



Observations and Reflections on  
**The Future of  
Church**



**A 12-part series of observations and reflections with  
Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault and Christopher Page at [www.contemplative.org](http://www.contemplative.org)**

During Lent 2011 in Victoria British Columbia, Canada eight church clergy, academics, and spiritual teachers (including Cynthia Bourgeault) shared their thoughts and insights over six Wednesdays on "The Future of Church". Christopher Page created a synthesis of twelve observations that emerged from these presentations and Cynthia Bourgeault will offer her reflections on these points over the coming weeks.

**Observation # 1:** The church is in the midst of a massive cultural sea change. This paradigm shift is altering everything around us and we in the church are not at fault for the devastating impact it is having upon our institution. The decline in the church is not primarily the fault of mismanagement, bad theology, or lack of good will. We are caught up in forces much bigger than we can control.

**Cynthia's response:** This strikes me as an enormously helpful and non-judgmental way of framing the situation, encouraging us right from the outset to "think outside the box." It really is a fascinating time to be alive as not only change itself but the *rate* of change keeps accelerating beyond anything the world has ever experienced. From global warming to the worldwide web, it's all about dynamic equilibrium in a fragile and interconnected world. This may be new to traditional theological formulations, but it's right at the heart of the Jesus message. As Fr. Bruno Barnhart so brilliantly put it in his book *Second Simplicity*: "The gospel's secret power, often hardly glimpsed by Christianity itself, is the gathering up of all our passion, our entropic centrifugal energy, our very outward thrust and vital compulsivity, secularity, and carnality into this divine energy that ever flows outward from its hidden Source." If it happened once, it can happen again. And we will find our way by turning toward it, not by running scared.

**Observation # 2:** The shift we are currently navigating is generally described as a move away from rationalism, propositional faith, and institutionalism. People are no longer seeking intellectual answers to questions or rigid institutional embodiments of those answers. They are looking for a deep experience of God and profound inner wisdom to support them in living authentic and integrated lives. We can no longer assume institutional loyalty. The days when we could rely on loyalty to the church and general agreement to a uniform body of dogmas are gone. It is not adequate to demand

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allegiance, or simply keep announcing our convictions confident people will eventually sign up.

**Cynthia's response:** That may indeed be how things look from the viewing platform of most of the Lenten Series speakers—i.e., the mainstream liberal Protestant establishment. But there seems to be no dearth of folks out on the religious right eager to sign up for rationalism, propositional faith, and institutionalism, while those seeking a deeper experience of God and an accompanying inner wisdom have existed in every generation. What's really happening, it seems to me, is that the “middle” has dropped out of mainstream Christian experience: those unspoken but hugely influential “lower left and lower right quadrants” (in Ken Wilber's terms) over which the church until recently presided as a combination of cultural cement and social networking agency. Upward mobility, social respectability, cultural literacy, “old boys' club” placement services, patriotism, civic duty, and a chaplainly blessing upon the affairs of state: all this was part of the great cultural-spiritual mainstream over which the church held undisputed sway.

That is mostly swept away now—a casualty of the cultural tsunami described in Observation #1 (first installment of this series). Not only does the role itself no longer exist in an irreversibly pluralistic, mobile, and secular society, but even in its former unassailable niche as ethical and moral pace-setter, the church now generally lags far behind in basic standards of inclusivity and civil rights widely established in secular society itself.

It seems to me that there are really two options for moving this dinosaur gently along the evolutionary track. One is to ‘fess up to the fact that this middle ground has always been an important part of the church's missionary ground and radically get on board with the social networking program in terms understandable in today's cultural reality. The other is to pare down and focus on those folks thirsting for authentic spiritual formation and actually deliver the goods, cutting through centuries of doctrine, dogma, and institutional solipsism to the profound transformational wisdom still flowing from the living heart of Jesus. That is the trajectory, of course, that I am myself the most keen on exploring.

