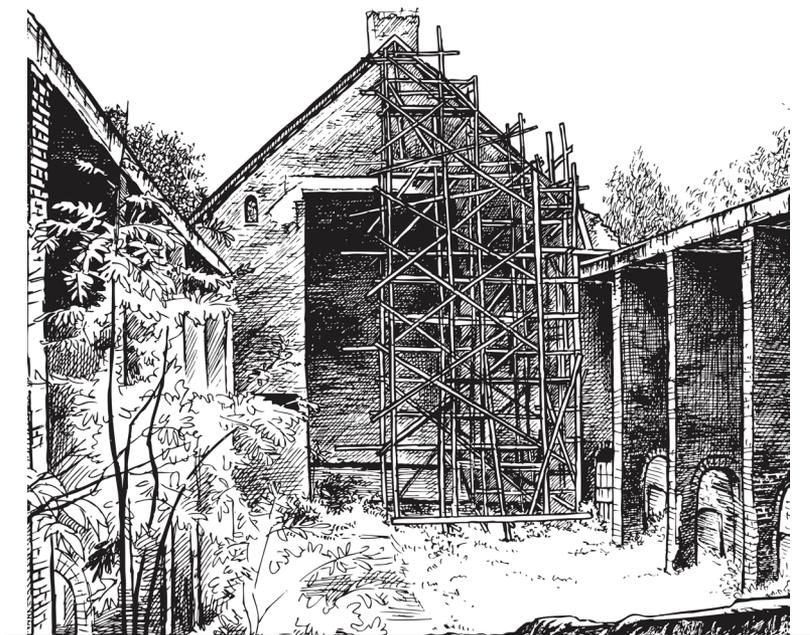


A CHURCH
DISMANTLED
A KINGDOM RESTORED

*Why Is God Taking
Apart the Church?*



CONRAD L. KANAGY

A CHURCH DISMANTLED—A KINGDOM RESTORED

Why Is God Taking Apart the Church?

Copyright © 2021

All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations unless noted otherwise are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, copyright © 1991, Oxford University Press, Inc.; *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (NRSV), copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations noted KJV are from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version in the United Kingdom are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press.

Six lines of lyrics from Wayne Watson's song, "Home Free," reprinted with the author's permission.

Selection from Henk Stenvers, "Walking on Water," Part 1, "Concerning the Future of the Dutch Mennonites" (Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëit), Feb. 3, 2021, reprinted with the author's permission.

Two lines from Sydney Carter's "Lord of the Dance" (1963) reprinted with permission of Stainer & Bell (U.K.)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021945085

International Standard Book Number: 978-1-60126-755-9

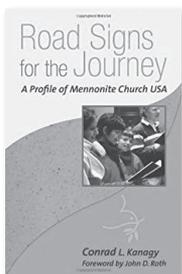


Masthof Press

219 Mill Road | Morgantown, PA 19543-9516

www.Masthof.com

MORE BY CONRAD L. KANAGY



*Road Signs for the Journey:
A Profile of Mennonite Church USA*
(Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2007)

*Road Signs for the Journey: A Study of Denominational Decline--and
the Discovery of Hope in the Spirit's Dismantling of the Church*
by Amazon.com Services LLC

Learn more: https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09C1PTFRP/ref=cm_sw_em_r_mt_dp_JVQAB6TYYSTXQJAPTZGT

CO-AUTHORED BY CONRAD L. KANAGY

*Winds of the Spirit: A Profile of Anabaptist Churches in the Global
South* by Amazon.com

Learn more: https://www.amazon.com/dp/0836196368/ref=cm_sw_em_r_mt_dp_E1A3N248FJ6WMN4Z038V

The Riddles of Human Society, Conrad L. Kanagy and Donald B.
Kraybill (CA: SAGE Publications, 1999)

TO HEIDI

God knew that I needed a life-long partner,
who when I finally showed up as my most authentic self,
would already be there waiting for me.

**“No churches to encircle God
And pen him up—a common fugitive”**

—Reynolds Price, “All Will Be Whole” (after Rilke)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword.....	xiii
Acknowledgments	xvii
Readers' Resources.....	xxii

PART ONE | 1

A Life Dismantled—a Life Restored

1. From Pandemic to Podcast	3
2. “This Is My Story and This Is My Song,” and Why It Took 55 Years for Me to Sing It	10

PART TWO | 19

A Church Dismantled

3. Why the Church Cannot Re-open	21
4. When Re-opening Just Might Be Our Closing.....	24
5. Malls and Megachurches: Covid-Crisis Casualties?	27
6. If the Spirit’s Dismantling the Church, How Can I Help?	29
7. The Spirit Is Coming—But I Want to Go Back to Church First!	33
8. With Wind and Fire, Yes—But with a Novel Coronavirus?	37
9. Spirit and Savior: The Best “Two-for-One” Special Ever	42

PART THREE | 47

Sins of a Church Dismantled

10. “Just as I Am” for the Great “I AM”?.....	49
11. The End of 2020 and Still No Vaccine.....	54
12. A Third Great Awakening?	58
13. Nobody Asks, “Where Is the Lord?”	62
14. Racism: Sin Then—the Same Sin Now.....	68

