiable. It is no longer considered a part of the Western understanding of the REAL.<sup>13</sup>

This is not a new phenomenon. More than a generation ago, a prominent anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn, offered this description of the United States:

More than half of our people still occasionally go through the forms... But very few of our leaders... are convinced that prayer or the observance of church codes will affect the course of human events... belief in God's judgments and punishments as a motive for behavior is limited to a decreasing minority. Feelings of *guilt* are common but a sense of *sin* is rare.<sup>14</sup>

What the anthropologist observed was a superficially religious population. They were religious in their commitment but secular in their thinking. Their confidence and perspective had shifted although they maintained devotion to the tenets of their traditional religion. Enlightenment teaching had moved from conscious affirmations, which one either affirms or rejects, to subconscious perspective of one's world. People were interpreting events, experiences and life reflexively, unthinkingly, unconsciously, through the prism of

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<sup>11</sup> Hunter in *Church for the Unchurched*, 21-22, describes these beliefs in a helpful list.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Kraft, *Christianity with Power*, 25-26.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

Enlightenment tenets. They were dismissing some things, diminishing other things, and emphasizing other things, without consciously reasoning. The Enlightenment had affected their worldview.

Kraft defines worldview as the “culturally structured assumptions, values, and commitments underlying a people’s perception of reality.”<sup>15</sup> A worldview is developed as part of a culture. In that culture people are taught to interpret life experiences in socially approved ways. They are rewarded when they conform (perhaps, with respect, knowing “nods” or affirmation) and punished when they do not (with social isolation or open ridicule).<sup>16</sup> They are taught to see selectively or are sensitized to the importance of some things over against others. For example, most of us in this culture have paid little attention to the invisible presence of electricity, except maybe for dairy farmers who have witnessed a loss in milk production and could isolate no other factor. We ignored invisible currents because of three things. First, we are materialists. We first look for visible causes. Invisible currents are not a visible cause. Second, we live around electricity all the time and have been taught not to fear its invisible presence. Indeed, views to the contrary were considered irrational. Third, we tend to accept those explanations that confirm what we have been taught whenever we evaluate new experience or information.<sup>17</sup> However, after a parishioner blamed transient voltage for the loss in his dairy herd and another parishioner was burned and his linesman partner killed by it, both my perception and comfort level changed.

Kraft believes that worldview plays the dominant role in affecting our perception of reality. He lists four other factors: our limitation of experience, our personal temperament, our will and our sin.<sup>18</sup> Because Enlightenment thinking tutors westerners about the nature of reality, the supernatural in western culture is relegated to superstition and fantasy, and the material world has been emphasized. Unless our experience, temperament, will or sin lead us, in the face of social disapproval, beyond that perspective, we will interpret all that we see in view of materialistic and naturalistic forces.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 19-22.

### **The Theological Divide**

Since denominations were bedfellows, of sorts, with these thinkers having chosen reason over tradition to justify their formation, they could not totally distance themselves. There was value, enormous value, in this new avenue of thinking. Indeed, successive generations were enjoying the fruit of this thinking, and it was alluring, even self-validating for some. Theologian Rudolf Bultmann suggested that one could not possibly use electricity and still believe in miracles.<sup>19</sup> In his mind, the Enlightenment and Supernaturalism were two mutually exclusive systems of thought. They were two trees with very different fruit. Some Christians agreed and opted out of the dominant culture. They formed communities that rejected the technological fruit of Enlightenment thinking.<sup>20</sup> Others, however, adopted or harmonized various aspects of both systems. In most cases, there was a reevaluation of not only church tradition, but also the meaning and role of Scripture. The tools of reason were now aggressively applied to Christian tradition, to practices of the Church and to the very Scriptures that had served so aptly in challenging the authority of Rome.

A theological divide developed as historic traditions and beliefs were questioned or discredited with these new tools. Christians, who sought to harmonize the systems but preserve a core of beliefs, became known as fundamentalists and conservatives. Their social disapproval came swiftly as they were labeled antiintellectual, pseudointellectual or pre-modern (a devastating critique in a culture of reason). Those with more confidence in contemporary tools of reason became known as progressives or liberals. They experienced in a return-volley the labels of heretics, infidels and “spiritual wolves.”<sup>21</sup> Wounded but undaunted, they remembered that their denominational founders had endured those labels just a few centuries earlier.