The third possibility, of course, is to attempt to shrink the world back to its former cosmological and theological dimension so that the church's cultural cement might yet again hold everything together. But this route, while being actively sought in some corners of the corners of institutional Christendom, does little service either to Jesus or to our planet.

**Observation # 3:** Although the institutional expression of faith is in precipitous decline throughout North America and Europe, faith is not in decline. The majority of people still believe in God and have deep spiritual longings. They simply would not think of looking to the church to satisfy their spiritual hunger.

**Cynthia's response:** Ouch! What a zinger that last line is!! But like the lad in that old fable, “The Emperor's New Clothes,” it names a truth that can be completely liberating

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once we let it out of the bag. If so many people “simply would not think to looking to the church to satisfy their spiritual hunger,” where *are* they looking? That’s pretty easy to see: to retreats, meditation workshops, wisdom schools (mine fill up instantly, a couple of years in advance), mystery schools, vision quests, spiritual direction programs, interSpiritual Institutes such as Ken Wilber’s Integral Life or the Spiritual Paths Foundation), internet courses (the wildly successful Spirituality and Practice e-courses, for example), virtual monasteries such as Sr. Joan Chittister’s newly launched “monastery of the heart, and grass roots contemplative orders and organizations such as Contemplative Outreach, The World Community of Christian Meditation, or our own plucky little Contemplative Society. They’re signing up for embodied experiences such as yoga retreats or Sufi zikr and whirling; they’re flocking to a proliferating network of “Open Centers” where spiritual ideas can be freely presented and pondered in an atmosphere of open inquiry and respect. The bottom lines seem to be that most people hunger for genuine spiritual formation (not doctrinal imprinting) in an atmosphere of embodied practice, non-sentimental but profound mystical devotion, and open, interSpiritual inquiry that draws respectfully on the transformative wisdom of all the great spiritual traditions. And if even this is too arcane, they run marathons, go skiing, or hang out at the Sunday market.

And I have to admit that for me, too, when I’m not scheduled to preach or celebrate, I do the same.

The big problem, of course, is the lived experience of a very large number of folks out in the world is that the church blocks the view, hog-tying genuine spiritual yearning in an intricate tangle of doctrinal ownership and theological nitpicking. If you’re following the response to Christopher’s observation #4 (to be posted soon), you’ll see what I mean. Why do we keep doing this to ourselves? What part of “contemplative,” “embodied,” “immediate,” “non-ideological” do we not understand? Why would we rather be “correct” than connected?

**Observation # 4:** Faced with decline, the institution of the church is permeated by fear. Some in the church are fearful for the preservation of their cherished institutions and buildings. Others fear that their familiar theological formulations are being threatened. Fear is never a good starting place for opening to the movement of God’s Spirit.

**Cynthia's response:** You’ve hit the nail on the head with that one! In fact, modern neuroscience now confirms what the mystics and contemplatives have insisted since time immemorial: that fear completely shuts down our capacity for Spirit-led responsiveness and even wrecks havoc on our basic common sense. The data now emerging from The HeartMath Institute and other places depicts graphically how any fear response immediately lights up the neural pathways straight to the amygdala, the most ancient and primitive part of the human brain (commonly known as “the reptilian brain” because guess whom we share it with?), where it stimulates a series of very rigid and repetitive behaviors in response to the “fight or flight” signal. Not only are we out of touch with Spirit; we aren’t even using the more evolutionarily advanced parts of our human brain!

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Learning to stay open, stay engaged, stay receptive in the face of sweeping change (rather than going to fear-responses) is a classic fruit of spiritual practice. It's ironic that in the plethora of retrenchment strategies now engulfing the church, that this profound resource at the heart of the church's own mystical treasure chest is so little acknowledged or utilized.

**Observation # 5:** The pervasive fear in the church is paralyzing. It inhibits genuine conversation and keeps us fixated on finding solutions, rather than launching into bold new adventures of faith. There is no way to move forward until we come to grips with the reality of fear. Dealing with fear requires deep personal and corporate spiritual practice. Only transformed people will have the ability to be a transformed church.

