

Fran Sciacca

"Fran Sciacca is a modern-day Jeremiah. He will not make his readers comfortable, but he needs to be heard."

LYLE DORSETT

Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism,
Beeson Divinity School

SO, WHAT'S YOUR POINT?



**Realigning Our Story
with the Only One
That Matters**

Fran Sciacca is a prophet for our times. He has a keen ability, as an observer of our Christian culture, to bring it to the bar of judgment of God's Word. In *So, What's Your Point?* he doesn't pull any punches or soft-pedal any issues. At the same time he is not just a critic. He points us in the right direction by bringing us back to God's purpose from the beginning of creation; to make all things new through the redeeming work of His Son.

JERRY BRIDGES

Author and Speaker

As a student in one of Fran Sciacca's first classes, I was the beneficiary of his passion and zeal for seeing students renewed by the gospel—not just salvation from our sins and a free pass to heaven, but the height, depth, breadth, and glory of the Story of redemption. Now, thirty years later, his passion burns more brightly. *So, What's Your Point?* is a realistic and honest portrait of the mess we live in, but also a beautiful painting of God's loving mercy for His creatures. As he did in my life so long ago, Fran's work continues to give hope and a mission to those who will listen.

ELISABETH MAXWELL RYKEN

First Lady, Wheaton College

If you are content with our culture, comfortable with the North American church scene, and confident that if you die Jesus will applaud you for having invested your time, goods, talents, and spiritual gifts for His glory, then you will not like this book. Nevertheless, you should read it. On the other hand, if you see much in yourself and in the Christian culture around you that needs to be transformed by Jesus Christ, read this book because it might help you get closer to true North on your spiritual compass. Fran Sciacca is a modern-day Jeremiah. He will not make his readers comfortable, but he needs to be heard.

LYLE DORSETT, PHD

Author and Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism, Beeson Divinity School

Like a master craftsman, Fran has woven together the elements of God's great redemptive story. *So, What's Your Point?* is clear, concise, and compelling. A great service to the body of Christ, helping us understand our role in the Story.

DANA L. THOMAS

Executive Director, The Forge For Families

Fran Sciacca brings decades of observation, study, and teaching to its proper culmination in a compelling, refreshingly authentic read. One of the book's most important contributions to a society desperately seeking "what's my point?" is the challenge that true purpose can only be found in design and that meaningful adventure comes when we quit chasing our own dreams and instead chase the dreams of God. This work is an outstanding read and a gift and wake-up call to the church.

MARIBETH POOR

Minister to Young Marrieds and Young Professionals, Mountaintop Community Church

Zeal with knowledge, passion with humility . . . Fran Sciacca has delivered an honest and biblically driven critique of where many of us in the American church have lost our way—shooting “pointless” arrows into targets that were never on God’s radar to begin with. Read at your own risk, and pray to God to be part of the solution, which will be your “point.”

MATT LETOURNEAU

Atlanta City Director, The Navigators

Fran Sciacca’s *So, What’s Your Point?* is truly timely and deeply, convincingly biblical. A prophet’s voice—self-cheated and at peril are those who ignore it; savingly located are those who heed it.

WALTER J. SCHULTZ, PHD

Professor of Philosophy, Northwestern College

It’s difficult to isolate one genre to describe this important book. It’s a perceptive and incisive *social analysis*—particularly of American, and more pointedly evangelical, cultural values. Sciacca writes out of his considerable research and wide-ranging personal experiences to analyze and critique important developments since the pivotal 1960s. But he also convincingly shows the impact of these developments on the church, which has sadly come to mirror the culture in a multitude of ways. The book is also *self-help*, in the best sense of that genre. That is, Sciacca seeks to help followers of Christ come to embrace and live out their God-designed identity, not on the basis of the values and messages the culture champions and sells so effectively. But the book is also a *biblical theology*—and Sciacca is careful to tell the full story of the Bible, what some call the “Grand Narrative.” If Christians understand who they are and what God’s redemptive program in the world entails, they will find their own mission and real fulfillment, though probably not the American Dream! This book will provoke a crisis: Do we really want what God wants or do we want what we want? Do we define the goal of life in terms of American values, or God’s call? Sciacca is bold, in the pattern of God’s prophets, telling God’s life-giving message in a day of great crisis. And to be sure, Sciacca knows the ins and outs of that crisis in the lives of real people after a lifetime of teaching students and speaking widely, not to mention his own life story. Sciacca’s writing is gripping, alive, and engaging; he’s clearly an accomplished communicator. My fear is that those who most need to read and heed his message won’t bother to read the book, or that we read the book and dismiss its wake-up call. But if we do, we will live much diminished lives. Sciacca gives Christians a prescription and a mandate for lives worth living, ones that truly fulfill the mission of God for this world.

WILLIAM W. KLEIN, PHD

Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary

SO, WHAT'S YOUR POINT ?

Realigning Our Story
with the Only Story
That Matters

Fran Sciacca

NAVPRESS 

A NavPress resource published in alliance
with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.



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So, What's Your Point?: Realigning Our Story with the Only Story That Matters

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A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

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Cover design by geoffsciacca design; www.geoffsciacca.com

Interior design by Dean H. Renninger

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ISBN 978-1-63146-459-1

Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 15
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

Or, Why I Wrote This Book

As a man in his sixties, I am properly schooled and experienced regarding the immediate danger of criticism in which I place myself by comparing anything I've ever done to the labor of childbirth. Stronger men than I have been dismantled in dialogue with, or in the presence of, women by carelessly comparing or contrasting childbirth to something they have endured. Having coached my wife through three natural childbirth deliveries—the last of which was a set of twins with a breach caveat thrown in by God—I'm no stranger to the pain, although I'm no veteran of it either. However, as I've pondered how to begin this book, I am continually drawn back to the metaphor of labor and delivery—the whole birthing experience.