15. If Truth Sets Us Free—Why Do We Hear So Little of It in Church?.....	74
16. When God Disappeared From the Church?	79

PART FOUR | 87
Good News for a Church Dismantled

17. A Block Party Hymn Sing—Not in My Backyard!.....	89
18. Saint Mark, Larry the Cable Guy, and Pink Floyd Hymns at a Mennonite Funeral.....	94
19. A Stressed-Out Preacher, a Knock at the Door, “Get the Hell Out!” and a Suspicious Neighbor Who Became My Trusted Friend	98
20. “Got” Jesus? Regardless of How You Answer, Your Life Is Sacred	104
21. Why “You Can’t Get to Heaven by Being Good” Is Not the Good News!.....	108
22. “I Feel Like Such a Schmuck,” Yet Jesus Loved Schmucks and Became One of Them	113
23. A Church Built on Lies and a Person Who Believed Those Lies Until He Didn’t	118

PART FIVE | 123
Ministry in a Church Dismantled

24. The Trouble with Pastors Who Are Troubled and Who Trouble	125
25. Pandemic Pastors: Will We Make It to the Tipping Point or Fall Flat First?	130
26. Dear Church Member: What Shepherds See and What Some Sheep Do Not	137
27. The Problem with Prophets	145

PART SIX | 151

A Dismantled Body in a Church Dismantled

28. Parkinson's Disease, the Gifts of Dying Churches, and the Glory to Come.....	153
29. It's as if Everyone Has Parkinson's Disease	159
30. Boxing in Church.....	163
31. Fallen Tree, Chihuly Blown Glass, and a Dear Friend to Help Me Get Home	166
32. With at Least One Eye on Our Dying Day.....	170
33. A Year of Dismantling, "The Last Children of Down Syndrome," and "Whatever You Do, Don't Allow Parkinson's Disease to Define You!"	174

PART SEVEN | 179

Looking Beyond a Church Dismantled to a Kingdom Restored

34. From Babylon to Jerusalem and from Captivity to Home!... 181	
35. The Temple as Idol and the Church in Fast Pursuit	186
36. Can the Church's and the Kingdom's Maps Converge?	190
37. The Church Got Its Limen—Now Will It Make "Limenade"?	194
38. More on the Limen, Parkinson's, and that River Ahead	198
39. Will I Ever Stop Talking About a Church Dismantled?.....	201

FOREWORD

Wherever you look, the metrics for the institutional church spell doom. A recent headline from the Pew Research Center proclaims, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”¹ Fewer people identify as practicing Christians; more and more say they are atheists, agnostics, “nones,” or spiritual but not religious. Other indicators of religious commitment are also slipping. Generation Z—the cohort born from 1997 to 2015 and nurtured on all things digital—has been dubbed “the first post-Christian generation.” Even though the long-term effects of the Covid shutdown remain uncertain, the future of Christianity in America appears gloomy.

Amid this dire forecast for the institutional church, Conrad Kanagy offers a vision of hope and dispels gloom. He sees the hand of God enabling what he calls the dismantling of the church. And why would God be doing such a shocking thing? To prepare the way, to restore the kingdom first described by the prophet Isaiah and later echoed by John the Baptist who paved the way for the kingdom announced by Jesus. And if God’s Spirit is directing this grand dismantling of the church as we know it, then Christian leaders, says Kanagy, should align themselves with the project, not try to obstruct it.

Dismantling involves taking something apart piece by piece. In the fashion world, a mantle is a sleeveless cloth, a cloak, shawl, or stole that covers the body. Dismantling the institutional church

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

involves unwrapping layer upon layer of mantles that hide the body. God is dismantling these socially constructed mantles that have accumulated over the generations—dense theologies, religious falsehoods, erroneous myths, centralized power, religious red tape, and ritualized formulas for proper worship, all of which obscure the body, meaning the original core of Christian faith and practice.

For Kanagy, the decline of the church is ironically the handiwork of God's dismantling of the institutionalized church as we know it. This process of dismantling, he suggests, reveals the real core of Christian faith: Jesus. Inspired by the vision of three Hebrew prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jesus—Kanagy reminds us that things are not always what they appear to be. Where others see catastrophe, he sees God's handiwork. Where others see disaster, he sees God's Spirit at work.

The Hebrew prophets unveiled the myths, the lies, and the idolatry of God's wayward people. Conrad Kanagy shows us how the message of the Hebrew prophets helps us interpret and make sense out of the sweeping changes in church life today. Instead of decrying the unraveling of the established church, he invites us to see the changes through God's eyes and to join in the work of the Holy Spirit. When religious professionals try to fix the broken church, Kanagy summons us not to repair it, but, like Isaiah of old, to prepare for God's coming kingdom.

It may sound audacious to say that God is dismantling the church, but that's exactly what Jesus, *God incarnate*, was doing during his ministry. He dismantled many of the entrenched practices and traditions of his time. Prophets are disruptors. They shake up the status quo. Jesus shook up the keepers and defenders of institutional religion. His scathing criticism condemned the Pharisees and Sadducees for developing religious regulations galore that placed heavy burdens on the poor.