In the Christian church those different approaches crystallized into two very different schools of thought. What else would one expect from a culture where Reason

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<sup>19</sup> Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 124 alludes to that comment of Bultmann as he assesses the techno-savvy and supernaturally focused ministries of new paradigm churches in North America.

<sup>20</sup> The Amish colonies are a contemporary example.

<sup>21</sup> With volatility abated somewhat in this recent new era of Postmodern thought, it may be helpful and not self-serving to suggest that in retrospect, those labels, both for conservatives and liberals, found many deserving as well as undeserving targets.

ruled? Reason was the judge and arbiter of truth on both sides of the divide. Consequently, Kraft writes of the postmodern, western church:

Our Enlightenment heritage has left us with a rationalistic, mind-oriented approach to everything. Even the Scriptures have come to be approached in a purely rational way. Evangelicals haven't carried this to quite the extreme of liberalism—rejecting as “pre-scientific,” naive, and nonhistorical all supernatural teaching. Liberals, in their quest to make the Scriptures palatable to contemporary people, have often made human reason and/or experience supreme. Instead of attempting to return to at least the more reasonable aspects of the supernaturalism that the Enlightenment overturned, evangelicals have often argued against the liberal positions from the *same* rationalistic basis. We, like they, have often seen little of God's hand in the present and conducted our defense purely on the basis of what God used to do.<sup>22</sup>

Neither side of the divide in the western church (and especially in its denominations) has been that receptive to supernatural explanations of reality. Conservative leader John MacArthur, for example, still considers contemporary reports of “signs and wonders” preposterous. He believes they are “utter fabrications or yarns that have grown with the telling.”<sup>23</sup> As a result of such open hostility and widespread discomfort on both sides of the divide, the supernatural realm is by and large an unexplored labyrinth in North American churches.<sup>24</sup>

Although MacArthur's intransigence and hostility toward the supernatural is losing influence in this postmodern culture, the church is still crippled in significant ways. First, the North American church is more than unprepared; it is ill prepared to discern the supernatural. William Irwin Thompson declares:

We are like flies crawling across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: we cannot see what angels and gods lie underneath the threshold of our perceptions. We do not live in reality; we live in our paradigms, our habituated perceptions, our illusions.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kraft, *Christianity with Power*, 41.

<sup>23</sup> John MacArthur Jr., *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 159.

<sup>24</sup> This is the central thesis and task of George Otis, Jr. in his book, *The Twilight Labyrinth: Why Does Spiritual Darkness Linger Where It Does?* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> William Irwin Thompson, *Evil and World Order* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1976), 81.

We do not see things as *they are*, we perceive them as *we are*, or as *we have become*.<sup>26</sup> What we have become is far from neutral as observers. Like people with eyes not used to light, we wince and turn away from the flash of the supernatural. “We have been desensitized in our intuitive responses,” says Otis, “by the drumbeat of socially correct science.”<sup>27</sup> “The more ably clergy are educated, the more likely they are to be enculturated into reductionistic scientific attitudes and to ignore their own tradition,” declares Walter Wink.<sup>28</sup>

Before examining our tradition, it is helpful to quickly reflect on the dimensions of the world we perceive. Frequently, there is talk of a three-dimensional world although scientists would not stop there. Some limit their perspective to a material world of length, width and height. However, this author sees in at least four dimensions. There is the length, width and height. In addition, I see movement, which requires the dimension of time, and I see in color. Although one might argue that color is not a separate dimension, it offers us a whole new array of meaning and awareness. Not all creatures see in those dimensions. Their perception of the world is much different. How many dimensions exist in reality? No one knows for sure. We are limited by our senses, but much more by our opinions. Harvard theologian Krister Stendahl observes, “It is not so much what we do not know, but what we think we know that obstructs our vision.”<sup>29</sup> Our tradition, both biblical and ecclesiastical, reveals and teaches that there are more dimensions to our world than what our culture has admitted. Indeed, there is much in our tradition that suggests the spiritual realm is not one more dimension for our life but many. The Bible and ancient literature frequently allude to multiple worlds in the spirit realm. Terms, like “abyss” (Luke 8:31), “heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12) and “third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2), and statements such as “the heavens do rule” (Dan. 4:26) suggest something much more expansive and complex than a single spirit realm. George Otis considers these dimensions and dimensional gates in *The Twilight Labyrinth*.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, the western church is largely oblivious to this and thus Otis concludes:

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<sup>26</sup> Otis, *Informed Intercession*, 77, quotes Franco-American writer Anais Nin saying essentially the same thing.

