

LifeWord Summaries

Disappearing Church

Mark Sayers

A Chapter Summary

Trevor Lloyd
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Introduction to LifeWord Summaries

LifeWord book summaries are based on two assumptions. The first is that many books, especially those based on Christian truth, are potentially life-imparting, life-transforming and life-shaping. The second is that too many Christians are not reading them.

I always recommend reading the actual books as the ideal, and signpost readers to them and to other books by the writers. But there are various reasons why not every Christian will ever get around to reading many of them.

In writing these summaries, my hope is that you can at least access some of the truths, insights and principles contained in the books. Like someone who has found a great treasure, even if not everyone can explore and sift through it for themselves, I can, at least, scoop up some of its riches and share them through these summaries. As well as benefiting from the rich insights from the books I summarise, readers can then go on to explore these and other good books for themselves.

There are three ways, therefore, that you can use **LifeWord Summaries**:

1. **A Taster** - there are many excellent books, old and new, out there but you have limited time. A quick, simple summary helps you to decide in which books you are going to invest your time. (See my book reviews at www.differentkingdom.com also).
2. **A Refresher** - you read the book some time ago and are not sure you have time to read it again. A summary can refresh your memory.
3. **A Digest** - whether due to time, inclination or challenges with sustained reading, you know you are unlikely to read a particular book. A summary of the main ideas and insights may be the next best thing.

The summary of this current book, **Disappearing Church**, should take about 25-30 minutes to read. If you prefer to listen, in the future there will also be an audio recording of the summary at www.differentkingdom.com.

Trevor Lloyd (May 2024)

Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience

By Mark Sayers

Main Message

One of the main strategies favoured by many churches in the West has not worked. Our attempts to make church and Christianity relevant to modern, secular culture have not only failed. They have backfired. Churches have been seduced by that very culture they have tried to reach. It is a culture of radical individualism which is, in fact, a new version of an old enemy of the Christian faith - Gnosticism. Sayers argues that our focus should be less on cultural relevance and more on gospel resilience. This is the way of discipleship to Jesus. It is a way that challenges the individualism of our age as it requires the death of self and the enthroning of God in our lives. It is a narrow way, a countercultural path. Those who follow this way become a creative minority at work in the 'corrosive soil' of the surrounding culture. The witness of such minorities, who live faithfully and counterculturally, has always been how God has 'replenished culture.' It is not an easy way. It requires faithfulness to the truth of the gospel but also engagement with the culture. It requires resilience.

Chapter Summaries

Part 1 - Understanding Our Craving for Cultural Relevance

Chapter 1 - Our Current Post-Christianity

Our culture tries to go beyond Christianity but still wants to '*feast on its fruits*.' It is a me-centred culture, and it is affecting churches. It is almost religious in its faith in maximising individual freedom. It simply assumes the priority of the self, the now and the instant. There are aspects of post-Christianity that look a lot like liberal Protestantism. For example, it rejects ideas of judgement and hell, it shifts the emphasis away from personal virtues toward the common good, and salvation is understood in terms of enlightenment. Liberal Christianity may have collapsed in

terms of church attendance, but it has won people around to its vision of a kind of secular Christian culture. Many therefore leave the church but don't feel that they are leaving spirituality, faith or ideas of goodness. Salvation becomes about self-defining and self-improving. Hell is social isolation and being shamed for holding the wrong views. However, it is not the self we need, but God. We need grace. Without God to define good, we rely on virtue signalling and shaming others with a new kind of Pharisaism to prove our goodness. And so the beautiful, progressive, tolerant, inclusive world keeps certain kinds of people who don't 'fit in' on the outside. It is a religion without grace because, failing to recognise its own sin, it blames others. We can't grasp grace and the gospel until we realise the true nature of sin and evil.

The post-Christian robbed of God as a moral standard must "virtue signal" instead to prove their goodness to others, surrounding themselves with others who will mirror back and affirm their goodness, while casting pharisaical accusations and curses of outrage down upon those who do not hold the correct moral line.

Chapter 2 - The History of "Relevant"

After the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century, many notable writers turned to the Christian faith. There was a rise in evangelicalism. This was the age of Billy Graham. But then things shifted in the 1960s and 70s. There was a reaction against authority, and we saw the rise of the individual. There was a shift away from politics and class struggle to psychology and individual fulfilment. In the 1980s, we saw the rise of the contemporary church movement, but its hope of stopping secularisation failed. It had emphasised relevance and yet such churches thrived mainly in traditional Christian areas. Fascinated with Gen X, they became all about radical cultural relevance. This was the age of the postmodern and the emerging churches. Those who used relevance to become more unorthodox are suffering the same fate as liberal protestants. Postmodern deconstruction seeks to make the world a better place by deconstructing traditions, conventions, and beliefs to gain more freedom. This produces a challenge for the public ethics of the church. Many churches who bought into the tolerant, inclusive age of this postmodern, progressive world have ironically seen a rise of judging, condemning and excluding those not 'on message'. We'd also hoped that, with the passing of modernity, there'd be less

emphasis on the individual and more on community. But we are in a post-institutional age of disengagement and the pseudo-community of social networking. In this culture, there is a danger of '*flashmob churches*' which harness social media and can create something impressive, but don't last. This creates a real challenge for church leaders. How do we measure success?