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, I set out to write a book on behalf of a generation in their late teens. Now that generation is much older; some of them are even in their forties. I was actually recruited to write this book, a rather audacious appeal to my own generation—the Baby Boomers—to put on our big-boy pants and admit complicity, even responsibility, for the spiritual demise of the American flavor of Western Christianity. I labored in that book to validate the assertion that the 1960s had altered the cultural landscape of the United States permanently. The church in America had by then been in bed with the culture for at least two decades. I made the claim that we had become slightly more than a marginally moral mirror image of the larger culture. Replete with our own industries to one another, our own magazines, entertainment, schools, and franchises, we had slowly, like the proverbial frog in the kettle, become our own subculture instead of a counterculture. For many of us, faith was more a product of democracy and Wall Street than the Scriptures. The book was titled *Generation at Risk: What Legacy Are Baby Boomers Leaving Their Kids?* In the metaphor of parenting, *Generation* was a

stillbirth. The publisher solemnly announced to me that the book was officially *out* of print three months before it was *in* print. A decision had been made to curtail the publishing arm of the organization to focus its efforts and budget on its central calling—evangelism. It was a wise and reasonable decision for them, and one that I've come to admire as an older man. Nonetheless, I was stunned then. Without trying to hijack the birthing metaphor too much, it was akin to a final doctor's visit just before delivery, in which you discover your long-awaited child is no longer living. *Generation* was put on the auction block. Another well-known publisher bought the rights to the book, but because of a complex mixture of circumstances, *Generation* suffered a second death. I returned to teaching, and writing dropped off my radar.

That was nearly twenty-five years ago. In the ensuing two decades, I immersed myself in the students who populated my classrooms day in and day out. I listened. I watched. I learned. And I realized that the things I was so passionate about earlier—the ideas that had woven themselves into the tapestry of *Generation*—were coming to pass before my eyes. The “generation at risk” had become the generation at hand. I adjusted my teaching to focus on what I believed was vital for the spiritual health of the twenty-first-century church. These new passions congealed into a corpus of material I had so internalized that it became difficult for me, and any who knew me, to distinguish between the two.

In 2005, I left the formal classroom for an informal one and founded Hands of Hur, a ministry to existing ministries through teaching and resources. My commitment to remain a diminutive and obscure blip on the kingdom radar seemed safe. However, about five years ago, while I was staying at a lake house owned by a younger man, a heated debate broke out between us regarding *his* conviction that I had a “responsibility” to write for the next generation. He insisted, in no tender terms, that I “owed” it to his children and my own grandchildren to leave some textual legacy of the heart and soul of what had become signature teaching and talking points for me.

I wasn't interested. I told him I'd already tried that. He wasn't persuaded by my arguments. Instead, he laid a challenge on the table: Had I ever considered that the whole purpose of my life was somehow related to what I would leave, more than what I said while living?

I patronized his spirituality but dismissed his admonishment. He was only forty. What did he know?

Since that conversation, almost imperceptibly, I have slowly been led back to the rising generation—this time through the teaching and training of collegiate ministers and the students they serve. My wife, Jill, and I are now deeply engaged in helping the current generation of campus ministry workers

understand secular and church cultures, the effects of technology on spirituality, and God's grand drama called the gospel.

The interest and enthusiasm of these campus ministers energizes me. It all culminated in the fall of 2011 when, on two occasions, I addressed nearly a thousand college students from twenty-five secular college campuses. I had sought to distill my greatest passions into three one-hour messages, knowing I would leave much underexplained and even more totally untouched. Yet, I found myself working on these messages months in advance, something very foreign to my intense, "just-in-time" production mind-set. The title of the message series was "So, What's Your Point?"

So, here I am again, giving birth to another book I hadn't planned to conceive. It may turn out that this is the book God had been shaping within me all along. The obvious difference is that instead of writing on *behalf* of the generation at risk, I now find myself writing *to* them. Therefore, this book, while surely suitable for any modern believer or seeker regardless of age, has a special application for that demographic.

My own generation, with the final shore in sight, is focused on the harbor ahead: how, when, and where our own story will end. Our lives are not yet over, but our options are diminishing. End of life and health care issues, physical limitations, and the sheer energy required for relocation, make dramatic life-change choices retreat into the realm of unlikelihood. For some of us, there comes a point in life when we can't awaken from the American Dream, even if we want to. And in fairness to my own generation, I need to express to those *not* facing that final shore a few words of encouragement: God is also expanding the number of older believers who deeply desire to do all *they* can to empower and equip the rising generation to do all that *they* can to enlarge the kingdom of God—wherever it leads them.

However, the generation that is coming of age shows signs of a profound and genuine spiritual awakening. This revitalization is characterized by radical commitments to mobility, simplicity, authenticity, and a longing for community as a context to explore all of the above. Unlike us, they have barely "left the dock," if at all, and their lives are open to redirection, reimagination, and the kinds of choices rigorous commitment to the gospel requires. If the "generation at risk" has become the "generation at hand," I would be honored to contribute to the conversation God appears to be initiating with them regarding His plans for His people.

It's daunting to me, a man in my sixties, to believe I can speak with relevance and authority to those half my age. But it may well turn out that we are again on the steps of the church in Wittenberg.¹ If I can contribute a line or two to the theses God is penning to the modern church, it will be enough.

PROLEGOMENA

INTRODUCTION

Robert and Rehoboth

Maybe it's just a coincidence—but then again maybe it's not—that at the 2012 Digital-Life-Design conference in Munich, there was an eighteen-year age span between the opening and closing keynote speakers. Viviane Reding, the European Commission's vice-president for justice, and Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer for Facebook, are nearly half a generation apart in age. Harry Truman was the president when Reding was born in 1951; Sandberg was born roughly two weeks after Woodstock in 1969.