In a flagrant violation of the rules that forbade “work” on the Sabbath, he healed the sick and shelled grain for the poor. And he sought to shut down the mighty Jerusalem temple by flipping the tables of the money changers who had turned it into a lucrative market to rip off poor peasants who came to offer their sacrifices—the only institutionalized pathway to forgiveness. Dozens of his parables critiqued the callous attitudes of religious leaders. Jesus described the pious powerbrokers as filthy cups on the inside that looked clean on the outside, and as polished tombs that stank on the inside. Finally, he scorned the sham piety of leaders who touted their righteousness when their hearts were filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness. In all of these ways Jesus dismantled the pillars and practices of institutional religion that perverted true faith and worship of Almighty God.

More importantly, Jesus announced God’s new upside-down kingdom that showcased God’s relentless, unconditional love. The new kingdom welcomed outsiders, nobodies, and the stigmatized. It welcomed the demoniacs, the lepers, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the ill, and the paralyzed as well as prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners, adulterers, widows, Samaritans, women, and Gentiles. In short, Jesus hung out with a big band of nobodies from nowhere. He welcomed the throwaways tossed on the social trash pile. Instead of spitting on them, he touched them, loved them, and named them God’s people.

When captured and tortured and placed on trial, Jesus demonstrated God’s nonviolent love in the face of terror. Love is the bright marquee message in Kanagy’s essays. He shows how God’s love has no boundaries or favorites.

About four years ago, Kanagy learned that he had Parkinson’s disease. This difficult but liberating experience brought a personal dismantling that transformed his life. Among other things, it prompted a blitz of 275 episodes in a year-long podcast with 50,000

downloads in eighty countries. The thirty-eight essays in this book originate from the podcast that began in May 2020.

The Parkinson's dismantling gave Kanagy the courage, the guts, and the grit to strip off his masks and speak the truth. It empowered him to say and write things that most of us might think but would never say. Setting aside his inhibitions freed him to reveal his innermost thoughts and struggles.

These essays mingle the voice of a prophet, the eye of a sociologist, the heart of a pastor, the wisdom of an educator, and, above all, the candid confessions of a child of God. Whatever your identities—religious, skeptic, political, racial, gender, class—you will find his essays provocative. His unvarnished honesty and his picturesque language are refreshing. Kanagy invites us to see things in new ways that jolt our spiritual complacency.

You may not agree with him on every point, but you will admire his courage to say it as he sees it. He may stir your ire or light your fire, annoy you or compel you to compassion. Prophetic voices do that. But you will keep on reading. His poignant stories, evocative phrases, and frank confessions will entice you to read on and on to the very last line. I promise!

—Donald B. Kraybill, author of *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, 1978, revised edition 2018.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book, written over the past year, is the first of what I anticipate to be a book series entitled “A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored,” based upon podcast themes about which I wrote during the pandemic: a church dismantled, ministry in a dismantled church, light and darkness in a church dismantled, and my own journey through a dismantled church. The current book is organized thematically, reflecting some of those themes. To provide a contextual timeframe, each chapter indicates the month in which it was written.

I have so many persons to acknowledge and thank for their support of this project over the past year and longer. I have walked with my wife Heidi for more than three decades, and she more than anyone has influenced my love for God’s Word and the truths found in the holy scripture. I have been deeply formed by her and by our journey together. She has supported this project and all of the endeavors to which God has called me over the decades. Their value has increased greatly for having emerged as they have “out of our marriage.”

For years, Heidi asked me whether my sermons spoke to everyone who showed up for the Sunday service. While for a time I resisted the question, I came to appreciate it deeply because it challenged me to abandon my scholarly jargon and ivory tower pretense, and to speak in language and story that could communicate to everyone—from children to the elderly and to those with little education as well as those with much. After all, it is “to infants” that such things

are revealed, as Jesus said, unlike to “the wise and the intelligent” (Luke 10:21).

For this reason I asked some of my most consistent listeners to offer their reflections on the book, not because they are scholars or theologians necessarily, but because they are ordinary folks who also hear God’s voice and have heard that voice within the words of the podcast upon which this book is based. Their encouragement over the past year has motivated me to keep on writing and sharing what I sensed God was giving me to speak. They have helped me to remember that I am not as alone as I often think I am when feeling without a theological or ecclesiastical home these days.

I am especially grateful to my friend of nearly two decades—Mike “the Bike Guy” Schwartz—for numerous conversations across the years that have sharpened my sensitivity to what God is doing in the world. Despite the fact that we do not share the same religious commitments, or perhaps because of that fact, Mike’s personal and sociological perspective has been invaluable to me.

Elizabethtown College for nearly three decades has given me space to engage in my church related research and practice of ministry. Across four college administrations I have been blessed by the same support and encouragement, without which I would not have been able to “pastor” as a minister and “profess” as a teacher at the same time. In keeping with what I have always experienced, the college has supported and promoted the podcast “A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored” and has publicized my efforts widely. The college has also given me a sabbatical for the fall of 2021 to continue to write and publish my work.

Our congregation at Elizabethtown Mennonite Church has graciously been a space for me over the last decade to hone my preaching and writing for an audience that lives and labors in the everyday world of work, home, and play.

I wish to thank my editor, Charles Davidson, for the amazing way that he has walked with me, encouraged me from the very moment he set eyes on the manuscript, has helped to broaden and deepen my writing, and has believed in this project from the beginning of our work together. I want to thank the readers of the various drafts of the manuscript, including Sarah Santos and Paul Roth who listened closely for the continuation and consistency of my message and my voice as Charles and I worked through several iterations of the manuscript. Charles gave the confidence to me that I needed to launch this project and was just the editor I needed to do so. I will be forever grateful.

