

The Hope
for Renewal
in the Rise
of Our
Post-Christian
Culture

REAPPEARING CHURCH

MARK SAYERS



Chapter 4

From Dissatisfaction to Holy Discontent

*Ripe for Renewal in the Ruin of Meaninglessness
and Unlimited Freedom*

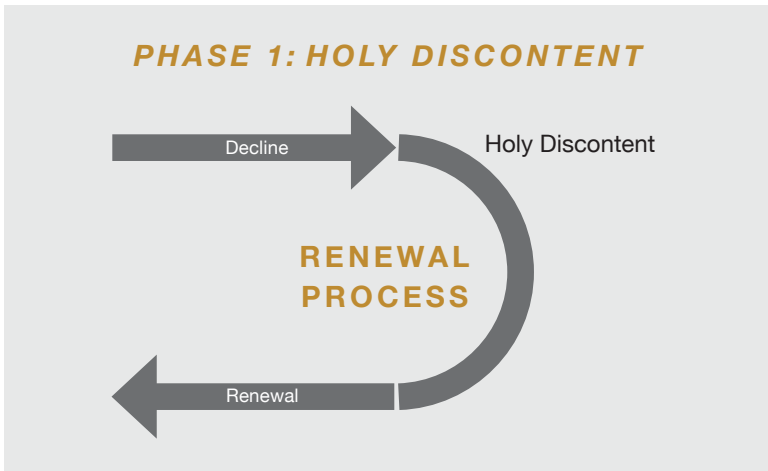
THE FERTILE GROUND OF DISSATISFACTION

At the height of Hollywood's golden age, Howard Hughes was everywhere. Plastered all over the gossip pages, he was the midcentury embodiment of a glamorous celebrity. Someone who drunk lustily from the well of personal freedom that the modern world offered. An Academy Award-winning Hollywood producer, property baron, daredevil pilot, and breaker of land speed records. He was tall, handsome, and smashingly rich. Hughes dated scores of Hollywood's most desired women. He was a walking advertisement for the freedoms of technology, sex, money, and power offered by the modern world.

Hughes's later years would be anything but an expanse of freedom. At some point during his forties, Hughes disappeared into darkened rooms within hotels he owned, becoming a recluse. Blocking out the world, he

retreated into the screen, a movie projector in his room allowing him to endlessly binge on his favorite films while he filled his body with codeine. A telephone line, his only communication with the outside world. The man who embodied the freedom and movement of the modern world, now paralyzed by the screen. Oppressed and imprisoned by his appetites, pleasure and power gave way to paranoia and suffocating anxiety.

Hughes is a symbolic figure. With the first half of his life, he showcased the promise of our unlimited freedom, but in the second half of his life, he became a different kind of pioneer, showing us the destination of unlimited freedom. His imprisonment in front of the glow of the screen, anxiety his only companion, his spiritual vacuum soothed by opioids, now reads as descriptive of the kind of excesses the media worries have become all too prevalent in contemporary culture. It shows us the discontent that grows from unlimited freedom.



As the gap between what our culture promises and what it delivers grows wider, its failures create openings for the gospel. Idols are shown for what they are—new potentials open up for God to again move.

George Hunter notes that it is not only people in transitions who are receptive to the gospel,¹ but also those experiencing a sense of dissatisfaction with the outcome of their lives. Transition and dissatisfaction often are companions. James Burns saw the period before a renewal as a time of growing dissatisfaction and discontent.²

This sense of growing dissatisfaction in our time is growing in proportion to the promises of our Western consumerist culture, which has promised to deliver us both social and personal utopia. Previous ages understood that happiness and lasting pleasure might be elusive, yet we now inhabit a media-drenched landscape in which endless promises of improvement accompany us throughout our lives. These promises are a post-Christian vision of personal renewal. Emptied of the transcendent, we now reach for reduced visions of the good life, from the quest for physical health to the quest for safety and emotional security in an increasingly risky world.

