

Plausible Hope: Faithful Witness in an Age of Distrust

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Sharing is Caring

No need to take photos of slides
I'll gladly share them for distribution



Gen. George Marshall

Exemplar of humility,
molded by an institution

Stewarded what he was given:
influence and opportunity



Gen. Marshall and FDR, Africa, 1943
CSU Archives, Everett Collection | Bridgeman Images



Outline

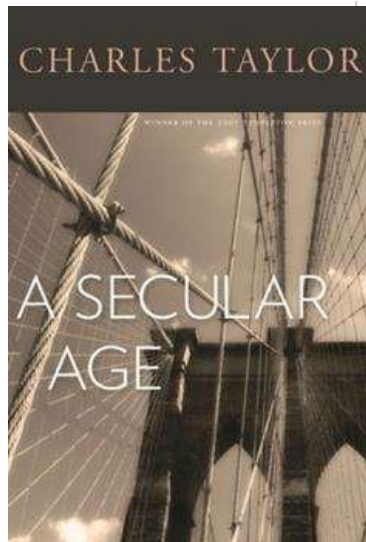
How we should REALLY understand the
“secular” in a “secular age”

Ways of responding to our cultural moment

How to steward what we’ve been given



A Secular Age – what it is



How did we go from a time, say 1500, when Christianity was the default identity of nearly everyone born in the North Atlantic world, to a time when Christianity (or any religion) is merely an option?

~the animating question of *A Secular Age*



A Secular Age – what it is

Faith is private.

Public sphere is emptied
of religion.

Secular 1



A Secular Age – what it is

Religion and religious participation is declining.

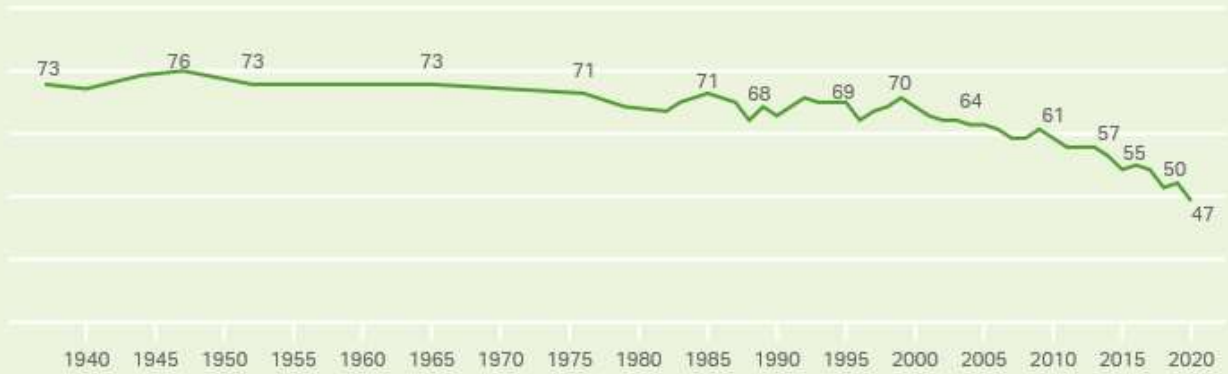
People are disaffiliating from religion.

Secular 2

Church Membership Among U.S. Adults Now Below 50%

Do you happen to be a member of a church, synagogue or mosque?

— % Yes, member



Based on annual aggregated data, usually based on two surveys

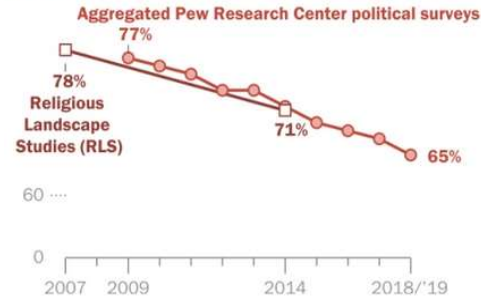
GALLUP

Source: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

In U.S., smaller share of adults identify as Christians, while religious 'nones' have grown

% of U.S. adults who identify as ...