I am both humbled and honored by Walter Brueggemann's willingness to write the major endorsement for this book. I relied heavily upon Walter's work in the writing of *Road Signs for the Journey* in 2006-7. To have him endorse the current project in which my prophetic voice was reawakened once again, fifteen years later, is indeed a gift of God's Spirit.

Dan Mast of Masthof Press has been a valued collaborator on this project and has postured himself to do whatever possible to speed this book along, to keep the pricing reasonable, and to add helpful counsel along the way.

I also want to thank the members of my Facebook group "A Church Dismantled" and to the Book Launch Team for their ambitious collaboration and their ongoing support. They have been a consistent source of affirmation and have helped me to feel less homeless and less alone in this dismantled church.

Thanks go to publicist Rob Eagar for his excellent counsel and direction in thinking about how to market this book and those that follow.

Finally, I am grateful for the willingness of my long-time mentor, friend, and colleague, Professor Donald B. Kraybill of Elizabeth-

town College, for writing the foreword to this book and for recognizing a kinship in it to his own now-classic title, *An Upside-Down Kingdom* (Herald Press, 1978). From the earliest days of my career to the present, and across hundreds of hours of collaboration, Don has poured wisdom into my life—always honest, always gentle, always gracious. As Mike the Bike Guy says about Don, “You just always feel better about yourself after hanging out with him!”

All of these essays were written during the Covid pandemic.² I have sought to retain, for the most part, the present tense in which they were originally penned. This book and the podcast episodes that preceded it represent for me the intersection and integration of various areas of my professional and personal life that had been disparate entities in the past. They have allowed me to draw upon nearly three decades of teaching sociology, thirty-five years of sociological research, fifteen years of church and denominational consulting, twenty years of pastoral ministry, my childhood and coming-of-age in a conservative Mennonite-Amish community, my life-long struggle with a terror of God’s wrath exacerbated by obsessive-compulsive disorder, and the diagnosis, four years ago, of Parkinson’s disease.

As you will read throughout the chapters of this book, the Parkinson’s diagnosis has been a difficult but transformative experience for me, and in an uncanny way has represented my own dismantling at the same time that I have been writing about the dismantling of the church. But as you will hear me say repeatedly, this disease has given me a timeline and horizon that I had not seen so clearly before, and it has brought with it an encounter with the love of God, a re-conversion to Jesus, and an outpouring of his Spirit in ways I had not previously experienced in my life, which has led to freedom, clarity of identity, and a sense of contentment like unto none I had known before. As I have often said, if it finally took Parkinson’s disease to

² Hereafter cited as “Covid.”

bring these gifts to me, then thanks be to God! For it may just be that these graces also ensure that I find my way, finally, “home.”

My prayer is that my reflections throughout this book and the future volumes, *To Tear Down or Build Up? Ministry in a Church Dismantled*; *The Light Still Shines: Discovering Good News in a Church Dismantled*; and *My Story, My Song: A Dismantled Life Within a Church Dismantled*, will be an encouragement to you, and will cast a bit of light on your own journey toward the new heaven and new earth that is just over the horizon.

So, accompanied by the gracious words of the apostle Paul, himself plagued by weakness and troubled with a thorn in the flesh that God would not remove, may you receive my words, like Paul’s, as means of encouragement. For, in the midst of the dismantling: “We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Cor 4:16-18).

—Conrad L. Kanagy, Elizabethtown, PA
June 28, 2021

READERS' RESOURCES:

The website www.achurchdismantled.com contains resources to support the material in this book, including a short video in which I address each of the seven sections of the book as well as study guides for personal or group reflection and discussion. Readers may contact me directly through the website.

PART ONE

A LIFE DISMANTLED—
A LIFE RESTORED

CHAPTER ONE

From Pandemic to Podcast

In May of 2020, during the early months of the Covid pandemic, I wrote what I simply call the “Weekly Email” to our congregation, where my wife Heidi and I have served as a ministry couple for fifteen years. I entitled that week’s message “Why the Church Cannot Be Re-opened,” which was my reaction to the incessant calls of local church leaders to “get back to church” as soon as possible.

That little piece caught the attention of a few folks who then passed it on to others, which led to a series of blog-like postings on Facebook and eventually to a year-long podcast of 275 episodes. The primary theme of the podcast was at least fifteen years in the making, and was based upon research on the American church that I conducted in 2006–7, resulting in a book entitled *Road Signs for the Journey*.³

At that time, I raised the question: “Is God’s Spirit dismantling the church because we have so failed God’s mission?” For me the question has now become rhetorical, since I do embrace the idea that God is up to a grand deconstruction or dismantling—a taking apart—of the church as we know it and as it has been constructed in the West. This question was quickly followed by another: “If this is what God’s Spirit is doing, then how can we as leaders work with the Spirit rather than against the Spirit?”

At the onset of the Covid pandemic, I quickly saw this moment as a season that was rich with transformational opportuni-

³ Conrad Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile for Mennonite Church USA* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2007).

ties for the church, if only we would see and embrace them. For over the past century the church in the West has staked its future on the rational structures of modernity—on Enlightenment ideals about what is real and true and right and good. But little have we understood just how vulnerable we have made ourselves by doing so. It's almost as if some days we have thrown Jesus in as an afterthought.