The conference opened with Reding, a sixty-year-old European woman, professionally dressed, speaking from a printed manuscript, standing politely behind a podium. But it ended seventy-two hours later with an attractive, youthful, American woman in “business-casual” attire, meandering casually across the platform with a behind-the-ear headset, cueing her remarks via multiple screens and a handheld remote. The former spoke of caution in the digital age; the latter, of freedom.

Facebook's Sandberg extolled the value of the “wisdom of friends.” This pithy proverb of the digital era is really just a mashup of sorts, an error in reasoning thirty-five centuries old, as we'll shortly see. The unspoken assumption is that one's friends are inherently wise. And, most likely, *friends* in this context is a synonym for “peers.” The consequences of an unexamined infatuation with this mentality will likely produce the same devastation it did in ancient Israel.

I am especially sensitive to this line of thinking, because I was both participant and spectator during the decade of its most recent and lasting manifestation—the sixties.¹ It was to this era that scholar Paul Johnson, in his landmark book *Modern Times*, gave the chilling label “America's Suicide Attempt.”² You couldn't have convinced any of us that *we* were trying to kill America or us, of course; we were convinced America was trying to kill anyone

with a dissenting voice. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young's haunting lyrics, "Tin soldiers and Nixon coming, we're finally on our own. This summer I hear the drumming. Four dead in Ohio"³ reminded us that the National Guard still had all the guns. By the decade's end, we had "drunk the Kool-Aid," regarding the moral imperative of what we were doing, nearly ten years before the Jonestown massacre would put that phrase in the dictionary. We were confident that song titles like "All You Need Is Love" and "Strawberry Fields Forever" were as axiomatic as the geometry we had learned as children.

More significantly, we had followed the political advice of a young, itinerant minstrel from the Mesabi Iron Range in Minnesota. Robert Zimmerman migrated to New York and changed his name to Bob Dylan before being catapulted into the role of spokesman for the era. Dylan's inclusion in *TIME* magazine's 1999 feature "100 Most Important People of the Century" demonstrates the broad and long half-life this musical prophet has had in American culture. Of special importance to me, as I begin this book, is the pathos he captured and catapulted in his 1964 release, a song that described and defined the era:

*Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly agin'.
Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand.*⁴

Thanks to the comparatively narrow-band phenomenon known as radio, many (if not most) of my generation ingested this ideology in one fashion or another: that the "wisdom of friends" is better than the "wisdom of the crowd"—especially if the "crowd" is one generation removed, in our case, the parent culture. Free speech and free enterprise had gotten in bed just when the youth culture had aged from *Rebel Without a Cause* to *Easy Rider*.⁵ Rock 'n' Roll was the Internet then, promoting cohesion and autonomy, as well as music and mayhem.

Whether Dylan realized it, he had endorsed a kind of thinking and decision-making that wreaked havoc in the ancient Middle East. It is enjoying a resurgence in the twenty-first century, because this polarization between the "wisdom of friends" and the "wisdom of the crowd" is a perennial problem, not merely an ancient one. Like tectonic plates, generations seem to clash, especially over what should be permanent and what should be transient. Whether it's clothing, cuisine, character, or truth itself, generational agreement has always been an agony. However, until recently, generational differences were also quarantined in a sense, insulated by geographical distances. That is, the sheer space between like-minded, similarly aged groups made a cohesive identity or solidarity congealing

effectively impossible. There was no such thing as “crowd-sourcing,” the “hive mind,” or the “like” button.

That all changed, irreversibly, in the early 1990s with the birth of the Internet. Since that time, or shortly thereafter, in the words of journalist Thomas Friedman, the world became “flat,”⁶ by which he meant that information became widely and readily available, which undercut the economic dominance of the establishment and allowed upstarts and previously powerless individuals and nations to become major forces in the world. I would edit Friedman’s metaphor slightly by adding that although it is “flat,” it is surely not “level.” There is a highpoint in the current technological topography, a place from which everything seems to flow *downstream*. With the advent of Web 2.0 and the Mordor-like spread of what has become the transparent matrix of social-networking, a digital benevolent oligarchy has emerged, concentrated in Silicon Valley. A sort of Technorati. They seem to be “nice,” but they also hold all the guns because they have all the skill, innovation, bandwidth, and data.

It is no exaggeration to say that information is the new currency, “the new oil.”⁷ But most of those who populate this Technorati, who hold much of the “new money” (as well as stockpiles of the “old money”), are young—they could be my children. At the end of the day, when they speak of “the wisdom of friends,” they are *not* talking about me. Neither, I suspect, is Viviane Reding part of the “wisdom of friends” in Sheryl Sandberg’s mind as she crafts her vision for the world: a new normal in which Facebook’s penetration of some countries is 90 percent.

A reasonable question should be emerging in your minds about now. What do Bob Dylan, Facebook, and Israel in the tenth century BC have in common? I believe the commonality is more than tangential. It is monumental. The legendary son of David, Israel’s greatest king, via a rather disappointing tryst-become-marriage, became the archetype Renaissance Man 2,300 years before da Vinci. A skilled architect, songwriter, poet, botanist, and a supremely astute philosopher and theologian, “Solomon” is an iconic summary of ancient Middle Eastern wisdom.⁸

He and his family also stand forever as a monument to how much life can change in a single generation. Solomon’s wisdom seems undisputed. His public relations acumen, however, left much to be desired. Viewed as a tyrant by the populace for his near extortion of money and labor, the news of his death created a hiatus of sorts among the people of his realm. Would *his* son, Rehoboam, continue his father’s public policy of “higher taxes,” or would he be cut from a different cloth? Would he value people more than progress, and the beauty of humanity more than the beauty of stone?