<sup>27</sup> Otis, *The Twilight Labyrinth*, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Wink, “Demons and DMin: The Church’s Response to the Demonic” in *Review & Expositor*, The Faculty Journal of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Vol. 89, No. 4, Fall 1992, 503.

<sup>29</sup> Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 7.

<sup>30</sup> Otis, *The Twilight Labyrinth*, 90-93.

Western Christianity has clung to its millpond discriminations of reality so tenaciously that it has nearly lost all ability to recognize the spiritual dimension.<sup>31</sup>

Conservative and liberal Christian believers have been so affected by academically and socially proscribed, naturalistic values, that neither group has the experience, the equipment or the motivation to meaningfully explore the very realms they are confronted with every time they read from the gospels, the book of Acts or the rest of the Bible.

### **The Mistrust of Experience**

A second debilitating effect of our partnership with the Enlightenment is our fear of religious experience. Reason promises understanding and control but ecstatic moments and its emotional expressions challenge both our understanding and control. Consequently, the Church has come to dislike and de-emphasize religious experience.

For a people who celebrate Adam's communion with God, Abraham's call, Jacob's dream, Moses' burning bush, Christ's resurrection and the church's Pentecost, distrust and fear of emotional experience are more than ironic. It is unfathomable. Conservatives dutifully print tracts on salvation and offer altar calls that are to help seekers experience a saving relationship with Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit. In general, they promise peace as a witness of this experience, suggest a formulaic prayer to recite and then share several reassuring promises from Scripture. In this ministry what comforts seekers? Is it the presence of the Holy Spirit? (No doubt, on occasion it is.) Are not they actually comforted by their reasonable deductions from the Scriptural texts that were carefully laid out for them? Is not this peace through reason? Evangelicals might assert, "The Holy Spirit is enabling them to draw those logical conclusions." Possibly. For sure, ministers of the Enlightenment are. They lead seekers on a path to a controlled and understandable, religion-related experience of peace. Will these new "converts" now embrace a cross in following Christ? Some, whom the Holy Spirit actually filled and who now exude passion, may. However, the experience of the Spirit could neither be carefully planned nor rationally induced. It is promised; but as Philip and a sorcerer witnessed in Samaria (Acts 8:9-24), it is not formulaic or automatic.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 64.

If western conservatives are carefully orchestrating controlled, rational, religious experiences on their side of the Enlightenment divide, what are liberals sharing with seekers? Little in terms of experience or meaning. Kirk Hadaway and David Roozen assert:

Mainstream churches tend to assume that they *naturally* provide religious meaning. And in the false security of this establishment presumption, they no longer give careful and primary attention to this most critical (and problematic) function of church life.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps, it is liberals' faith in rational processes that causes them to assume that words and symbols are sufficient as agents of conversion and that involvement in Christian community is evidence of that conversion. Whatever the case, historic denominational churches – with their collective memory of suffering caused by religious intolerance and their dread of losing hard-earned cultural respect – fear religious zeal and the emotional experiences that birth passionate commitment. Religious tolerance and theological openness are of greater value, at least “operationally,” than personal experience.<sup>33</sup> Liberals, thus, are best suited to serve people, who either have been wounded by the indiscreet acts of the religiously zealous, who feel threatened because their views, behaviors or temperament is at odds with religious orthodoxy, or who carefully guard their cultural stature. Perhaps, this is what Donald Miller is observing when he writes about his local Episcopal church and the historic denominational churches.

I worry about All Saints and the mainline churches. In spite of the apparent health of this one Episcopal church, no new churches have grown from it in recent decades. For a church its size, it has very few high school or college students. *Rather, it seems dependent on other religious groups to socialize people into the Christian faith before they make the transition into a more liberal religious community.* This does not seem to me to be a successful formula for religious leadership in the twenty-first century, especially when compared with the aggressive evangelism that characterizes so many of the more conservative churches. Still, All Saints fills an important niche, for it is because of churches like All Saints that some of us remain within the Christian fold [italics mine].<sup>34</sup>

Miller has good reason for concern. With the fall of Christendom the constituency that historic denominations are best suited to reach is quickly disappearing. People, uncomfortable with Scripture, upset with Christians and hungering for some profound

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<sup>32</sup> Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, 76.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>34</sup> Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 187.