POST-CHRISTIAN PERSONAL RENEWAL

Psychologist Dan P. McAdams notes that the Christian shape of individual redemption has remained, but its content has been replaced with secular elements.³ This secular salvation is found now in what Philip Cushman described as “the lifestyle solution,” which was the answer to the problem of “the empty self.”⁴ Modern culture, relentlessly undermining foundations of meaning, creates an inner emptiness, an inner life in constant need of repair, and salvation. The elements of the post-Christian personal renewal are as follows:

- 1) *We are born innocent, happy, and whole. Our inner child or inner self is good.*
- 2) *Families, bad experiences, binding commitments, externally given identities, cultural, traditional, and religious restrictions make us unhappy, giving us low self-esteem.*

- 3) *Through escaping from these binding commitments, externally given identities, traditions, and religious restrictions, we discover our inner self, which is good and can guide us.*
- 4) *Through finding a missing element such as a soulmate, meaningful career, enjoyable experiences, material things, or through exercising our self-expression, our lives can be filled with pleasure and meaning.*

Our consumer-shaped culture then offers us endless promises to fill our “empty selves,” which it creates in the first place.

**Contemporary consumer culture offers medicine
to cure the diseases it creates.**

Reflecting on this culture of promise, anthropologist Thomas De Zengotita warns that “there is no going back to reality.” Social media and emerging technologies have made this place immersive, therefore, “We have been consigned to a new plane of being . . . a place where everything is addressed to us, everything is for us, and nothing is beyond us anymore.”⁵ This is the culture of superabundance, which doesn’t simply promise a life of comfort and opportunity but also offers a never-ending parade of consumer goods and experiences. Older forms of consumerism required the individual to travel to stores or malls in search of satisfaction. This next stage of intensified consumerism comes to us, in the form of home delivery, downloads, and streaming, all increasing the strength of our individualism.

**We cannot escape from the promise that we can have it all.
We also cannot escape from the truth that we can’t have it all.**

THE PROMISES OF PERSONAL RENEWAL ARE FALLING FLAT

The promises of our cultural and political elites that things will get better are falling flat. We have endless opportunities to pursue pleasure and our desires, yet so many of us are miserable and anxious. We can traverse geography, time, and space, yet loneliness is growing. Silicon Valley's promises that a world connected by social media will be a better, more tolerant world now look ridiculous. The assurances that a globalized world will be a fairer, more peaceful and prosperous place seem shaky. These failed promises are fuelling a growing sense of dissatisfaction, a desire to see things change, a hunger for a vision of personal and social life in which humans flourish.

A FLOURISHING SYSTEM

In Psalm 1 we are given an image of what human flourishing looks like:

*Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.*

The psalm offers us a model of what faithful and fruitful living looks like. Michael Wilcock notes that the vision it paints of the good life is a challenge to “the whole range of modern-isms, from liberalism to post-modernism, which shy away from the notion of objective

truth and error, right and wrong. . . . It challenges the individual to repeated choices between clearly defined ways of believing and acting.”⁶ Such a vision of the good life contrasts with the fuzzy drift toward utopia we see in the secularist-progressive myth, instead offering us a definitive model in which we are all invited to live.

**The use of a model from the natural world—a tree planted
by water, bearing fruit in season—reveals to us a definitive
and binding way to live.**

There is no way for any human or society to truly and wholly flourish without following this model.

The final verse of the psalm also reminds us that those who do not follow this model will find themselves and their endeavors leading to destruction. We are given in this psalm a path to flourishing that contains a vital truth about the world. That we live in systems, and our dissatisfaction or, indeed, satisfaction in life flows from the health of the systems in which we live in. A gnawing sense of resentment and discontent, and an accompanying failure to flourish, is a sure sign the system of Western culture is failing and ill.

WE LIVE IN SYSTEMS

Regarding Christ’s role in creation, Paul writes to the Colossians, “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him” (Col. 1:15–16). The Greek word used to describe the reality that all things have their being in Him is *synhesteken*, from which we get our English word *system*. As theologian Hendrick Berkhof notes, this means that Christ is the system that holds the universe and all of creation together.⁷ Two crucial truths come into view. First, that everything exists in an interconnected system, and second, that Christ is at the center of that system.

We can describe our culture as a vast, mysterious force. We try to understand its history and its construction, to see why it is the way it is, and predict where it could move next.

**A better lens with which to understand our culture,
and the role of revival and renewal in human history,
is to realize that we live in a system.**

Understanding our culture as a system is liberating; not only does it help us grasp its shape, but also its effectiveness. The concept of systems can initially seem complicated, but in reality, it is a simple idea that we intuitively understand because we spend our lives living in, creating, and working with systems. Donella H. Meadows defines a system as “an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something.”⁸ The society we live in, both local and global, is a system.