**Cynthia's response:** This is so, so true. If "perfect love casts out fear," the opposite is sadly but equally true: "perfect fear casts out love." And it shuts down just about everything else as well. Fear is always a tip-off that one is living at the egoic level of consciousness (or in the corporate mode, the "we-goic" level): that anxiety-prone hardwiring of the immature human mind that sees everything from its own self-interest and perceives through separation and scarcity. The only "cure" for fear is spiritual practice, which gradually heals this artificial split in the field of consciousness and restores the direct perception of abundance and connection. All other approaches to fear simply mask the symptoms, generally through reliance on illusory power and control to "fix" the external situation deemed to be broken.

Ironically, this healing of fear is at the very heart of the Jesus message, over which the church claims custodial rights but about which it knows so very little. "Do not be afraid, little flock: it is my Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom," Jesus assures his followers in those immortal words of Luke 12: 32. And throughout his entire ministry, he teaches, models, and ultimately offers himself up in the kenotic (or "letting go") practice which not only surmounts fear but transforms it.

Imagine what might happen if a whole group of Christian were to simply drop their terrified insistence that the church as we know it must survive and were instead to give themselves to that "deep personal and corporate spiritual practice" that makes it possible to fall through fear into perfect love. What might happen next? Whatever form it might take, it would certainly be REAL: a powerful new unleashing of the Jesus energy, no longer as that "mighty fortress" and "bulwark never ceasing" of times gone by, but as the river itself, ever flowing.

**Observation # 6:** The church will not recover its nerve, its creativity, or its authenticity simply by instituting fancy new gimmicks, implementing flashy programs, trying to get more organized, or working harder. The way forward is through the development of meaningful spiritual practices, a renewal of corporate spirituality, and a profound shift of consciousness in the way we do church. These deep inner changes will only be achieved

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by creating space for an awareness of the presence and action of God to emerge in our midst.

**Cynthia's response:** Amen, brother! More than seventy years ago the Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly penned these prophetic words:

“Continuously renewed immediacy, not receding memory of the Divine Touch, lies at the base of religious living. Let us explore together the secret of a deeper devotion, a more subterranean sanctuary of the soul, where the Light Within never fades, but burns, a perpetual Flame, where the wells of living water of divine revelation rise up continuously, day by day and hour by hour, steady and transfiguring. The ‘bright shoots of everlastingness’ can become a steady light within, if we are deadly in earnest in our dedication to the light and are willing to pass out of first stages into maturer religious living. Only if this is possible can the light from the inner sanctuary of the soul be a workaday light for the marketplace, a guide for perplexed feet, a recreator of culture-patterns for the human race.”  
(*The Light Within*, p. 31).

If that Light within truly exists, there is only one authentic way to find it, and it is just as you have named it: “*creating space for an awareness of the presence and action of God to emerge in our midst.*” If we don’t trust that the light actually exists, if we resign ourselves to being no more than the caretakers of a “receding memory of the Divine Touch,” then we might as well close up shop right now and go join the crew at the Sunday market and soccer practice. At least there’s fresh air!

**Observation # 7:** People want to learn spiritual practices. They want wisdom for the journey of life. If the church is going to meet these real desires, we must put aside our obsession with the institution and explore the presence and action of God’s Spirit at work in our lives, in our churches, and beyond the church in unexpected places throughout the world. Where we find God’s Spirit at work, we must cooperate with and celebrate that work, even when it seems unusual and unsettling to our established ways of doing church.

**Cynthia's response:** Just like Jesus did it.

**Observation # 8:** In order for us to cooperate with the work of God’s Spirit, we must loosen our grip. If the church wants to move forward in the current environment, we can allow no place for stultifying rigid hierarchy or oppressive control. Clergy must learn to let go. We need to relax our structures, allow for fluidity, flexibility, openness, and diversity.