Rehoboam began well. His first challenge came from a unified populace: “Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you” (1 Kings 12:4). In response, he asked for three days of contemplation, during which he sought “the wisdom of the crowd”—in this case, the men who had surrounded his father, the previous king. Their response was immediate and unanimous: “If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever” (verse 7).

What transpired next is chilling in its consequences, and yet familiar in its details. Rehoboam sought the “wisdom of friends”—peers who had grown up with him and “stood before him” (on his payroll). Seeing the glimmer of unlimited opportunity at a young age—having an Angel Investor for your startup, if you will—their counsel turned out to be the polar opposite of those who, through age and experience, had seen the result of an oppressive monarchy for four decades.

And the young men who had grown up with him said to him, “Thus shall you speak to this people who said to you, ‘Your father made our yoke heavy, but you lighten it for us,’ thus shall you say to them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s thighs. And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.’” (1 Kings 12:10-11)

Rehoboam “liked” the “wisdom of friends,” which turned out to be a blistering promise of Solomon on steroids. The immediate result of his short-sightedness was the split of a united kingdom into Israel and Judah, a distinction that remained for nearly a millennium and generated a history more known for apostasy and wickedness than truth and beauty.⁹ Israel in the north became a synonym for idolatry and rebellion. Not a single righteous king would sit on its throne, and names like Ahab and Jezebel would enter the narrative only to be enshrined in infamy. The ruthless Assyrians would extinguish what little light remained in the north in 722 BC. The southern kingdom of Judah too, though punctuated with bright spots like King Josiah, followed the path to anarchy and was eventually battered and taken by Babylon.

The choices facing young King Rehoboam had consequences that endured long after him. The future is always contained in the present. In a very real way, without knowing it, we choose for our grandchildren. Sometimes those who have lived long enough to see the present unfold into the future and understand this, are best suited to provide insight to those whose sight has a limited

horizon. The point here is not that Rehoboam should have *ignored* the “wisdom of friends” and blindly embraced the “wisdom of the crowd.” Rather, his greatest error was in privileging the one and summarily dismissing the other.

Several years ago, when our middle son was completing his MFA in graphic design, he had an idea for nurturing racial healing on his campus. The fifty-year anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* was approaching, and in the Deep South, that landmark decision declaring segregation of schools unconstitutional (with clear implications for segregation more broadly) had repercussions that were still reverberating. Geoff made a series of posters and tabletop-tents that reminded the students at his Louisiana college of the anniversary *and* called attention to the fact that they were still *voluntarily* segregating themselves. He stretched a piece of duct tape down the middle of the campus lunchroom and dragged several tables into the “neutral zone.” Then he challenged students to “meet in the middle” one day during that week.

Geoff and his fiancée essentially ate alone that day. White students ate on their “side” of the lunchroom, and black students on theirs. Only a few people joined them “in the middle.”

Living in the middle is sometimes a sign of laxity, sometimes a sign of bigotry. But when it comes to the “wisdom of the crowd” versus the “wisdom of friends,” the middle might be a good place to land. Rehoboam and Robert Zimmerman have something in common: They both advocated a cultural platform that was generationally defined and existentially driven. Like Dylan, Rehoboam and his “friends” also seemed to believe that “the times they are a-changin’,” and that the older generation should either get on board or get off the dock.

Whether it’s called the “wisdom of friends” or “Rehoboam’s Folly,” it’s a dangerous choice to polarize generations when determining which direction and at what speed the world should be driven. But this sword cuts both ways! There is a need for my generation to understand and appreciate the immense spiritual and social capital residing in the rising generation. Many of us only seek the counsel of our children after a power outage, when the digital clock on our DVD player is flashing “12:00.”

A provocative modern caricature of the beauty and power of this type of multigenerational synergism is the 2007 film *Live Free or Die Hard*. In the film, an old-school but efficient cop (Bruce Willis) finds himself unexpectedly and unintentionally wedded vocationally to a youthful, high-tech Jedi (Justin Long). Their reluctant yet amazing convergence of analog and digital approaches to life not only rivets you to the screen, it brings resolution to the plot.

A renegade first-century Galilean, whose message landed Him outside the

status quo, isolated the real issue of the wisdom of friends versus the wisdom of crowds:

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’

And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.” (Matthew 16:1-3)

Jesus’ perennial struggle with the adult generation of His day was that they just didn’t get it. They were so locked into the “old” that they were blind to the “new.” In fact, the “new” was so foreign, frightening, and threatening to them, and their own perspective so rigid, that to embrace the “new” would mean the *destruction* of their whole worldview. There simply was no way to simultaneously hold on to their presuppositions about the kingdom of God *and* embrace the teaching of Jesus. Their theology wasn’t merely wrong; it was too small.¹⁰

The remarkable middle ground that Jesus offered, which remains available today, is found in a single brief statement He made to a small group in Galilee: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matthew 13:52).

The word “old” here is *palaios*, a word whose meaning carries within it the notion of “ancient.” Jesus told first-century seekers that those who really “get it” are those who value and embrace both the “new” and the “ancient.” Unfortunately, twenty-first-century Christians seem either to have both feet in the “new”—so sexy that we’re *irreverent*—or we have both feet in the “old”—*irrelevant* to the point of invisibility. It’s important to distinguish here, however, between “old” and “ancient” in our contemporary practice. “Old” in this case is best understood as the “status quo”—mindlessly repeating what has been done in the past with little personal connection to that past. “Tradition” can be either vibrant or dead when it comes to spiritual matters. It is not inherently right simply because it is “older.” “Ancient,” on the other hand, has to do with what has always been true based on what God has told us in Scripture about Himself and His purposes. Being rooted in the “ancient” yet free to step into the “new” is the modern antidote to falling prey to Robert and Rehoboam on one hand, and the Pharisees and Sadducees on the other.