... Christian



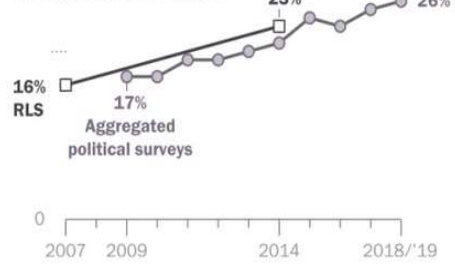
Source: Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Studies (2007 and 2014), Aggregated Pew Research Center political surveys conducted 2009-July 2019 on the telephone.
 "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

In U.S., smaller share of adults identify as Christians, while religious 'nones' have grown

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

 Naming our fears

Where are they?

Why did they go?

What can we do?

Problems to address: church decline,
disaffiliation – how do we stave off the
bleeding, the loss?



Church in occupied territory

Occupation means:

1. Church is no longer dominant (PostChr)
2. Resident Aliens (the church's social status)
3. Feelings of loss, irrelevancy, resentment
4. Ministry feels more difficult:
 - a. No urgency for witness; no growth
 - b. Apathy – people who don't need God
 - c. Exhaustion, depression, frustration, anger



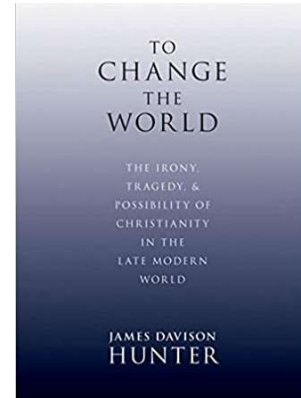
Predominant Reaction

THIS IS BAD! We need to do something.

Problem = Secularization

Reaction: *Ressentiment*

- French for resentment + plus anger, outrage, a sense of loss
- “We’re losing the church because of the left/progressives/liberals” (name your THEM)
- Decline of Christian values; no place at the table
- Something sacred has been (is being) taken away from us





Responding to A Secular Age

Threat or Opening?



Responding to A Secular Age

THREAT -> Three Temptations

1. Relevance
2. Resignation
3. Resistance



Responding to A Secular Age

THREAT -> Three Temptations

1. **Relevance**
2. Resignation
3. Resistance



Relevance: The Church as Singularity

Assumption: Decline is a result of irrelevance

Action Plan: Increase Relevance
(of programs and ministers)



Relevance: The Church as Singularity

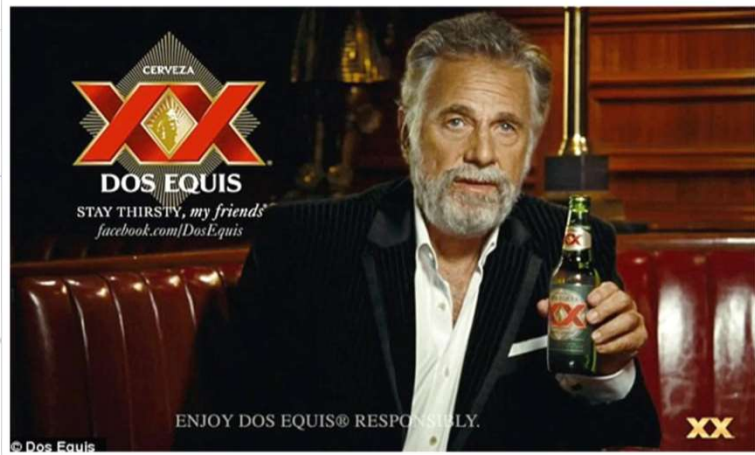
Relevance \approx “real” or “authentic”

The relevance imperative -> an *ethos*
a normative way of being that has subtly but deeply
affected all of late modern culture, including the
church



Relevance: The Church as Singularity

to be the MOST
watchable,
attractive,
interesting
church/pastor
(in town, on social
media, etc.)