**Cynthia's response:** “Loosen our grip” sounds right—this is, in fact, the heart of Jesus’ revolutionary kenotic teaching. But are you talking here about style or content? When you recommend that “Clergy must learn to let go,” are you talking about a way of hanging onto structures and dogma, or the structures and dogma themselves? Does “fluidity, openness, and diversity” mean in your book to relax the Nicene creed as the benchmark of Christian belief, to say it’s okay to believe that Jesus was just a wise teacher, not a unique manifestation of the very being of God, to say that the resurrection never really happened, to allow each parish to ordain their own spiritual leadership and develop their own liturgies? Where do you draw the line in “letting go?” “Stultifying, rigid hierarchy” and “oppressive control” is really a straw man tactic, end-running the question of whether there is a need for hierarchy and control at all, and if so, who makes the call.

There is actually a core perceptual issue underlying this conundrum, a conundrum that cannot be spotted theologically but only phenomenologically (from what Ken Wilber would call “right quadrant” or objective perspectives). And that is this: the greatest spiritual teachers in all traditions—Jesus included among them—have told us that we need to loosen our grip on “identification” as the means of establishing our identities. “Identification” means to attach your mind to an idea, an ethnicity, a religion, a story of yourself, any kind of descriptor, as a way of establishing and defending your identity. It is a tendency built right into the hardwiring of the mind itself, and most of us simply can’t conceive of how we’d have either “identity” or “motivation” without it.

But this was exactly Jesus’ complaint about the Pharisees: not that they were “rigid, stultifying, or controlling” ( after all, they were the political liberals of their time!), but that they thought they “owned” the story: they knew who they were, they knew what was right and wrong, they knew how the story was supposed to turn out. They were, in Jesus’ way of looking at things, “rich.”

As the church now hovers at the cusp of two ages, we are caught in an anguishing and virtually invisible double-bind. Identification is our spiritual and practical *modus vivendi*. We call ourselves “people of the Story,” “people of the Book.” We think it’s perfectly normal to establish our faith by a set of identifiers—i.e., propositional statements—such as the Nicene Creed—which establish our ownership of the story and our field of expectations. Closer to home, identification with our denomination, or our local parish church, is a main strategy for membership building, generating enthusiasm, and stewardship (it’s virtually the whole program of evangelism). What we don’t want to see is that the fundamental reason we can’t “loosen our grip” is that we have used tightening our grip as our primary strategy of Christian “identity formation,” and we fear that letting go of identification means plunging ourselves into chaos, apathy, and “anything goes.” How can we simultaneously let go and hang on?

What we also can’t see—at our usual level of consciousness— is that this is simply the hall of mirrors of the mind.

The great mystics and masters have pointed consistently to another way of doing business, another way of orienting our consciousness and receiving our identity: not from

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eternal principles or the fixed recitation of a story or a set of beliefs (even cherished and “good” ones), but from the dynamic and flowing stream of compassionate Presence itself. A few quotes here: from Jesus (Luke 12:32): “Do not be afraid, little flock; it is my Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”; from William Blake: “He who binds unto himself a joy doth the winged life destroy”; from the contemporary spiritual psychologist Gerald May: “As attachment [identification] ceases to be your motivation, your actions become reflections of compassion absolute.” God does not go away when we loosen our grip on identification as the means of establishing our identity and motivation; rather, these things fall “like dew from above” into the willing heart.

But to receive identity without identification is a higher spiritual/energetic capacity than can be sustained by the mind alone. It requires mind and heart, working together, to undergird a whole new level of spiritual perceptivity. Again, this is at the core of the Jesus teaching. To get there is possible—in fact, it’s the point of his whole teaching. But it requires spiritual practice, not dogma.

In short, my fear is that we will keep right on straw-manning and plea bargaining, looking at “things” it’s okay to “loosen our grip on,” or confusing inclusive and laid back style with a real change in game plan, until we spot the real problem of identification itself and begin to stabilize within ourselves and our church “the mind of Christ” which is capable of letting go of even our most cherished sacred cows—not because the cows are bad, but because the clinging to them is bad; it “doth the winged life destroy.”