A growing belief that secularism could be arrested by an emphasis on relevance began to take hold. Our best chance at growth seemed to lie in culturally relevant forms of church, expression, and communication.

Chapter 3 - How Much More Relevant Can We Get?

A Chinese study concluded that Western pre-eminence was due to the values of Christianity. Many ignore this fact, wanting the values of the West while deconstructing what produced them. Sayers introduces the work of sociologist **Philip Rieff** and his idea of **the three cultures**. **First culture** is the ancient culture of many gods, of animism, of the sacred. **Second culture** is rooted in the Judeo-Christian ethic and rational belief systems based on the idea of truth. **Third culture** is the culture we are in now where the sacred is deconstructed, authority lies with the individual, and everything is open to interpretation. Theories of mission grew out of second-culture Christians taking the gospel to first culture. They taught us to find cultural bridges. We thought the same way would work when trying to reach the second culture. We missed the fact that Rieff spoke of the third culture which defines itself in contrast to the second culture. Its ultimate authority is the self. The danger of second culture trying to reach first culture is that we colonise it. The danger of reaching third culture is that we get colonized by *it*. We compromise on beliefs and ethics to fit in. The answer to this position of exile lies in Jonathan Sacks's use of the idea of **the creative minority**, based on Jeremiah's exhortation to seek the welfare of the city when exiled in Babylon (see Jer. 29:5-7). This involves a difficult tension as we must stay true to the faith while remaining open so that we can transform the larger society. In this tension, there is a danger we abandon the ancient paths and get drawn into a new religion around us. That new religion is actually a new form of an old one - a return to Gnosticism.

“To become a creative minority... is not easy, because it involves maintaining strong links with the outside world while staying true to your faith, seeking not merely to keep the sacred flame burning but also to transform the larger society of which you are a part

Chapter 4 - The Gospel of Self (Gnosticism)

Ours is a self-obsessed, individualist culture characterized by *'the self run wild.'* As C S Lewis portrays in his book, *The Great Divorce*, hell is individualism *'pushed to isolation and self-obsession.'* Various thinkers and writers have traced this back to the ancient heresy of Gnosticism, a perennial 'parasite' on Christianity. Gnosticism has returned in a modern form in the past 200 years as Christianity has waned. It is characterised by such beliefs as: 1) we find God within ourselves; 2) the material world is a botched job of an 'inferior god'; 3) we must break free of the constraints of the material world, including our bodies; 4) we must find our true self, or re-create it. In the new Gnosticism, the aim is not so much to escape the material world. Instead, we escape the *'mundane world'* into some kind of perfected world, including perfected bodies. Influential thinkers in the twentieth century have been deeply affected by Gnostic ideas and some have argued that we should embrace it as the religion of our time. The danger is that the church gets emptied of biblical truth and simply takes on this gospel of the self and the good life. It then becomes a *'mere shadow'* of what it is meant to be.

Gnostic spirituality then is not one of obedience and faith but rather of breaking boundaries, rejecting definitions, and transgressing limits.

Part 2 - Learning Gospel Resilience

Chapter 5 - An Exciting Opportunity

It is easy to lose hope in this cultural moment, but we should look back at how such challenges in the past have given rise to great Christian moments and movements. Sayers argues that these reveal the calculation:

*“New Cultural Landscapes + Faithful Orthodoxy + Courageous Creative Response =
Revitalization of the Church and Culture”*

This involves embracing the tension of being a creative minority. It requires deep roots. The response to a shallow and broken culture is not superficiality or the spectacular, but depth. It is a commitment to be *'rebuilders'* and requires deep roots and foundations. It is this that secures resilience. Disciples who survive in a *'hostile and corrosive'* cultural environment need to be resilient *'extremophiles.'* Leaders who survive in such difficult environments have a sense of meaning that comes from outside of that environment. Creative minorities are sustained by grace. They are deeply rooted in the gift of grace, know they are indebted to another, and live with a *'positive posture'* in life. They are not *'Gnostic seekers'* but slaves to the giver of grace.

In a caustic, corrosive third culture, which causes us to question and doubt our commitments, we need extremophile disciples—disciples who are resilient. In the third culture, relevance must be matched by resilience. Deep roots and foundations will ensure resilience.

Chapter 6 - Reject the Implicit Prosperity Gospel. We Are Slaves, not Seekers.