spiritual connection, suffer no social disapproval as they explore alternative spiritual experiences through non-Christian avenues. The liberal church even encourages the exodus, unwittingly, as they esteem independent inquiry, affirm theological diversity, focus on intellectual development and assume that this posture satisfies their constituency's hunger for meaning and spiritual connection.<sup>35</sup> Hadaway and Roozen assert:

People are searching for spiritual connection and religious meaning. They want “to have their lives make sense,” to find answers to ultimate questions, and to experience something beyond themselves—“wholly other” or “holy other.” Nearly everyone in American society believes in God, even many of those who do not express a deep longing for such a belief. People *expect* churches to provide a setting for religious experience and answers to ultimate questions. Instead, mainstream churches seem to fear religious experience and avoid “imposing” answers.<sup>36</sup>

The highly intellectualized atmosphere of “mainstream churches” offers discussion rather than experience and ambiguity rather than meaning. The result is a cultural disconnect. With the exposure of Reason's frailty, postmodern people no longer solely trust the intellectual processes that are emphasized in these churches to unveil reality and improve their lives. They hunger for authenticity validated by their own experience rather than “unassailable reasoning.”<sup>37</sup> That may account for Bill Easum and Thomas Bandy's observation:

Understanding the saving grace of God in a rationally consistent, historically grounded way is not important to most North Americans. *Experiencing* that saving grace in ways that personally transform one's life is everything.<sup>38</sup>

Don Miller saw much the same thing as he studied the growth and attraction of “new paradigm” communities. He wrote:

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<sup>35</sup> Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, 77. Hadaway and Roozen offer a scathing critique of “mainstream” churches. They claim that they deaden religious experience among their members by relativizing it, rationalizing it, burying it in rote tradition and giving it no visibility. Instead, they observe that these same churches instill attitudes that lead many to leave the church to explore other forms of spirituality.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Regele, *Death of the Church*, 57-80. Regele notes that for postmoderns, truth is no longer “unassailable.” He suggests that our perception of reality is always influenced in some way by our culture or subculture. This knowledge has led to a radical relativism and agnosticism about truth. However, he insists that is not a necessary conclusion. While we may not be able to shed all our biases and establish a foundation of knowledge that is free of weakness; he maintains that we can construct our lives on what is “unsurpassable.” In other words, we can focus on what has no better explanation, rather than what has no other explanation.

<sup>38</sup> William M. Easum and Thomas G. Bandy, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 41.

When new paradigm Christians read about Jesus and Paul and first-century Christians casting out demons and healing people, they believe that these must be their tasks also. They read about the prophets and sages of the Old Testament seeing and hearing God in their visions, and before long they too are having these encounters. The Bible takes on a reality to them based not so much on a priori assumptions as on empirically rooted experiences. Ironically, in their appeal to experience, new paradigm Christians may be aligned more closely with a truly empirical scientific worldview than are those theologians who anchor their theories in armchair reflection.<sup>39</sup>

The need for experiential validation is redefining the role for church leaders. The clergy as “resident theologian,” a “professional,” an officer of the church is senseless.<sup>40</sup> Postmodern people must hear and see in their leaders proof that Jesus makes a difference in the fortune and lives of those leaders. Eloquence in speech and artistry in worship will not substitute for an authentic model of Christianity’s value.<sup>41</sup>

North American congregations can overcome this vexing infirmity of fear, mistrust and irrelevance only when they are led by leaders who have been shaped by spiritual experiences, expect those experiences, are comfortable with others’ experiences, and stand eager to share and to help people explore their experiential connection with God.

### **The Diminishment of the Supernatural**

Earlier it was noted that denominations, which were birthed in the west with the rise of Modernity, are struggling to survive in their native lands; and though their congregations grow and multiply in other territories, they appear profoundly handicapped compared to those churches that have little western influence. As we explored the reason for this, we considered the cultural perspective of denominational churches rather than the multitude of structures they use. Every local congregation and every denomination develop over time an ethos or what Hadaway and Roozen call a “discrete subculture.”<sup>42</sup> Certain values are reinforced and certain behaviors are discouraged (much like the general culture). This can foster growth or decline. It can empower or it can shackle. Although most denominations officially espouse no bias against supernaturalism or religious experience, their subcultures have been greatly affected by Enlightenment teaching so that leaders are ill equipped to

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<sup>39</sup> Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 124.