**Observation # 9:** Letting go means being willing to accept that certain things may need to die. There are some institutional expressions of faith that are simply no longer sustainable. Certain things must be left undone in order to create space for new things to arise. For a time this may look messy. It may seem like failure. But the only failure is demanding that what has been in the past must continue to be in the future. Such a demand makes us unable to respond to the call of God’s Spirit blowing through the church today.

**Cynthia's response:** I’ve often remarked that as I work in the church in this extraordinary era, I never know whether I’m a hospice worker or a midwife. It’s important to keep in mind that these are both sacramental roles having to do with liminal space, and allowing things to die with dignity is as holy and faithful as receiving them into new life. I’m curious, Christopher, from your long experience as a parish priest, what you would see as some of those “institutional expressions of faith that are no longer sustainable”?

It’s been my experience that midwifing of the new often works better, initially, in smaller, contemplative groups—again, because the capacity for deep listening and collected attention is built right into the fabric of a contemplative gathering. I have seen great energy and new life in centering prayer groups, contemplative eucharist and Taize services, which seem to speak to people’s deep hunger for embodied, less wordy forms of corporate prayer. Once a critical mass of this new sort of collected energy has gathered

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at the edges of the church's traditional expressions of theological and devotional piety, it can move into the center as a reconciling force, allowing old forms to die with less of the sort of contentious heartbreak that often ensues when old and cherished patterns are threatened.

**Observation # 10:** A church that has the potential to appeal beyond the narrow confines of churchland, will be driven by a vision that reduces division and emphasizes the oneness of all creation and of the human community. We are too familiar with the devastation of division in our midst. We know too well the impact of dissension and discord. The world is looking for places where the realities of deep connection are honoured and practiced. When churches quarrel and separate, they erect impenetrable obstacles to being able to speak in any meaningful way to the world beyond the church. We must model profound respect for all people. We must learn to pay careful attention to the world and to listen carefully for God's Spirit at work in all peoples' lives. Good speaking always starts from good listening.

**Cynthia's response:** How profoundly you cut to the heart of the matter here, Christopher! Those lines embedded in the midst of your summary here do in fact say it all: "The world is looking for places where the realities of deep connection are honoured and practiced. When churches quarrel and separate, they erect impenetrable obstacles to being able to speak in any meaningful way to the world beyond the church." Amen, amen! Dissension and strife create a powerful negative energy field, and in a world already so beset by dissension, danger, anxiety, and brokenness, any further fracturing only adds to the intolerable levels of dissonance. Who wants to seek refuge on a battlefield?

When my grandson Jack was three years old, one of his older aunts asked him if he knew what a sermon was. "Yes," he said. It's when someone stands up in a high box and goes "nuh-Naaa, nuh-Naa, nuh-NAAA, nuh-NAAAAAAA!!!" He raised his voice and jabbed his small finger skyward with mounting intensity, perfectly mimicking the sound of the rhetoric of certitude. The words were all just drone; it was the tone he was picking up on. And I suppose that countless others are doing likewise.

You call us back, Christopher, to that simple and yet overwhelming realization that if we are truly to bear Christ to the world, we don't do so through our words and theological formulas (even if they're correct), but through the qualities of energy that he himself brought: gentleness, peace, inclusivity, empowerment, hope. In a world reeling from violence and cacophony, the church has instead become among the worst polluters.

**Observation # 11:** We need to listen to the world outside the church and find ways to make church more accessible to that world. The world will never listen to an arrogant voice that pronounces from a position of power and privilege. The world will listen only to the authentic voice that speaks from a place of deep sensitivity and openness to the real

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wisdom that is already present in the hearts of people who do not find a place in the church.

**Cynthia's response:** From the Christian Inner Tradition (via the Gurdjieff work) comes the powerful idea of the Law of Three. Basically, it states that every change or new arising in the physical world is the result of not two but THREE independent forces: not just “yes” and “no” (or “thesis” and “antithesis” in Hegelian terms), but “yes,” “no,” PLUS an additional energy that brings the two opposing forces into meaningful connection at a new level. These three are called “affirming,” “denying,” and “reconciling.”