The gospel is about a King but, in the Gnostic culture of the autonomous self, people reject the idea of a Kingdom. They reject the idea of authority and of submitting to another. Submission has been replaced by spiritual seeking. But in biblical faith, we are not the seekers. We are those who are sought. Grace, not self, is at the centre. We may deride the explicit prosperity gospel but imbibe an implicit one which suggests that, as seekers, by doing the right things we will get the good life. But the Bible calls us slaves and not seekers! The Christian path is a *'selfless path of life'* in which we give up ourselves to find Christ. We are called to be the slaves in the inverted *'triumphal procession,'* who are *'spreading the fragrance of selflessness in a culture of selfishness'* (see 2 Cor.2:14-16). In the second culture, many ran from God to pleasure, only to find grace when they came to an end of self, e.g. John Newton. In the Gnostic third culture, the pursuit of self leads to a prison of self-obsession. It is more about self-improvement and continual reinvention. The pursuit of pleasure becomes disembodied e.g. pornography. This leads to greater fragility which, along with the loss of conventions and traditions, leads us to surround

ourselves with pleasant spaces and experiences to calm the anxiety which is 'a constant soundtrack to our inner world.'

This is the upside-down kingdom. This is the inverted, subversive, triumphal procession. The believer in Christ is not a seeker, breaking past boundaries, transgressing limits, pursuing autonomy. They are transformed by grace, walking behind Christ in His triumphal procession as slaves to Christ.

Chapter 7 - Stop Catering to “Public” Opinion

People want connection but also freedom and autonomy. This leads to disengagement, lack of commitment, and disembodied pleasure. It leads to a 'beautiful apocalypse' of attractive public spaces but where we are emotionally and socially falling apart. For some, it leads to just accepting 'the nice life.' To enjoy a public sphere that is liberal, democratic, aesthetically pleasing and in which individuals can self-create. In such a world, people searching for the transcendent can be politely ignored or joked about. In the private sphere, the individual rules and anything goes. You create your own belief system. For those trying to live out the Christian faith in such a world, it casts doubt on their faith and the commitments and choices they have made. The church has tried to adapt by providing nice and attractive public spheres itself. The result, though, is that people are tempted to see the church as just another space in which they get to self-create, a place for personal fulfilment. Church can never be that. There are some parallels between this world and ancient Rome where the church flourished. Then, Gnosticism was attractive as an escapist spirituality in a world of empire. Modern Gnosticism is an escape into the fantasies of *this* world rather than another world. In the 'beautiful' secular world, the church can be tempted to allow its focus to be just on the immanent. But we must refocus on heaven, on the eternal, the otherworldly. The good things in this world are gifts which point us back to heaven - gifts of grace. When we try to possess them, we end up with idolatry and get possessed *by* them. Irenaeus fought the rise of ancient Gnosticism with a theology of grace and we must do the same with its modern version.

...we live in the world and are called to flourish within it, yet we must always remember that the end point of that flourishing is heaven...The

*good things of this world must be understood as pointing toward heaven
and the creator of all good things.*

Chapter 8 - Don't Offer Everything. Deliver Truth.

Even the terrorist network, Al-Qaeda, suffered from a lack of commitment and discipline. Its original leadership acted from a sense of serving a cause, and of duty. Sayers refers to this as a **Code**. Rieff pointed out that there is a pattern of revolutions of '*restraint and release*'. We are in a time of release. A time of breaking the traditional moral code. Anyone who lives by religious tradition is seen as a controller. ISIS fared better than Al-Qaeda because they did not rely on code but on 'pitch'. In a time of release, they had to promise their fighters that they could fulfil their dreams by taking part in Jihad. It is not just businesses that have to make a 'pitch.' In a crowded culture with competing demands for commitment, all have to rely on it. To compete, your pitch has to offer greater benefits. In the 1980s, young people who wanted to live a free life needed some financial security to do so and so did it on the back of self-sacrificing parents who had actually held to a duty. Or they amassed debts on credit cards. If you build your church on pitch, it might grow in the short term. However, because it relies on the commitment of previous generations, it will be left with spiritual debts. People leave when the promises of the pitch are not fulfilled. Relying on pitch is like trying to follow the crowds in the gospels. They can't be trusted. Instead, Jesus builds his kingdom on a few followers, a creative minority. Sayers uses another beautiful example of Benedictine monasteries, based on a committed few rather than the crowds or on public opinion. They led to the renewal of a whole culture. They were seemingly withdrawing but were actually deeply missional. Newman spoke of them as '*the revolution of silent men.*'

By going deep with a few, living by code, submitting themselves to God, dwelling in Scripture, and quietly living out the kingdom, the community that gathered around Benedict became magnetic. This wasn't pitch—attractive because it promised immediate benefits; this was something different.