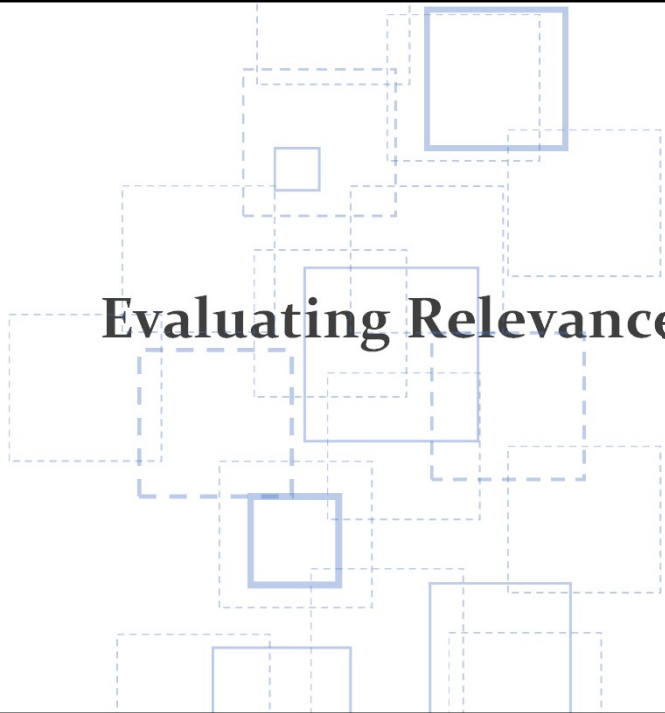
Relevance: The Church as Singularity

“In the mode of singularization life is not simply lived, it is *curated*. From one situation to the next, the late-modern [person/church] *performs* his or her [or its] particular self to others, who become an audience, and this self will not be found attractive unless it seems authentic.”

-Andreas Reckwitz, *The Society of Singularities* (emphasis in original; reference to church mine)

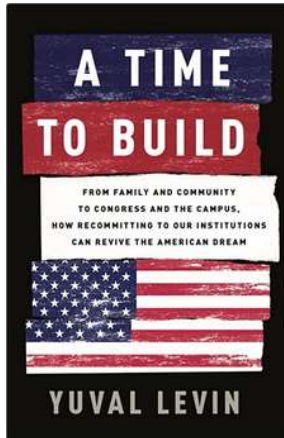


Evaluating Relevance





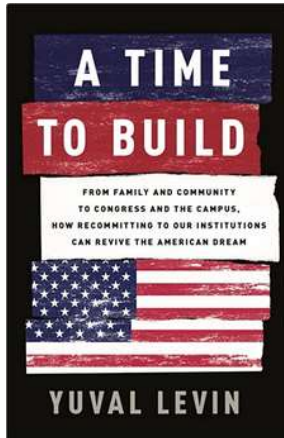
Seeking Attention Generates Distrust



“[W]e find that many holders of elected office now spend much of their time participating in the cultural theater of our politics... We find many journalists leveraging the reputations of the institutions they work for to build their personal brands...and to accumulate followers for themselves on social media. We find professors and scientists and **ministers** and CEOs and artists and athletes all using the legitimacy built up within professional institutions to raise their own profiles in a broader public arena, and often in ways intended to signal cultural-political affiliations more than institutional ones.”



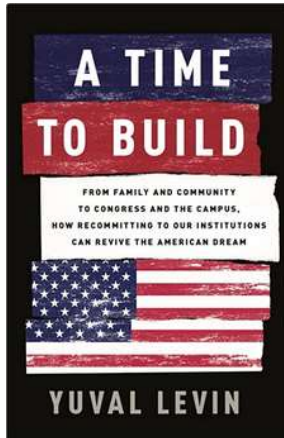
Seeking Attention Generates Distrust



“[A]s different institutions come to be seen (by both the people in them and the larger public) as platforms for displaying individuals, they also come to lose their distinctions from one another and so tend to become homogenized into increasingly interchangeable stages for the same sorts of cultural-political performances...”



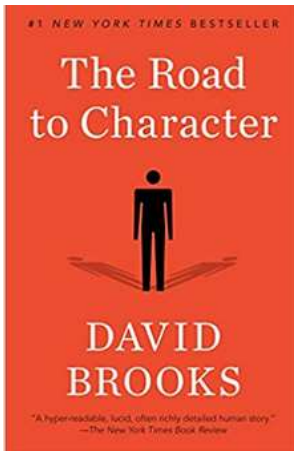
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“This process undermines our confidence in institutions from two directions. One the one hand, people outside the institution—people who need it, or interact with it, or observe it—lose respect for the institution as they come to think of it mostly as a means for the personal promotion of those within. On the other hand, people within the institution forget the value of whatever constraints it might impose on them and come to understand it as a platform for themselves.”