An example comes in steering a sailboat. People will tell you that a sailboat moves across the water through the opposition of the wind in it sails and water against its keel. But any sailor knows that a boat doesn't sail in this state, it rounds up into the wind and comes to a dead stop. Only through the addition into the equation of the HELMSMAN, who brings the wind and water into connection for a chosen trajectory, does forward movement happen.

The church, it seems to me, has gotten stuck on the horns of a dilemma, mechanically taking the role of “denying,” or SECOND FORCE, in the mistaken idea that this is the only way to remain faithful to eternal truths. Wrong. It merely makes the boat head up into the wind and come to a dead halt. Instead, we must realize that in a religion whose core mandala is the Trinity and whose incarnational theology proclaims both the inevitability and the goodness of a dynamic world, we must learn how to be THIRD FORCE, “holy the reconciling.” We must prioritize CONNECTION, learning how to bring things into relationship at a new level, to support a whole new level of God's compassionate Self-revelation. This is not pandering to modernity, but midwifing the future.

For example, rather than simply digging in our heels and sticking ferociously to old formulas—no reception of the eucharist before baptism, no marriages solemnized outside of a church building, no new liturgical words not already belabored by a church commission, no marriages except between heterosexual partners (hear all the “no's”?), we might instead position ourselves to see that in all these situations there exists a possibility for making a new and deeper connection between old and new, inner and outer, in a way that neither trashes tradition nor trashes human beings standing on the outside, yearning to be invited deeper within.

Face it: there are now a staggeringly larger number of folks on the outside than on the inside. We're now well into the third generation of people who were not brought to church as children—or were driven away by arrogant answers or rigid parochialism—and have no comfort level or even familiarity with the churchified way of doing business. Connection (“holy the reconciling”) is the name of the game. It's what we need to be about, person by person, situation by situation.

Incidentally, the Gurdjieff work specifies that holy the reconciling exists in EVERY situation. But to see it requires an alert, flexible presence and a listening heart. The

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mechanical sliding into “yes” and “no,” dualism, argumentation, and oppositionality, simply makes us third-force blind. Like the older son in the parable of the Prodigal Son, we stand frozen and self-righteous outside the banquet hall: correct, perhaps, but alone. The party goes on without us.

**Observation # 12:** There is hope. God has not given up on the church. God has not given up on the world. There will always be a need for spirituality to be embodied in some form of institutional expression. As we navigate the death throes of institutional forms that no longer have life and vitality, we need to keep our hearts open to the presence of the God who has not abandoned us. We need to trust God’s work in our midst and remain open to one another and to the world around us trusting in the faithful guidance of God’s Spirit.

**Cynthia's response:** Toward the end of his own life, that great contemporary mystic Raimon Panikkar affirmed, “The individual drop of water that I am will come to an end. But the water itself—the drop’s water—will continue—provided that it has come to recognize itself as water, not drop.” To the extent that we equate the word “church” with institutional expressions of church, we are casting our lot with the drop. But the drop’s water—the mystical body of Christ, the true meaning of church—is ever-living and ever-flowing, for if truth be told, we are inside IT rather than the other way around. The living water we so desperately seek...well...we’re swimming in it already, and the only thing lacking is that simple but sweeping act of recognition which transforms our perspective from drop to water.

I so appreciate, Christopher, that you end your reflections on such a strong note of hope. As Julian of Norwich observed, “All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

**Now we invite you to join in as this rich and insightful discussion continues:**

In the hope of inviting further conversation Christopher will post the original 12 points along with Cynthia's response and his response to her on his blog [www.inaspaciousplace.wordpress.com](http://www.inaspaciousplace.wordpress.com) on Tuesdays and Thursdays beginning July 5 and running until August 11. Cynthia will check in from time to time and may respond if motivated by the conversation. We encourage you to follow this series and to join in the discussion in the comments section below each blog posting.

**For more writings and interview with Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault and for information on The Contemplative Society, please visit us at [www.contemplative.org](http://www.contemplative.org)**