Chapter 9 - Recreate the Institution

Secularism is not leading so much to a lack of believing but to a lack of belonging. There is still nominal belief but people maintain their independence, freedom, choice and limited commitment. The Gnostic influence is felt in our post-institutional age. There is a rejection of the ordinary, mundane and messy in church life, and a rejection of any form of discipline or authority. As selfish individualism grows, together with technology and consumerism, we see the decay of those social institutions which require commitment, and duty. They also provide community and meaning that are essential for the success of civilizations. We have tried to replace institutions with networks as we don't like discipline, responsibility, conflict, or limits. But for some things we need institutions. It is not institutions that are bad. It is institutionalism. We need them to nurture and grow meaningful activities and experiences. The social, concrete reality of institutionalised Israelite faith - *'the spirit and dirt'* - meant that they learned not to pursue the spiritual alone without it being grounded in the concrete of community and institution. The benefits of institutions are that: 1) they en flesh beliefs, passing on values and requiring both obedience and limits, but also engagement and participation; 2) they outlive us and so ensure *'the partnership of the generations'*; 3) they limit us - and limits are good as that is what God uses to discipline us. Involvement with the concreteness and messiness of church life is a spiritual discipline. Church is at its best when having to relate to real people and to build strong ties. It shows us how evil is not just in the other person but in every human heart. In a culture of superficial projection of the self, the gospel and church encourage the building of a strong inner life. The gospel provides a coherent worldview in a fragmented world, with the vital message that there is something *'more than me.'*

the great flaw of our search for spirituality and faith minus church is "the unfronted life. Without church, we have more private fantasy than real faith. ... Real conversion demands that eventually its recipient be involved in both the muck and the grace of actual church life."
(quoting Ronald Rolheiser)

Chapter 10 - Withdraw/Return

Crowds sap courage. To live differently, we have to withdraw from the world to serve it. Resilience is exemplified by ‘*extremophiles*,’ leaders who have been tested by the extremes of opposition and isolation, and endured it. They have learned the principle of ‘*withdraw/return*’. Such leaders: 1) withdraw, involving a dislocation from the cultural chaos around them, living as exiles deeply aware that things are not as they should be, and adopting a ‘*prophetic posture*’; 2) break from the cultural narratives, saying no to the culture so they can say yes to the call of God; 3) recognise their own flaws, fearlessly facing how they have been shaped by the false narratives; 4) find a deeper conversion and connection, an abiding union with God; 5) develop a deeper orthodox message that connects to the felt experience of exile in our world and our longing for the eternal; and 6) return to equip others within the culture.

God has allowed men and women to enter into extreme environments, to be tested to their absolute limits, to face isolation and opposition. Through this process these disciples emerge as kinds of extremophiles of faith, who become models of how to follow God faithfully and flourish in challenging environments.

Conclusion: Going Beyond the Culture of the Ghost

It is the embodied, risen Christ who changes everything. The death and resurrection of Christ was the ultimate ‘*withdraw and return*’. It begins to change the disciples into a creative minority who will change the world. But why does Jesus entrust his message and mission to such an unlikely bunch rather than appeal to the crowd? He had learned through his first withdrawal into the desert. He knew not to wow the crowds with the spectacular, but to entrust his message to the few followers who would gradually change the many. He had learned to ‘*go deep to go wide*.’ He invested in a small discipleship community, training them to be ‘*extremophiles*’. He started by teaching them that the only way to survive in a hostile environment and to produce spiritual fruit that lasts for eternity, is to abide in him and in the Father.

To learn to abide in Christ, we also must break from the lures that surround us, while still offering good news to the culture that seduces us.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the signs of radical individualism that you see around you in contemporary culture?
2. How does the way of radical discipleship challenge that individualism?
3. What does it look like for you to live faithfully and creatively in this culture?
4. How are you developing 'gospel resilience'?

More About the Author



Mark Sayers is the senior leader of Red Church in Melbourne, Australia. He is an increasingly popular and respected Christian commentator on contemporary culture and world trends. He is passionate about discipleship and renewal in the Church and culture. He formerly joined John Mark Comer for commentary on the podcast, [This Cultural Moment](#). He now podcasts at [Rebuilders](#), commenting on current trends and encouraging Christians to establish the foundations for rebuilding our inner lives and restoring our culture. Other books by him that I can recommend are [Reappearing Church](#), [Facing Leviathan: Leadership, Influence and Creating in a Cultural Storm](#), [Strange Days](#), and [A Non-Anxious Presence](#).

Disclaimer:

This is an unofficial, personal summary which inevitably reflects my own reading of the original book. I can make no guarantee that the author or publisher would validate its accuracy. If you have not read the original book, I highly recommend that you do so. This summary is intended only as an introduction and guide, and the writing of it is meant as a tribute to the value of the original work.