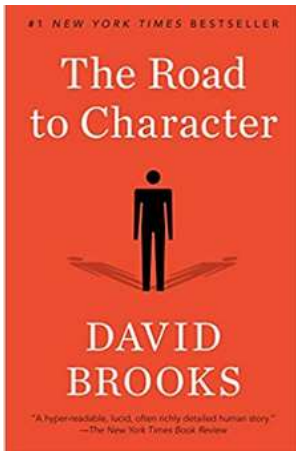
Seeking Attention Generates Distrust



“Today, it is unusual to meet someone with an institutional mindset. We live in an age of institutional anxiety, when people are prone to distrust of large organizations. This is partly because we’ve seen the failure of these institutions and partly because [in our time], we put the individual first. We tend to prize the freedom to navigate as we wish, to run our lives as we choose, and never to submerge our own individual identities in conformity to some bureaucracy or organization...We like start-ups, disruptors, and rebels.”



Seeking Attention Generates Distrust



“This mentality has contributed to institutional decay...People who have an institutional mindset, as Marshall did, have a very different mentality, which begins with a different history consciousness. In this mindset, the primary reality is society, which is a collection of institutions that have existed over time and transcend generations. A person is born into a collection of permanent institutions. Life is...committing oneself to a few of the institutions that were embedded on the ground before you were born and will be here after you die. It is accepting the gifts of the dead, taking on the responsibility of preserving and improving an institution and then transmitting that institution, better, on to the next generation.”



Responding to A Secular Age

THREAT -> Three Temptations

1. Relevance
- 2. Resignation**
3. Resistance



Resignation: Remnant Theology

Decline is not bad but GOOD
True faithful are revealed

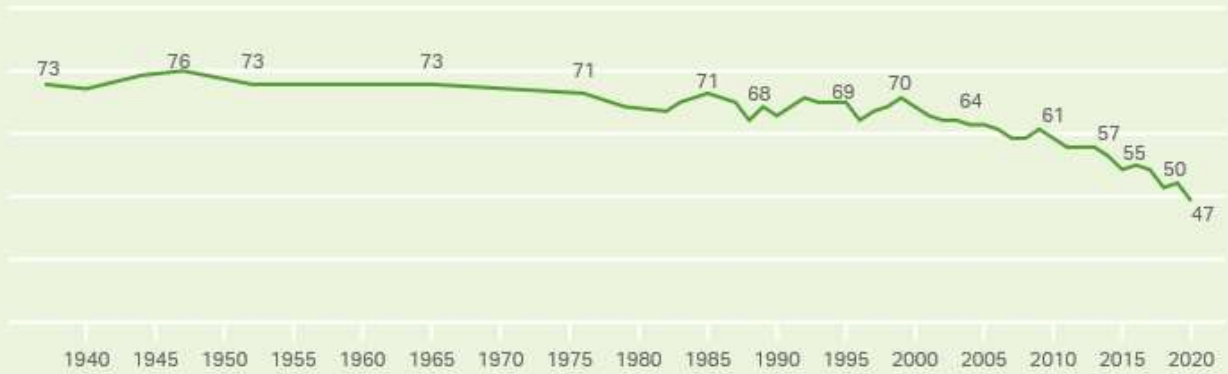


Image Credit: <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/289648-7-suggestions-church-decline-ron-edmondson.html>

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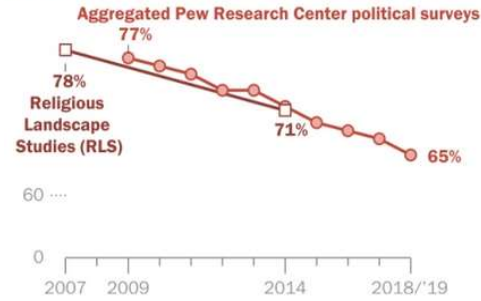
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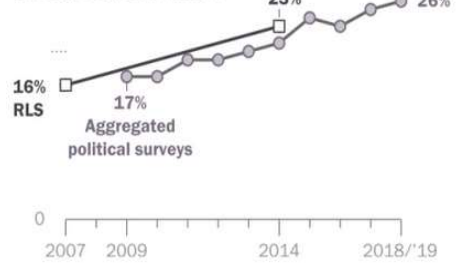
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Resignation: Remnant Theology

Does not account for
missional impulse
(LHM, LWML, LCMS missions)

Outcomes of the centripetal (in)
and centrifugal (out) rhythms of
worship/discipleship and
mission, respectively



Image Credit: <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/289648-7-suggestions-church-decline-ron-edmondson.html>



Resignation: Remnant Theology

Make best of second-class status

Negative theology of glory

Sophisticated theological
self-justification



Image Credit: <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/289648-7-suggestions-church-decline-ron-edmondson.html>



Evaluating Resignation

HERESY – we should repent!