<sup>40</sup> Read Easum and Bandy, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, 196-197.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>42</sup> See Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, 61, for a discussion of denominational subcultures and their effect on church growth.

discern the supernatural and mistrustful of religious experience. By far, the most significant implication is that these attitudes actually diminish the supernatural work of God. To put it in biblical terms, these attitudes “quench the Spirit” (1 Thess. 5:19, RSV). They douse the passionate work of God’s Spirit among His people and distance us from our Creator.

There are two results from this. First, diminishing the supernatural cuts an important communication cable with God. All contact is not necessarily severed, but it is substantially limited. All kinds of data is excluded from people’s awareness because, only when they recognize the source of that data, do they realize its import. Illustrating this is the story of a young boy, who purchased and began operating a two-way radio on a Pacific island. He once complained about interference. His father, however, listened for a while and recognized a pattern. It was a distress signal from a ship. What the boy dismissed as an annoyance, because he never thought of the possibility, proved to be vital communication.

Otis observes:

When God breathed “the breath of life” into Adam’s nostrils (Gen. 2:7), He brought forth something utterly unique in creation—a being endowed with capacity to traffic in two dimensions (the material and spiritual). Since “God is spirit” (John 4:24), He wanted to insure His children could relate to Him according to His nature. With this in mind the Almighty bent over Adam’s dusty form and exhaled. The inside of God spawned life inside man. Humanity became a race of spirits. Unfortunately, many people neglect to utilize their full range of endowments. Westerners, including a disconcerting number of Christians, are especially guilty of this. Having embraced the language and worldview of the Enlightenment, they dismiss spiritual vision as superstitious folly. Ask them to explain why things are the way they are in their communities, and they will instinctively turn to the oracles of sociology, economics or politics. Talk of spiritual explanations and you have bounded outside their comfort zone.<sup>43</sup>

As “a race of spirits,” people were designed for communion with God. Because humanity was meant for partnership and relationship with God, the quenching of the Spirit—the refusal to embrace the possibility of direct communication and intervention—is a betrayal of our life, wisdom and work. It hinders the gospel the church proclaims, because the gospel invites humanity to relationship, and skepticism impairs that relationship. With the cable cut, people become committed to images of God in the past rather than alert to communication in the present. God’s communication must be constricted into linear, logical

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<sup>43</sup> Otis, *Informed Intercession*, 80.

deductions that are consistent with natural processes (or some scriptural teaching—for conservatives). That was not the communication pattern modeled in Scripture. Peter’s noon vision of eating unclean animals (Acts 10:9-16) was neither a natural deduction nor a scriptural deduction. Perhaps, contemporary Christians allow for subjective hunches, but what about prophecies, tongues, dreams, visions, and angelic visits? Do we say to the Spirit, “Just basic cable please, we don’t want all those channels?” Restricting the means of communication is damaging. It limits communication and our knowledge of others because the means of communication often reveals as much as its content. If communication in marriage is restricted to the manner or means that one mate considers comfortable, knowledge of and intimacy with the other mate is nearly impossible. Only when spouses are utterly free to express themselves, can they really know each other. It is the same with God. Intimacy depends upon openness.

The second result of ignoring the supernatural is a limited ministry. With the cable cut or the channels limited, there are only certain ways people are open to God’s direction; and for the most part, skepticism squanders the power for evangelization. It is the Spirit not reason that liberates. We need the Spirit to minister. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3: 2). It is the Spirit, not reason, that leads (Matt. 4:1, Rom. 8:14, Gal. 5:18). We need to listen to the Spirit rather than just reason things out. The Spirit is not equated with our reasoning, but starkly contrasted to it (1 Cor. 1:20-31). Indeed, Paul wrote the Corinthians that it was not his eloquence or irresistible logic but the visible power of the Holy Spirit that brought them to faith in Christ and liberation (1 Cor. 2:4-5).