And I want to suggest to you that though “old school” is often something that needs a proper funeral, “ancient school” is not. My desire in the pages that

follow is that, unlike God's people in Judah, you *will* heed the voice of Yahweh spoken twenty-six centuries ago through the prophet Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD: "Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'" (Jeremiah 6:16)

My appeal to you, then, as we begin this journey *backward* to the "ancient paths" to find our way *forward* in a Chart Your Own Adventure (CYOA) culture, is that despite which demographic you find yourself a resident—the rising or retiring generation—you would be willing to ask for the ancient paths, seek the good way, and by walking in it, submit yourself to the One Story of the One God.

My commitment is to steer you onto those paths. Because I'm in the last lap of my life, the time is short and the stakes are high. I'm going to be honest, prophetic, and passionate. It's too late for me to dance gracefully around provocative points for fear of offending. I surely don't desire to offend. But I also refuse to dance.

It's time for those of us who claim the name of Jesus to perform an audit of our own spirituality. If you're not willing to do this, then I suggest you close the book and go play golf or *Angry Birds*, depending on your age. However, if you are willing to step out, not knowing where the path might lead—well, then, make sure your seats and trays are in the upright and locked position.



WE'RE IN MIDDLE-EARTH, DOROTHY, NOT KANSAS

In the classic 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy (played by a very young Judy Garland) enters the majestic land of Oz and says to her tiny canine companion, “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” For those of us old enough to recall hearing those words emanate from the tiny black-and-white TV in our living rooms, we could never have imagined a day when that statement would be a national confession.

More recently, Galadriel’s lament, which opens the 2001 screen version of J. R. R. Tolkien’s epic trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, has become a requiem of sorts:

The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth.
I smell it in the air. Much that once was is lost, for none now live
who remember it.

At least it’s become that for those of us who’ve been paying attention. But how many are paying attention?

The good news is, the number is growing. The bad news: They’re almost exclusively *outside* the family of believers.¹

Less than forty years ago, one of the founders of a major firm in the computer industry announced, without hesitation, “There is no reason for any individual to have a computer in their home.”² Obviously, he never envisioned a day when millions would have computers in their *pockets*—or worse, as quasi-appendages! Since the recent meteoric and geometric trajectory of technological innovation, change has become the only constant. Unfortunately, because of the dizzying rate at which it is occurring, we have become numb to the tectonic-level, transparent transformations occurring around us and *in us*.³ The size and significance of both

the number and degree of changes is exacerbated by the speed at which they are occurring *and* the relative transparency in which it is happening.⁴

If this book purports to be a journey to discover our “point” or purpose, it would be prudent to have an informed understanding of the stage upon which we find ourselves. Things have “changed” in America in the twenty-first century, but *how* have they changed, and to what degree?

Because I’m neither a historian nor the son of one, what follows will surely be broad strokes with a large brush on a small canvas. But I believe it will suffice, as I simply want this chapter to set the table for what follows.

The Spiritual Landscape Has Changed

I am a second-generation child, born of Sicilian immigrants. My grandparents’ names are in the records on Ellis Island a half mile from the Statue of Liberty. Emma Lazarus’s poem on the base of that statue is a historic invitation, especially to those who are poor and broken, that lies beneath our nation’s diversity.

*“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*

My ancestors, and those of my wife, accepted that invitation.

America has always boasted that we have open arms and borders (although currently the word *borders* is as volatile as *Communist* was in the 1950s). Recently, there has been no end to the rhetoric and dialogue about quotas and qualifications for crossing our borders. But while all the talking was taking place, an amazing shift quietly occurred, much of it via humanitarian efforts to refugees on one hand, and an eagerness for diversity in our universities on the other. America’s religious landscape shifted.

My grandmother would not recognize it. Interestingly, however, neither would many of my contemporaries. She, because she knew her surroundings. They, because they don’t. And that’s a significant distinction.

Consider the following: Although each of the following bullet points is not alarming in itself, collectively they paint a portrait of American religious life that has an eerie consonance with Galadriel’s comments above. The world *has* changed—at least the little patch of it known as the United States.

- There are more US Buddhists than US Muslims.
- There are as many Muslims in the United States as Jehovah’s Witnesses.

- Most American Buddhists were born here; most American Hindus and Muslims were not.⁵

Moreover,

- The percentage of Americans calling themselves “Christian” has fallen on average 10 percent since 1990 (from 86 percent to 76 percent).⁶
- Twenty-five percent of those aged eighteen and older have “no religious affiliation”; this number has *doubled* since those in this group were children.⁷
- Only 4 percent of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds listed “becoming more spiritual” as their most important goal in life.⁸

When I came to faith on the college campus in the late 1960s—in the midst of a heavy cloud of Marxism and cannabis—there was intense interest in the spiritual. It was common to have “all-nighters” of meaningful dialogue not just about the Vietnam War or civil rights but about God. Not so today. Mark Silk, professor of religion and public life at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, puts it bluntly: “The real dirty little secret of religiosity in America is that there are so many people for whom spiritual interest, thinking about ultimate questions, is minimal.”⁹ This is consistent with the findings of an annual survey of nearly 300,000 college freshman conducted by the American Council on Education.¹⁰ The survey results have nearly inverted since the sixties regarding the big questions of purpose versus personal comfort.

“A very important goal is to be well-off financially.”

1966 = 43% 2008 = 74%

“A very important goal is to develop a meaningful philosophy of life.”

1966 = 84% 2008 = 51%

Some of this, no doubt, is the consequence of the natural trajectory of the human race since Adam’s rebellion.¹¹ However, I believe equally culpable is the American church itself.

Unfortunately, since the sixties collapsed, the American church has simultaneously withdrawn from the public square *and* created a caricature of Christianity that resembles biblical faith less and less. Researcher Christian Smith apparently believes we have, in some ways, become our own worst enemy:

It’s not so much that US Christianity is being secularized. Rather more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself, or more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.¹²

Without being simplistic, I think one can almost chart our migration from authenticity to paucity by decade.