Responding to A Secular Age

THREAT -> Three Temptations

1. Relevance
2. Resignation
3. **Resistance**



Fractures and Splinters

“The list of controversies is endless, but the parties to them are remarkably constant and durable. Individually, these fights sometimes touch on genuinely vital questions. Yet seen together they appear as a vast sociopolitical psychosis. They are all one fight, **and the fight is the point.**”

~Yuval Levin

“How to Curb the Culture War,” *Comment* - <https://comment.org/how-to-curb-the-culture-war/>



THEY are always wrong

“Each party knows the other is the country’s [or church’s] biggest problem.”

~Yuval Levin

“How to Curb the Culture War,” *Comment* - <https://comment.org/how-to-curb-the-culture-war/>



*"Your mother and I are separating because
I want what's best for the country and your mother doesn't."*

<https://www.newyorker.com/cartoon/a15905>



Do We Even Know THEM?

“whoever is underrepresented in
your life will be over-represented
in your imagination”

~Mónica Guzmán

I Never Thought of it That Way



Resistance: The Law Done Wrong

*Beating people up with the commandments
rather than helping them meet Jesus*

“Contempt makes persuasion impossible — **no one has ever been hated into agreement, after all** — so its expression is either petty self-indulgence or cheap virtue signaling, neither of which wins converts.”

- Arthur Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*



Image credit: https://www.news-journal.com/features/religion/longview-street-preacher-on-mission-to-spread-christian-message/article_ar390098-37d3-5477-9b5b-2982bc05866.html



Responding to A Secular Age

THREAT -> Three Temptations

Each move undercuts our witness

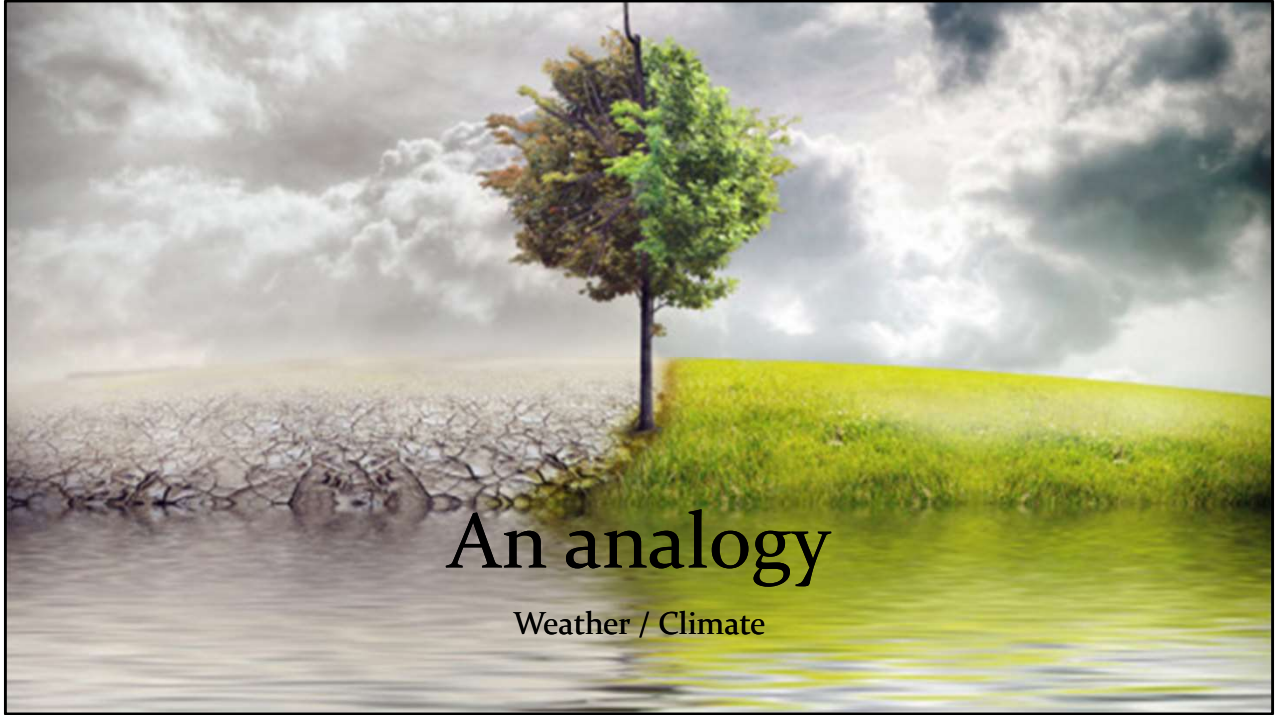
1. Relevance -> Indistinguishability
2. Resignation -> Sectarianism
3. Resistance -> Antagonistic relations