Over the years, I have repeatedly cautioned my students that we have no idea whether modernity is sustainable or not. When we embrace the cultures and structures of modernity, we are vulnerable to whatever attacks them. Given our confidence in the reliability of empiricism and science, the last thing we expected was a virus from the Dark Ages to threaten the modern foundations upon which we have built the church. My concern at the onset of Covid was that if we fail to be honest about how thoroughly accommodated the church has become to modernity, including its economic and political manifestations, then we would unlikely be able to weather the pain and discomfort of the Spirit's reorientation of the church during the pandemic. I repeatedly stated, "If we are not converted to the ways of Jesus in this moment, we may never be."

Yet, as the months rolled along, I began to sense frustration among some of the saints who wondered, "Conrad, just what do you mean by the dismantling of the church, and how long will you keep rattling the same cage?"

I responded along these lines: I believe the Spirit is deconstructing, or tearing down, or taking apart the socially constructed elements of the church that recently have become—or for a long time have been—irrelevant to the central message of the gospel. That is to say, ways of being the church that have lost sight of the essential meaning and purpose of the church, ways of interpreting scripture that have justified remaining culture-bound and period-bound, and

ways of forming political alliances with the principalities and powers that have terribly compromised the message of Jesus.

This deconstruction may require eliminating tiresome committee meetings spent more on decisions about who will clean the church than about who will care for the diversity of neighbors in all degrees of circumstances surrounding the church—and spent on anything else that takes our eyes off of the imperatives of the gospel to which Jesus urgently summons us in mission.

Parenthetically, our youth flee the church, not as pagans who renounce the church, but as insightful persons who may see more clearly than the rest of us just what the church has become.

For me, dismantling the church is about joining God's grand excavation project of Isaiah 40, which has captured my imagination ever since I was a child, by lowering mountains that are barriers to the shalom of God's coming kingdom, by raising valleys in which the marginalized have had to hide for fear of being overrun by those who hold the power strings, and by making crooked paths straight and rough places a level plain along which the lost, the wounded, and the destitute may find their way home. Contrary to the vision of Isaiah, the church too often has done the opposite, by erecting mountains, deepening valleys, and making pathways rougher and more crooked than they already were.

Some have noted that I sound a bit angry at times as I write. Or they feel condemned by my writing. Yes, sometimes I do feel angry—angry that the church has built edifices and theologies and policies in keeping with the prevailing materialistic, mechanistic, and rationalistic ethos of modernity that the larger society takes for granted, but which has cast a long shadow over the good news of the freedom, joy, love, kindness, grace, and, yes, judgment, that God revealed in Jesus Christ. For it is not to the ethos of modernity that we are called to be obedient, and by which we are to be judged as faith-

ful, but rather in obedience to and by the transcendent judgment of him whose name we bear as Christians.

Which brings me to the second aspect of what I mean by the Spirit's dismantling of the church, and that is the removal of those "mantles" of our own devising that we have placed on the church and the Christian faith, which cover up the truths of God's kingdom that we are called to live by as our truths. The dismantling that I identify in this book has been both personal and autobiographical, as I confess my own false mantles while calling out the false mantles of the church that have displaced the true mantle of Christ—whether those false mantles be imposed upon any one or all of us, or upon God, or upon the Church itself.⁴

From very early on as a child, I was caught in cycles of torment and depression characteristic of obsessive-compulsiveness, which were fed by the oppressiveness of an "old order" of cultural fog that emphasized goodness, performance, perfection, and then, on top of it all, God's wrath. So whenever I failed to hit the high mark, which was every moment of every day, I remember these kinds of thoughts: Am I the only sinner among this bunch of saints? Are all the others okay with their sins? Do they know some secret about how to survive with a guilty conscience, which no one has shared with me? And finally, I don't understand why everyone says the gospel is so wonderful, when to me, given the way it's laid on like a razor strop applied to one's tender behind, it feels like hell instead of good news.

Slowly and over time, I began to understand that what the church had done (and all too often still does) was to "muzzle" (as in "muzzle") the truth, by declaring one thing while being altogether

⁴ When I reference the Church with a capital "C," I am referring to the Church eternal and universal. References to the church and churches with a lower case "c" reflect those institutions of our own construction as well as the local embodiment of the Church universal.

comfortable with something else, that is, by marketing its “product” with false advertising and claiming that the naked emperor wore a fine suit of clothes and his wife a starched bonnet, when what I saw underneath was something altogether different.

To mantle means to cover up and smooth over. And, dear folks, you and I both know that the church has too often covered up truths and smoothed over falsehoods. This is why I recently reacted so strongly to an invitation to speak to a group of churches for whom the stated aim of the weekend was to reinforce their desire to separate themselves from the world, as a way of feeling reassured about their goodness in contrast to the darkness of the world. I reacted because I detected that old shibboleth, that better-than-everybody-else-separatism. At the same time, I knew too much about some of the congregations within this group of churches in order to feel comfortable “remantling” their pretense to an unworldliness and otherworldliness that needs to be dismantled.