In the church culture of the 1960s, “Christian” was an assumed synonym for “American.” Christianity and democracy were presumed to be inseparable. (These unfortunate associations are still alive, but they show signs of languishing.)¹³ This genre of patriotic spirituality was a distinct carryover from the complacency of the 1950s, in which a worldview solidified that was colored more by the flag than the Bible. It explains why a dear friend and fellow “hippie,” who had come to faith after an engaging inner struggle with a variety of competing ideologies, was ejected from a Baptist church near our campus. He walked in one Sunday morning, dressed as he always was: suede jacket with fringes, knee-high moccasins, and a leather hat with feathers. Two deacons, one on each arm, escorted him to the door with the words, “Your kind is not welcome here.” Our “kind” was distinguished by our clothing and hair, obviously not our hearts. In the minds of the status-quo Americanized church, the counterculture was anti-American, and therefore anti-Christian.

Most of us in the counterculture were, I suspect, some threat to the American way of life. But we were no threat to the gospel. I believe the church, as an institution, lost much of its credibility with the rising generation during the 1960s thanks to a perceived (or perhaps real) attitude of self-righteousness.

The 1970s seemed to be a decade of the church’s seeking to regain that lost credibility. It was a season of intense interest in apologetics and the Christian mind. Books by Francis Schaeffer, Os Guinness, Josh McDowell, James Warwick Montgomery, and others began to pour out of Christian publishing houses, demonstrating that a Christian can have a satisfied mind, not just a warm heart. Schaeffer in particular surely shaped *my* thinking and many of those of my ilk. But the decade was also a period of incredible accommodation to culture. There seemed to be a campaign to convince the watching world that they should take us seriously. In the words of one observer, “Alas, in leaning over to speak to the modern world, we had fallen in.”¹⁴

The mistake, I believe, was laboring to convince non-Christians that Christians were “just as good at everything” as they were. Christian day school enrollment exploded. Christian industries (music, clothing, publishing) burgeoned. Being “born again” became a household word.¹⁵ The “Dove Awards,” a Christian version of the Grammys, was birthed by the Gospel Music Association. Country rock singer Kris Kristofferson headed up an all-star cast for *Explo ’72*, a conference sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ, and hailed as a “Christian Woodstock.” (Kristofferson’s bestselling album *Jesus Was a Capricorn* no doubt made him an obvious choice.)

This was a season when impressing the secular culture became the “point.” An unfortunate by-product was the formation of a distinct and very visible Christian subculture—one that was, under close examination, a mirror image of the larger culture. And, like the previous decade, there was enormous collateral damage, though it was largely unperceived by Christians. We quietly traded a distinct biblical identity as individuals, and corporately as a community of faith, for a subcultural one. We began to see ourselves in *contrast* to the culture instead of in *comparison* with Scripture.

It should come as no surprise that the 1980s could be characterized as a decade of Christian narcissism. This intense season of “focus” was, tragically, directed primarily toward ourselves. A 1980s edition of *Current Christian Books* listed nearly five hundred titles that began with *How To*.¹⁶ Books promising sexual fulfillment in marriage, foolproof parenting, success in business, and personal happiness were commonplace. I joked back then that I was waiting for the book *How to Lead Your Pet to Christ*. Fortunately, I failed in that prediction! Professional Christian counseling services sprang up everywhere, as we sought to find, nurture, and heal our inner selves. It would be no exaggeration to say that in the 1980s the American church fell in love with itself.

The consequences were numerous and significant, but one stands out among the rest: a near-complete retreat from cultural influence and concern. But that would soon change, or at least an attempt would be made to do so.

The 1990s became a decade defined by our attempts to retrieve what secular culture had “stolen” from us while we were partying on the rooftop of perceived popularity. As if waking up from a hangover to find we had left our home unlocked, we seemed to suddenly notice that the culture had continued moving in its normal trajectory away from God. Why this realization dawned with such force, I’m not sure. But it hit all the hot buttons within American evangelicalism simultaneously.

Thanks to the rhetoric of several prominent Christian leaders, we wound up being “at war” with the culture. Christian activism was the theme of radio and TV talk shows, conferences, and books. And about the time Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority was retreating into obscurity, several other Christian activist groups were emerging to replace it. The “culture wars” became a lightning rod for Christian passion. The clarion call was for us to reclaim what had been taken from us as Americans and as Christians.

Having lived through those years in Colorado Springs, the Mecca of popular evangelicalism, I think it would be honest to admit that we had gone through less a time of “stealing” than it was of “surrendering.” When you’re wrapped up in yourself, you become a very small package indeed. I think it’s

significant that *Roe v. Wade* (the Supreme Court decision declaring abortion a right of privacy) was decided within roughly six months of Exlo '72. Were we *really* paying attention to the culture in the 1970s and 1980s? Jesus said that the strong man's house couldn't be plundered unless he was tied up. I suspect that the plundering of "traditional values" happened because we *were* tied up—with our busyness. We were distracted, worshiping at the shrine of Self, in the name of Christ.

The thing that was relinquished during this period was a sense of *mission*. Those we found ourselves "at war" with were the very ones to whom we had been sent. The church came to believe its purpose was to redeem culture; to restore it to an original constitutional condition. In the process, the mandate to be ambassadors of Yahweh, committed to reconciling sinners, fell out of our spiritual backpack. And, if we are honest, the way of life we had come to love because of our preoccupation with ourselves in the 1980s, was what was threatened more than the kingdom of God. In our zeal to heal ourselves, we had become poisoned by distraction. A commitment to issues replaced a burden for individuals. Politics had become more important than people. Leonard Sweet summarized our condition clearly: "The greatest sin of the Church today is not any sin of commission or sin of omission, but the sin of no mission."¹⁷

It should be apparent at this point why the word *missional* is currently on the radar of many thoughtful Christian leaders and the agendas of most Christian organizations.¹⁸ I am deeply encouraged by the rising number of churches planting other churches, and the growing sensitivity to the need to have a reason—a purpose—for existing. And in an America whose spiritual landscape has been reordered by religious diversity and atrophy, learning to think "missionally" might be a good thing. But if it turns out to be the next hot thing for God's people, then being "missional" might be an attempt to fill a void *within*, not responding to a call from without. This is especially plausible if more than just our religious landscape has shifted.