A Secular Age – what it is

Decline,
Privatization,
Desacralization,
New ways of believing

Secular 1 and 2



An analogy

Weather / Climate



A Secular Age – what it is

Decline,
Privatization,
Desacralization,
New ways of believing

a weather report
from Secular 1 and 2



A Secular Age – what it is

Implausibility

belief is contestable and therefore, contested

Secular 3
(the climate; conditions Secular 1 & 2)

If we think about the concerns of Seculars 1 & 2 (decline, desacralization, privatization and the emergence of new ways of believing) as the empirically observable “weather report” made possible by the fact that we live in a time where belief is contestable and therefore contested, it makes sense to then aim our ministry efforts more directly at the climate situation of implausibility instead of constantly functioning in “reaction” mode to the weather report of decline and growing disaffiliation.



Fragility of belief

Contestable beliefs and contestation leads to **fragilization**

Fragilization is the feeling of being haunted by other possibilities of belief – either believing otherwise (different religions/spiritualities) or unbelief (is this really true?)

If I hadn't run out of time, I would have tried to make a bit more sense of what it means to live in a time where believing—whether from a traditional religious perspective or even atheism (for even skeptics doubt their doubts)—has become difficult. To do that, I would have looked to some other phenomena that Charles Taylor discussed in his magisterial *A Secular Age*.

One of the first is that he says belief has become fragilized. And this fragilization occurs because of the fact that belief is contestable (all and any kind of belief, despite however much you might sometimes feel like your Christian faith for example, is a special target).

You can see here on this slide how I define fragilization, riffing on Taylor. It would be helpful to think a little more on how fragilization becomes possible. That's on the next slide.

Fragility of belief

Fragilization occurs because of **cross-pressure** (in relationship):

“This kind of multiplicity of faiths has little effect as long as it is neutralized by the sense that being like them is not really an option for me. As long as the alternative is strange and other, perhaps despised, but perhaps just too different, too weird, too incomprehensible, so that becoming *that* isn't really conceivable for me, so long will their difference not undermine my embedding in my own faith...”

Fragilization is a result of relational cross-pressure, Taylor says. Cross-pressure is simply the experience that, as we live our lives, we are liable to encounter people whose deepest conviction differ significantly from our own. In times when we have developed particular close and significant relationships with people of this sort, we experience a kind of internal reflection that might generate in us such questions as “why my way and not hers.” Now, while this might be difficult to admit, it's not difficult to imagine. The quote from Taylor on this and the following slide helps us understand just how easily we might experience this kind of cross-pressure, leading to fragilization of our own beliefs.

Furthermore, despite the fact that we might not want to admit it—and indeed, there are strong social norms that would suggest that we should not do so—if Taylor is right, it is highly likely that each of us, from time to time, experiences questions, doubts, and otherwise that make us worry about the state of our faith. Sadly, it's unlikely that we would ever share these experiences with others.

Fragility of belief

Fragilization occurs because of **cross-pressure** (in relationship):

“This changes when through increased contact, interchange, even perhaps inter-marriage, the other becomes more and more like me, in everything else but faith: same activities, professions, opinions, tastes, etc. Then the issue posed by the difference becomes more insistent: why my way and not hers? There is no other difference left to make the shift preposterous or unimaginable.”

~ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 304



Responding to A Secular Age

Not a THREAT, but an Opening

Stewarding What We're Given:
Opportunity and Influence

From the perspective on thinking more accurately about what it means to live in a secular age by thinking more about the issue of implausibility and contestability of belief, we can face our current situation differently. Rather than thinking of our secular age as a threat, we can consider it an opening to steward the influence and opportunity we are given. In fact, we need not worry about the disappearance of deeply held religious belief at all – rather, as the sociologist Peter Berger (a Lutheran, by the way) noted in 1999, we are becoming more religious than ever. It's just that there is a move beyond the traditional belief categories and systems that have long been familiar to us. If openness to belief is true, then there is an opening for us to gain a hearing by developing relationships of trust, and by the leading of the Holy Spirit, take advantage of opportunities to introduce people to Jesus by sharing our faith and telling them about the Gospel.



Stewarding what we're Given

Marshall stewarded what he
was given:
influence and opportunity
He changed the Western
world.

The church is not ours to save.
Our task is to steward
influence and opportunity so
that people meet Jesus and
follow him.



Gen. Marshall and FDR

I discussed this slide in the presentation.



Responding to Implausibility

Trust is crucial.
Relationships are where it's born.

I discussed this slide in the presentation.



Can they trust us?

In an age of **IMPLAUSIBILITY**,
PERCEPTION and REPUTATION
matter for witness!

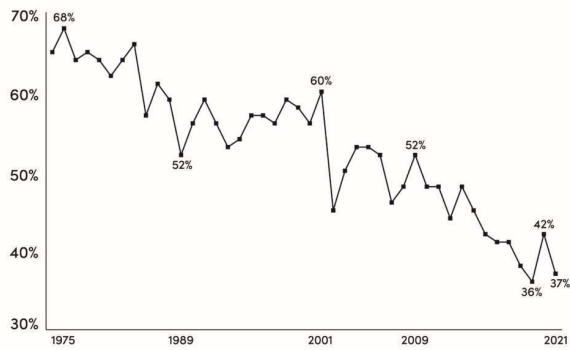
I discussed this slide in the presentation.

Let me add by saying that this is particularly important to take note of, given the background of recent social surveys that discuss the significant lack of social trust in the church and the clergy. See the data on the next slide from the Gallup poll to support this.



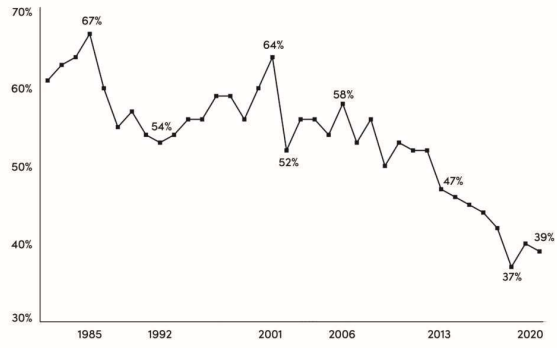
Can they trust us?

Americans Near Record Low Confidence in Church



Source: Gallup
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/352316/americans-confidence-major-institutions-dips.aspx>

Public trust of clergy remains near all-time low



Source: Gallup <https://news.gallup.com/poll/328136/ethics-ratings-rise-medical-workers-teachers.aspx>

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/352316/americans-confidence-major-institutions-dips.aspx>

To gain a hearing for the Gospel, we have to overcome the trust deficit we've have incurred over the last few decades. How do we do that? Perhaps by practicing the same kind of humility that we observed in the story of George Marshall.



How to Increase Social Trust of the Church

Building trust requires:

- Acting with integrity
- Owning mistakes and apologizing
- Being vulnerable
- Establishing deep relationships
- Aim to be known for our LOVE because it's God's LOVE



Image source: <https://leadingwithtrust.com/2019/09/22/25-simple-ways-to-build-trust-at-work/>

Here are some additional ways of regaining trust.



We've Done This Before

Aim: To be Christians who are known for their LOVE

CONTEXT: Post-Christian culture is pluralistic – beliefs and ideas are many. Not everyone believes and thinks like us.