It was recognizing the false mantles of the church for what they are that saved me from giving up on God. And I suspect that I will spend the rest of my days doing the work of dismantling if it means that even one more person could be set free, as I have been set free over the course of this past year—set free by the One named Jesus who so dismantled the religious arrogance and edifices of his day that it cost him his life in order to save the world.

In 2017, I was diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease at the age of 52 years. For the first year, I cried and raged as I grieved the losses to come. But over time, I have also begun to recognize the gifts that I am receiving as a result of this disease. One of those gifts is the clarity with which I now see the horizon ahead, and the knowledge that my days of quality health are limited. This recognition has been transformative for me, as I realize that my own body is being dismantled at the same time that the church itself is being dismantled.

My weaknesses are being exposed, and the mantles I wore to cover those weaknesses have been stripped away. I can't hide my vulnerabilities or deny my fragility. Over the past four years I have had a new conversion to Jesus and a new awareness of God's incredible love for his children—meaning every and all human beings created with the imprint of God upon them. I have little doubt that the podcast or this book would ever have emerged without this disease taking me by surprise, but which I now realize to be my own unique path Home.

It has been clear to me during the past year that I am not alone in my sense that the church is in the process of being dismantled. The podcast "A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored" has appealed to many more listeners than I ever imagined it would. Nearly 50,000 episodes have been downloaded in more than 80 countries and nearly 1,600 cities. My writing has had a special appeal, it seems, to folks who have become disillusioned with the American church and have perhaps left that church. I call these folks the diaspora—those who have left what we have long presumed to be the primary institution by which one discovers the kingdom of God but which too often is the one that leads folks in the wrong direction or in no direction at all.

Do I still believe in the Church? Yes. I believe that the one who founded the Church (upper case) is also the one who is now taking apart much of what we have constructed of the church (lower case) that fails to be the people that Jesus calls to be the light and the salt of the earth.

I believe in Jesus. And I remain committed to the Church eternal and universal and to the church that is temporal and local, composed of divinely inspired communities encountering and living fully within the mystery of a loving, compassionate, and caring God who made himself vulnerable to us by entering our world through the embodiment of his Son.

My continued discovery of the Holy One means that I must join his Spirit in the grand excavation project envisioned in Isaiah 40, which the Spirit initiated—for lowering mountains, raising valleys, and making rough places smooth and crooked places straight!

CHAPTER TWO

“This Is My Story and This Is My Song,” and Why It Took 55 Years for Me to Sing It

July 2020

Following my sermon one Sunday, which was focused on my grief over the losses that I and so many of us had suffered during this pandemic, I was approached by one of the saints who was concerned about what he had heard in my podcast.

Taken by surprise, I hemmed and hawed from behind my mask. I was tired from having preached, especially since my message was filled with lament. I stuttered a few things about the podcast, trying to explain to him where I was coming from. And I’m sure I came across as a bit defensive.

As I turned away, the answer that I wish I had given him suddenly came to me from the titles to two old hymns I love: “Just as I Am, Without One Plea” and “Blessed Assurance . . . This Is My Story, This Is My Song.” Accordingly, I thought, he may not agree with “my story and my song,” and he may not appreciate me “just as I am,” but nevertheless “this is my story” and “this is my song.” And I shall tell it and sing it forever in the presence of the One who receives me “just as I am.”

There are so many reasons why I have hesitated over the years to tell my story and sing my song, but mainly because I feared the reaction of some of the saints. You know, don’t you? Be careful, tread lightly, don’t reveal yourself, I said to myself, as do we all. For we are

bound like prisoners by certain social controls. Sociologists argue that stigma, gossip, and rejection by family and friends are among the most powerful of controls we encounter. We have a hard time being our authentic selves, even and especially with those persons who supposedly love us the most. And yet, as sociologists also tell us, it is the stranger with whom we often are most willing to be transparent.

One of our problems as Christians is that we may too readily confuse our experiences of being judged by other persons with our experiences and understandings of God. We project upon God the same reluctance to reveal ourselves that we present to others. We fear that God may reject us for reasons similar to those of family and friends. Beneath it all, sometimes tragically, we are besieged by internal conflicts about our own self-acceptance.

The fact is that the burden of self-shame is all too quickly conveyed to us from the moment we are born, whereupon the message we too often receive, hard-wired by negative reinforcement in the brain, is “I am of little or no worth.” Sadly, this is the conclusion we come to about ourselves when most of all we need to hear instead the good news that God loves us and deems us to be of great worth despite all the falsities, pretenses, hypocrisies, and self-deceptions that plague our days.

I recently heard someone confess that it was no longer necessary to place the sole burden of blame for his adult struggles on the dysfunctions of his family of origin. For when taking a close look at his own marriage and family, he recognized a similar dysfunction being played out. The message he was passing on to his children sounded like this: Son—Daughter—don’t do such-and-such a thing because of what people will think of you. Don’t go over there to that particular place because people will glance at you with disapproval.

“Don’t, don’t, don’t” was the repeated imperative. It was rooted in the dread of being judged and stigmatized by what others

might think. The result was that the children began to shut down emotionally. Fears of verdicts from the outside prompted shrinking self-confidence and self-esteem on the inside.