Our Inner Landscape Has Changed

The eighth century BC prophet Isaiah, speaking on behalf of Yahweh, made a jarring pronouncement:

For by people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue the LORD will speak to this people, to whom he has said, "This is rest; give rest to the weary; and this is repose"; yet they would not hear. And the word of the LORD will be to them precept upon precept, precept

upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little, that they may go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken. (Isaiah 28:11-13)

The sobering context of this imaginary dialogue between Israel and Yahweh is one of judgment. Yahweh informs His covenant people here that He will soon address them from *outside* the community of faith. Because of Israel's refusal to be attentive to the Word of Yahweh revealed through their own prophets, He would address them through people who have no regard for either Him or His Word. I do not believe I'm overextending the truth of this passage when I say one thing seems clear: When God resorts to addressing His people from *outside* the covenant community, they are far from Him. When the prophetic voice is missing from God's people, either by refusal to speak or refusal to listen, we are flirting with judgment.

Most of the thoughtful assessment of the deeper shifts occurring around us is coming from researchers and writers in the secular world. There is a comparative silence from within our own ranks. And to top that ante even more, their assessment of what's happening to us collectively is rather monolithic in its volume and consistency. This is important to me because the American expression of Christianity has modeled the culture more than molded it. The "voices in the street" regarding the tectonic shifts in our inner landscape, in describing culture, are therefore indirectly addressing the church. And the "voices" (mind you, these are *not* theologians!) seem to be echoing the same four observations. The first is narcissism.

Mirror Mirror . . .

Social psychologist Jean Twenge observes that the generation that followed the Baby Boomers

were born into a world that already celebrated the individual.

The self-focus that blossomed in the 1970s became mundane and commonplace over the next two decades, and GenMe accepts it like a fish accepts water. If Boomers were making their way in the uncharted world of the self, GenMe has printed step-by-step directions from Yahoo! Maps—and most of the time we don't even need them, since the culture of the self is our hometown. We don't have to join groups or talk of journeys, because we're already there. We don't need to "polish" the self, as [Tom] Wolfe said, because we take for granted that it's already shiny. We don't need to look inward, we already know what we will find. Since we were small children, we were taught to put

ourselves first. That's just the way the world works—why dwell on it? Let's go to the mall.¹⁹

The Christian world (and remnants of the secular educational machine) are still operating under the assumption that self-esteem is a prerequisite to altruism—that we must learn to love ourselves *before* we can truly love others, or be successful in school for that matter.²⁰ In fairness to the origin of this sentiment, it is true that there *is* a longing deep within each of us to understand ourselves. But alas, what we think *of* ourselves is an ocean removed from how we *see* ourselves (the subject of the next chapter).

Regardless, being labeled “narcissistic” (the premise of the book *Generation Me*) is surely no compliment to anyone, believer or unbeliever. And what's worse, the voices from outside the church are *also* informing us of something that is antithetical to the notion of being in touch with God, our perennial boast as Christians.

The second assessment coming from “the voices in the street” has to do with a documented atrophy in a key item on our résumé as humans—the ability to utilize our rationality. Even for Darwinians, humans stand higher than the rest of the air-breathers on the planet by virtue of our ability to employ sustained engagement, both with our minds and our emotions. Sadly, the jury is weighing in that Americans as a rule—which means Christians as well—are becoming increasingly “shallow,” both intellectually and emotionally. The charge of being wrapped up in ourselves was hard enough to face. How much more the claim that the package itself is small, and shrinking.

Nicolas Carr, in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, a riveting and believable analysis of the physiological and emotional cost we are paying to be tethered to our gadgets, believes at the end of the day, we are being diminished as people:

What both enthusiast and skeptic miss is what McLuhan saw: that in the long run a medium's content matters less than the medium itself in influencing how we think and act. As our window into the world, and onto ourselves, a popular medium molds what we see and how we see it—and eventually, if we use it enough, it changes who we are, as individuals and as a society. . . . Media work their magic, or their mischief, on the nervous system itself.²¹

Carr's research is both compelling and sobering. The very idea—that my brain is remapping itself based on the *kind* of activity I engage in while using keyboards and smartphones—is more than eerie; it's frightening. Those laboring

in the world of secondary education have substantiated his findings. Their students talk about the task of reading long narratives using adjectives that are fitting of marathon runners: discomfort, pain, even fatigue.

Maggie Jackson, a very sensitive and thorough journalist, has arrived at similar conclusions about whether we're creating our electronic gadgets, or if they're recreating us in their own image, one that is linear instead of nuanced:

So who are we becoming as we play God to the machine and face the future of sharing our earth with mechanical creatures that we can create, love, and nurture? This question is entangled in another way with the fate of the machine. Put simply, as machines seemingly become more human, we are becoming in many ways more like our machines. Our evolutionary calling cards are shifting quietly from *Homo sapiens* to post-human, with the tick of a pacemaker, whir of a brain implant, rush of an attention-enhancement pill, or the beat from a chip-implanted arm as we passed through security. This physical fusion with the machine empowers us and yet risks narrowing us in ways that may be hard to imagine.²²

The long human journey from an oral culture to a digital culture—with stopping-off points as a print culture and a broadcast culture—has been intoxicating and spectacular. Unfortunately, we seem to have gotten turned around in the process and are retracing our steps, according to some experts, instead of progressing. Among the growing din of voices is Jaron Lanier, father of virtual reality technology and a true “insider” to digital culture. The title of his “manifesto” is itself an abbreviated paradigm: *You Are Not a Gadget*. Lanier, Jackson, Carr, and others are describing the human race in ways that are beyond embarrassing—they are insulting: They speak not of our evolution but our *devolution*.²³ But that's not the bad news; the bad news is they are right.