Early church: pluralistic context (we've been here before, sort of)

Nostalgia: cannot go back but we can move forward while leaning back on ancient wisdom (also, eschatology)

In fact, we have resources in our own past that can help. The church at one time lived in a moment similar to ours. They were a part of a pluralistic society (maybe not a thoroughly pluralistic—not everyone was bumping into others who held deeply different conviction everyday in public places or via systems of communication as we seem to do today), and they fashioned for themselves a lively, even if difficult, existence within that society. The church had the encouragement of the New Testament writers, especially from those letters written to persecuted communities (see 1 Peter) that encouraged them to keep going. The later leaders of the early church constantly focused on patience (see Alan Krieger's *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Impossible Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*) – they were playing a long game rather than functioning in a merely reactionary mode. This informs my suggestion to do the same in an age of implausibility—we should move away from reaction and more toward talking about and embodying a faith that appears plausible (believable) as a witness to people who have so many reasons to doubt and distrust us.

One additional thing is important. There is no going back to a time when things were somehow better for the church. There is no such thing as a Golden Age. God is always drawing us forward on a trajectory into the future which ends with the return of Jesus

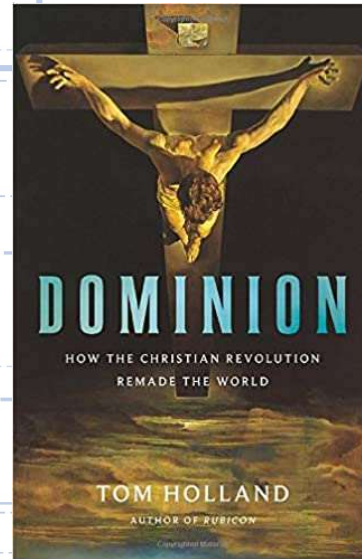
and the consummation of the age. So as we move forward in time carrying out our vocation as God's witnesses before the watching world, we lean back on the ancient wisdom of the church's experience in the past without trying to recover or reinstate and certain time in the past that we might remember with deep affection.



Dominion

Love is not a sentiment.
It is a social practice.

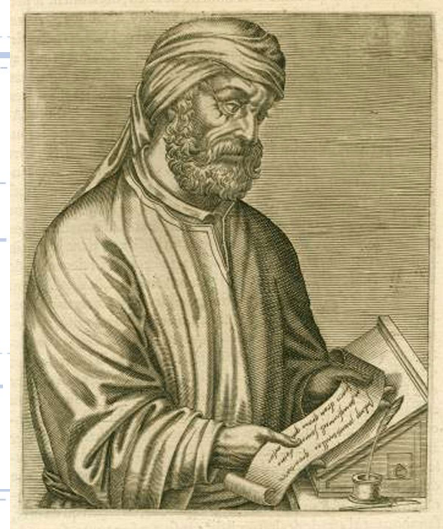
This is the witness of
saints and martyrs. This
is the witness that
fueled Christianity's
ongoing growth. It can
do so again.



I discussed this slide in the presentation.

Love's Witness

“It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See how they love one another, they say, for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, they say, for they themselves will sooner put to death”
(Tertullian, *The Apology*, ch. 39).



I discussed this slide in the presentation.



What Can We Do?

Aim: To be Christians who are known for their LOVE

Letter to Diognetus

For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. This doctrine of theirs has not been discovered by the ingenuity or deep thought of inquisitive men, nor do they put forward a merely human teaching, as some people do. Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth...

Furthermore from Tertullian, this classic portion of the anonymously written Letter to Diognetus also describes the church's social reputation during its earliest centuries, including those in which it was persecuted.



What Can We Do?

Aim: To be Christians who are known for their LOVE

Letter to Diognetus

They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. It is true that they are “in the flesh,” but they do not live “according to the flesh.” They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require. (Letter to Diognetus, 5.1-10)



Hospitality: Toward Renewed Trust

Hostis: source for the English “hospitality,” “host,” and also, “hostile/enemy”

How do we host our (Christ’s) enemies (host the *hostis*)?

Romans 5.10-11 - “...when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled...”

Self-identify with/as sinners – the church is *for* sinners

This is how the world meets Jesus in us (this is God’s chosen mechanism).

We are people *for* others. (Bonhoeffer + St. Paul)



Renewed Trust Produces Plausible Hope