It is this demonstration of God’s power—which brought Corinthians to faith—that is drawing people to Christ all across the globe. In *Understanding Church Growth*, the author observed:

American missionaries, who have grown up in a highly secular society, usually take a dim view of divine healing, considering it mere charlatanism. After long years of sharing that common opinion, I now hold that among vast populations, divine healing is one of the ways in which God brings men and women to believe in the Savior.<sup>44</sup>

Margaret Poloma studied the Assemblies of God denomination in the late 1980s. She noted that much of its growth came at the expense of mainline churches, and she

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<sup>44</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 145.

discovered that it was precisely the emphasis on the supernatural that drew the people.<sup>45</sup> It reminds me of a situation that is described in the second book of Chronicles. King Asa calls an assembly of the nation for worship. The turn out is impressive, and the biblical writer notes:

He assembled all Judah and Benjamin and the people from Ephraim, Manasseh and Simeon who had settled among them, for large numbers had come over to him from Israel when they saw that the LORD his God was with him. (2 Chron. 15:9)

How did the Israelites know God was with King Asa? Probably many did not. However, some thing or things caught the attention of great numbers so that they concluded God and His favor was with King Asa and they left their homeland to join him. How much quicker will people leave their congregation for one where God's favor is visible in power? Poloma noted that the migration to Pentecostalism in the 1980s was not from the uneducated or impoverished. It was by people who were educated in the assumptions of the Enlightenment but hungry for a connection with God.<sup>46</sup>

To be sure, some people are interested in the supernatural for personal profit, power or prestige. They, like Simon the sorcerer who wanted to buy the tricks or secrets of spiritual power, are interested in magic that can work for them. However, so many more just hunger to know that divine love is more than a story. They are looking for more than a pat on a back or an encouraging word by a believer. They read of God's intervention in the Bible. They want that intervention in their lives. They reason that a God big enough to make this world must be great enough to do what is reported in Scripture. Wherever that might be tasted, they will go. Moreover, some will go out of desperate need. Personal, heinous evil has overtaken them. They cannot get loose. They are broken. Their psychiatrist's drugs only numb. Everything in them is screaming. They know the supernatural of another kind, and they hate it.<sup>47</sup>

It is often these tormented people that outsiders observe in Pentecostal communities. We conclude that the movement is for imbalanced, psychologically needy people. By that we mean it is an unstable, irrational and psychologically impaired movement

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<sup>45</sup> Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads*, xix, xx.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> It has been my experience with people from the occult who convert to Christianity, that they do not repudiate their spiritualistic view of life for a naturalistic one. Instead, they change sides in what they recognize to be a spiritual struggle.

that produces people of that ilk. To our shame, we act like the Pharisees who criticized Jesus for running with the wrong crowd and for being demonized because he casts out demons. If the tormented are present in Pentecostal circles and not ours, it may be because there they have hope.

John Wimber warned:

In Western culture, because of the influence of materialism and rationalism, many people do not believe in a spirit world, or if they do, they do not believe or live as though the spirit world could affect the material world. But their unbelief does not exclude demonic activity from our societies; demons' existence is not dependent on our belief in them. A mind-set that excludes the possibility of direct intervention by supernatural powers (good and bad) in the world makes Christians vulnerable to Satan.<sup>48</sup>

That vulnerability is twofold. First, we are vulnerable in that we do not recognize what it takes to liberate people. Engaged in a spiritual battle, we fight as if we are in a rational one. Any leader who has served on a church board has learned that reason, articulately expressed, does not always win. Individuals, families and communities are under spiritual, not just rational, duress. Our vulnerability lies in the fact that we are fighting things we do not recognize, and so we are clueless in forming a strategy to defeat them. Satan has got us buffaloed. Second, we are vulnerable to Satan in that we do not recognize his work or presence. Like an alcoholic refusing to admit that alcohol is his enemy, like a cancer patient refusing to acknowledge her diagnosis, like a compulsive gambler refusing to believe there's a problem, our intellectual scruples may simply amount to denial of a reality that actually dominates our present and our future. We may find temporary relief from our afflictions through some diversions, but our healing will not come until our denial ends and we begin to deal with the reality we have refused to acknowledge. If our fight is truly with "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12), as the Bible both illustrates and teaches, then our cultural skepticism is a bondage to be broken, an unbelief from which to repent, a deception from which to be freed, a stronghold from which to be delivered, and a choice that we can make.<sup>49</sup>

To lead and unleash our churches in the significant and exciting work God has for us, we need to realize who we are as the church (as we discussed in the past chapter), and what we

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<sup>48</sup> Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 41.

<sup>49</sup> Mike Regele in *Death of the Church*, 78-79, writes that postmodernism has more in common with premodernism than with modernism. Indeed, he claims that the most important distinction between the two is that of choice.

have become in our subcultures (the discussion of this chapter). The potential for intimate communion with Christ and world changing ministry is limitless, for “nothing will be impossible for you,” says Jesus (Matt. 17:20).