My contention, however—one that I'll seek to unpack in the rest of this book—is that they haven't got it right *enough*. Things are much worse than they propose because *we* are more than they suppose. It's a good thing to tell people that they are not a “gadget,” but it's not instructive unless you help them see what they *are*. Lanier's lament is genuine:

But the challenge on the table now is unlike previous ones. The new designs on the verge of being locked in, the web 2.0 designs,²⁴ actively demand that people define themselves downward. It's one thing to launch a limited conception of music or time into the contest for what philosophical idea will be locked in. It is another to do that with the very idea of what it is to be a person.²⁵

Sadly, his solution, although reasonable to a postmodern mind, is impotent. In a society that has excluded God from conversations about cultural disintegration (*and* one in which Christians are mostly silent), the burden to create lasting solutions will always rest on the shoulders of the very ones in need. And our refusal to fall into nihilism on one hand, and a blind Nietzschean optimism on the other, seems to leave us orphans in time, hoping in hope itself:

One of our essential hopes in the early days of the digital revolution was that a connected world would create more opportunities for personal advancement for everyone. . . . During the past decade and a half, since the debut of the web, even during the best years of the economic boom times, the middle class in United States declined. Wealth was ever more concentrated. I'm not saying this is the fault of the net, but if we digital technologists are supposed to be providing a cure, we aren't doing it fast enough. If we can't reformulate digital ideals before our appointment with destiny, we will have failed to bring about a better world. Instead we will usher in a dark age in which everything human is devalued.²⁶

I concur that we are indeed becoming “shallow” and “narrow,” and “defining ourselves downward.” I also subscribe to the notion that we have an “appointment with destiny,” and a responsibility to preserve and nurture a sense of nobility among people. But I disagree with what has caused this trajectory for humanity, and what is required for a remedial redirection. There is inherent emotive power in words and phrases like *ideals*, *destiny*, and *a better world*. They are excellent words. Their value, however, hinges forever on the meaning ascribed to Lanier's final adjective: *human*.

But before we get to that, I want to say without equivocation that I am grateful for these voices, and they need to be taken very seriously. They are, I believe, the voice of Yahweh Himself, speaking into a world that has gone further east of Eden. Unfortunately for us, the vast majority of those getting it right in their descriptions of our demise, get it wrong in their prescriptions for correction. So while I applaud and thank them for the thoroughness of their work, I am forced to part ways when it comes to a regimen for recovery.

Reality's Address Has Changed

A third warning coming to us from these “voices in the street” is the step-child of shallowness, and a temptress to narcissism's folly. Some believe we are becoming a race that prefers the virtual to the real—to such an extent that we are on the cusp of renorming what exactly “real” is—*and* that we prefer to “live”

there. Over half a century ago, in his critique *An Essay on Man*, Ernst Cassirer made an astute observation about people and their growing obsession with a visually rich new technology called television:

Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves, man is in a sense constantly dealing with himself.²⁷

Cassirer saw people receding from the world around them, spiraling further inward, fueled in their imaginations by a script not their own. This has a near *déjà vu* sense to it when we listen to modern social critics such as Chris Hedges, whose seminal work, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*, explores the notion that the image-laden “virtual” is the new narcotic:

The more we sever ourselves from a literate, print-based world, a world of complexity and nuance, a world of ideas, for one informed by comforting, reassuring images, fantasies, slogans, celebrities, and a lust for violence, the more we are destined to implode. As the collapse continues and our suffering mounts, we yearn, like World Wrestling Entertainment fans, or those who confuse pornography with love, for the comfort, reassurance, and beauty of illusion. The illusion makes us feel good. It is its own reality. . . . The worse reality becomes, the less a beleaguered population wants to hear about it, and the more it distracts itself with squalid pseudo-events of celebrity breakdowns, gossip, and trivia. . . . More than the divides of race, class, or gender, more than rural or urban, believer or nonbeliever, red state or blue state, our culture has been carved up into radically distinct, unbridgeable, and antagonistic entities that no longer speak the same language and cannot communicate.²⁸

Maggie Jackson, also writing in our own day about the Internet, speaks of this same drift toward narcissistic atrophy of our personhood:

Do we yearn for such a voracious virtual connectivity that others become optional and conversation fades into a lost art? For efficiency's sake, do we split focus so finely that we thrust ourselves in a culture of loose threads? Untethered, have we detached from not only the soil but the sensual richness of our physical selves?²⁹

Later, Jackson warns of the inevitable solitude that is the fruit of trying to be everywhere at once: “Lose the will to focus deeply, to point the compass of our lives firmly in one another's direction, and we become islands.”³⁰ Her counsel,

though profoundly true, is not new. A first-century Roman stoic warned of the inevitable void that is the fruit of seeking to be larger than oneself: "To be everywhere is to be nowhere."³¹

But then again, Seneca didn't have a Twitter feed!

The consensus of the "voices in the street," in conjunction with the fact that nearly one out of ten people on earth is on Facebook, seems to suggest we are in danger of becoming two-dimensional people in love with 3-D movies. And I believe we are. On that lovely note, I'd like to suggest a way forward. The road to the future goes through the past—the ancient past.

But before we begin that journey, we need to spend some time exploring why we seem to be walking in circles, searching for the road itself.