When I was a kid, I used to ride my bike down the street and place into people's mailboxes little tract-like papers telling them how to find Jesus. But someone warned me that putting things into mailboxes was a federal offense and that I needed to stop. So I then went to the neighbor's house to tell her directly about Jesus. Yet when I knocked on the door her dog broke through the screen. I felt suddenly shame-bound for disrupting the elderly woman's life. Quickly I learned not to tell my story, even if the story was about Jesus.

You could say that this experience turned out to be the flip side of the parental "don't, don't, don't." For what I had heard as a child in church was "do, do, do." That is, do tell people about Jesus. Do talk about him. It's a good thing. But then, given what happened when I actually told someone about Jesus, embarrassment and shame set in.

This leads me to say a word about hypocrisy. We Evangelicals seem to have a knack for making each other feel guilty about our failure to tell the world about Jesus, while at the same time we go on saying to ourselves: You should pass out tracts. You should be a street preacher. You should pray with your neighbor. You should do something for somebody in need. You should . . . you should . . . you should.

As Evangelicals we seem bent upon hearing, talking about, and critiquing others' beliefs. But seldom do we do a good job of listening to each other's life-stories and validating one another as persons. Being fixated upon what we think others need to believe, we overlook what we most of all need for ourselves, which is affirmation of our self-worth in the eyes of God and one another.

The same is true about the self-worth of others. We displace our unworthy sense of self upon others by holding them to standards

of “right belief” that we ourselves are far from measuring up to. This is what Jesus pointed out when calling the scribes and Pharisees to task: “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers” (Luke 20:47a). Their unjust treatment of widows made hypocrisy of their prayers. Piety provided no cover for their injustice. They had forgotten the words of one of their own prophets:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them and the offering of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

Unfortunately, for many of us Evangelicals, “right beliefs” have become our public persona, the equivalent of long pharisaical prayers. We display our neatly bundled beliefs for others to see and adopt as their own. But what about our acts of justice and mercy? When we take an honest look at ourselves “just as we are,” how do we measure up when it comes to our relationships with persons of color, LGBTQ persons, immigrant persons, and others? Do we treat them as any less worthy than we are of God’s abundant acceptance and love?

That is to say, if any such persons were to tell us their stories, saying to us, “Hear me ‘just as I am,’” would we open ourselves to them without prejudice and with the same welcoming compassion that Jesus bears toward each one of us?—“Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me”?

I often tell my students at the beginning of the semester to find a way to get “their voice out on the table,” since together we do

not learn until we all have made our stories known. And that's because things will move from head to heart when we share our stories and songs with one another. When I have heard their hearts and stop worrying so much about what is in their heads, lo and behold, my own soul's longing to share my story and sing my song "just as I am" stirs within me.

In my sociology of religion course I recently tried something different from my usual practice. I asked students to write their religious autobiography, even if it was about growing up without religion ("nones," meaning persons of no religion, is now an official religious category for us sociologists). I told them that the classroom is a safe place to tell their stories and to sing their songs, and that we would not be critiquing or criticizing or judging one another's deep-down sharing. Their stories were to be grounded in their socialization, that is, in what they had learned, seen, and experienced at home, in school, in religious settings, and elsewhere. This was to be their time to reveal and explore together without being judged.

The results were amazing—honest, raw, moving, and deeply personal. As students listened to what sprang from the souls of others, the experience had a transformative effect upon their beliefs. One person, who assumed that all Christians were right-wing supporters of Donald Trump, had previously declared himself to be an atheist. But having heard the stories of others, including Roman Catholics and Evangelicals who believed in God, by the end of the semester he said, "For the first time I now see that perhaps I can believe in God. I need some time to think more about this."

It wasn't his hearing about the beliefs of those Christians that opened his mind and heart, but rather it was hearing their deep-down personal stories. As a result, I walked away from the semester grieving that the church provides so few opportunities for such hon-

est conversations in which we silence our need to express our beliefs long enough to listen to another's heart.

One listener to the podcast responded with a note that I'm afraid far too often reflects what we hear in the church:

I went to an “Apologetics Conference” a few years ago—before I had totally divested myself of all “corporate church” goings-on—and saw a number of big names speak. One was J. Warner Wallace, who concluded the final day of the conference by telling the audience (mostly high school and early college folks, and a few adults like me) that we needed to *stop* telling our personal stories! He made a deeply hammered point of the fact that “nobody cares about your story” and that we need to stop “giving our testimonies” and, instead, stick with the *facts* about the Bible being true, about the archaeological and ethical-logical arguments for the truth of the Bible. He said (with a bit of a sneer) that by sharing “our stories” we wouldn't win anyone over for Jesus. I found this (and many other things I heard at the conference), quite honestly, troubling and confusing, for when my heart has been changed by others it has been because they shared their *stories* and perspectives, and not because of the “cold hard facts.”

From toddler to grownup, Sunday school is frequently too much about believing the right things and talking about doing the right things, yet rarely about enabling our children and ourselves as adults to integrate the gospel from the biblical stories, including the stories of Jesus, with truth-telling about ourselves. For Jesus enters our stories not as a belief but as a person. Just as God does, Jesus cares and listens to who we are, to what's going on with us, to how we're doing, to what we're facing and struggling with, to our deepest longings, hopes, desires, and, yes, to our darkest moments of despair.

“Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”

When the church becomes a safe haven to tell our stories, we find far more growth occurring within our souls and ultimately much more love to offer one another. But when we are overly defended and protected by our beliefs, we miss the rich experiences of one another.

As with Truman Burbank in the movie “The Truman Show,” the surrounding culture conditions us to live inauthentically within a walled reality, deprived of the fullness of true selfhood. Breaking away from those constraints, those walls, does not come easily, for we must first disabuse ourselves of the “believed reality” that disguises the truth about our common human condition. Truman believed from an early age that his father had been lost at sea, only to discover later with his very own eyes, and to his sudden shock, that his father lived as a homeless man on the street. We too require such moments of startling awakening. For it is then that we see what’s transpiring not only within ourselves but also within others.

I wish I had broken through this kind of walled reality earlier in my life. I wish that doing so had not required the diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease, which confronted me with the fact that my days were numbered, and that if ever I wanted to become an honestly authentic human being, then I’d better start now. I wish I had cared far less about what other saints and sinners (we’re all a mix of both) had thought of me, and about what I *believed* of what they thought of me. For I knew what no one else could possibly know about me until I shared it, which is the truth of my own deep-down story.

By God’s grace, and with thanksgiving, I finally broke through the wall. Yes, it’s better to arrive home late than not at all. It’s better to live authentically for a short time than to live inauthentically all of the time. Such breakthroughs, I believe, are God’s way of prepar-

ing us to live in the richness and fullness of God's kingdom that, yes, begins now.

It's better for God to undertake the hard work of sanctification within me now rather than at the last minute when I stand before him, smoking like smoldering straw rather than bearing a golden crown. Or, as St. Paul said plainly enough, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:12b).

As for God's good pleasure, if ever I were to have the privilege of hearing the story of that listener to my podcast, who seemed so disgruntled by what he heard of my story, I pray that I should be able to accept his story and his song—the holy truth of it—from deep-down within him, with grace and without judgment.

"Blessed assurance . . . This is my story, this is my song."

PART TWO

A CHURCH
DISMANTLED

CHAPTER THREE

Why the Church Cannot Re-open

May 2020

Several months into the Covid pandemic, this chapter was the first of what would become the podcast “A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored.” The essay was originally one of my so-called “Weekly Emails” to our local congregation where my wife Heidi and I lead together.

Nearly everywhere we turn these days we are hearing the word “re-open”: re-open the country, re-open the economy, re-open nail salons, restaurants, barbershops, gyms, major league baseball, and just about everything else we’ve done without for the last two months. And now, more and more we are hearing that it is time to “re-open the church.” The problem is that the Church cannot be re-opened, for the Church was never, ever closed.

The idea that churches can be “re-opened” along with barber-shops and malls and hair salons reveals our concept of ecclesiology and our theological orientation as twenty-first century Americans, namely, that congregations are places to go to consume religious goods and to shop for various expressions of worship, preaching, and community that best fit our lifestyles, our preferences, and our theology (to the extent that any of us are thoughtful anymore about the latter).

But the Church is not a barbershop or a restaurant that can be opened and closed. The Church (capital “C”) is a living and breathing organism, the very body of our Lord Jesus Christ, of which he

is the head. The fact that the wooden doors to our church buildings may never open again will have nothing to do with God's eschatology—the new heaven and new earth for which the Lord of history is shaping the future.

The problem with rushing to “re-open the church” is that we may sabotage the work that the Holy Spirit is wishing to do among us in this time of “dis-assembly.” After all, Jesus instructed his disciples to wait for forty days for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. What a shame it would be to miss the coming of God's Spirit in new ways in this time by our impatience to return to a previous reality that has served God's purposes in the past but may not be well suited for the future that God is building.

Fifteen years ago, while writing *Road Signs for the Journey*, I sensed a question that by now I've come to believe came from the Holy Spirit: What if the Spirit is dismantling the church, so that once again, here and now, we can get on with God's mission in the world that “God so loved” and so loves still? As I've asked that question in various settings in recent years, it has resonated with many persons, perhaps because it has become abundantly clear that God is dismantling the church of *our creation*, but not the Church reflecting the “pure and spotless bride of Christ” that God intends us to be.

So, before we jump the gun and attempt to go back to something that may already be gone, let's lean into God's Spirit to discern in the presence of Christ what exactly we are to “move into” and “create anew,” rather than “move back to” in an “embrace of the old.” For I am quite confident that there is no moving back or embracing of an “old” that we previously created. By God's grace, the old has become history.

In our own congregation, as we show up on Zoom together, there is an authenticity and freedom that has come to all of us as we feel less pressure to “perform” and “dress up to go to church.” What-

ever the future of our congregation turns out to look like, I pray that we never regress to that “Egypt” where “going to church” means leaving our genuine selves behind so that for two hours a week we can be what we think others, or our “socially constructed” views of God, expect of us.⁵ If that isn’t bondage, then I don’t know what is.

Frankly, my hope and prayer is that whenever we re-assemble face-to-face, it will be only after God has had the chance to do his holy, transformative work within us individually and corporately.

⁵ I will use the phrase “social construction” or the “social construction of reality” throughout this book. It is a sociological term that simply means that society and our social worlds “create” our realities for us. They may or may not be true realities but they appear as true to us because others have told us they are true and we come to accept these realities as normative. The best sociological source for further reading about this concept is Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).