Western culture, and the values it has exported across the globe, has been designed to achieve a level of individual and corporate human happiness, flourishing, peace, and prosperity.

Understanding our culture as a system with a function aids us in seeing how it is failing at achieving its goal, delivering bad results that drive our sense of dissatisfaction.

A system contains various parts, which are interconnected. Systems can include:

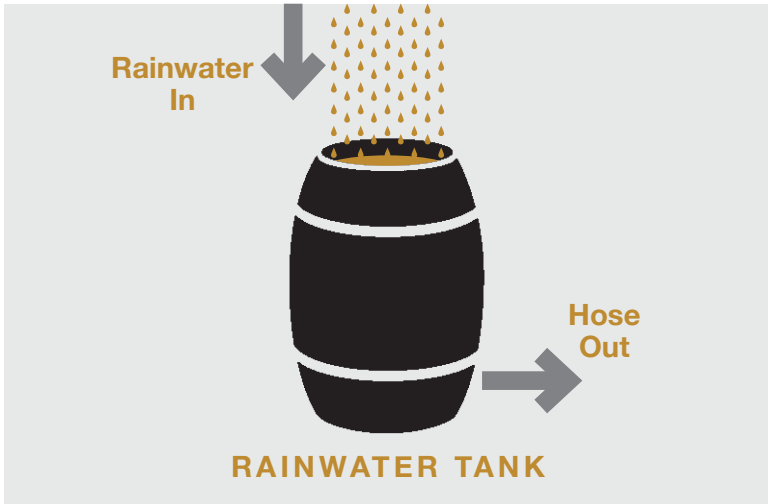
INPUTS: What is put into the system.

RESERVES: What is stored in the system.

OUTPUTS: What comes out of the system.

CONNECTIONS: The relationships between elements of the system.

An example of a simple system is the rainwater tank in my backyard. It contains an *input*—the rainwater that falls from my roof into the tank. The tank itself is the *reserve*, which can be filled, emptied, or can overflow. The garden hose connected to the tank with which I water my garden is the *output*. The tank is connected to the ecosystem of my garden when I water my plants; I am the *connection*.



Now familiar with the basics of a system, we can examine Psalm 1 as a system. The input is God’s presence. By delighting in God’s presence through His way and His words, health flows into our system. For us as individuals and communities, health will come through God’s presence, the revelation of His closeness through His Word, and the wisdom it provides. Most trees are reliant on the vagaries of rainfall, yet here we have a tree by a river, illustrating that God is an ever-present and unwavering input, willing to offer us health and flourishing.

Health flows into our systems through God’s presence.

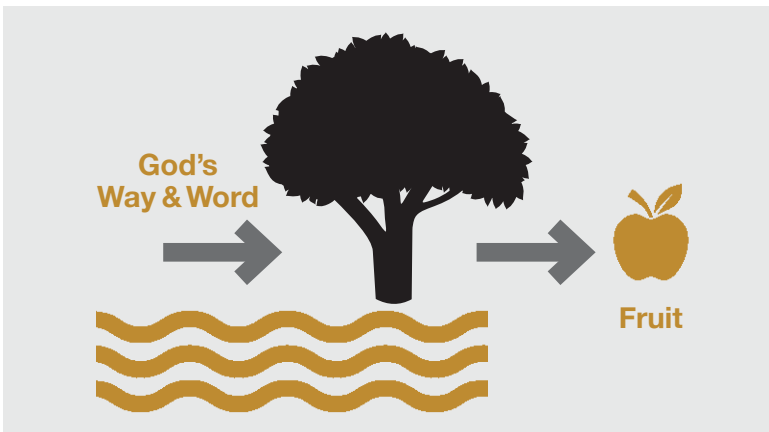
The biblical word for peace in Hebrew is *shalom*. *Shalom* means so much more than merely an absence of war. It also means completeness. “Shalom refers to something that’s complex with lots of pieces that’s in a state of completeness, wholeness,” says Tim Mackie.⁹

**God wants to bring shalom to our systems, making them
complete, whole, and holy.**

Jesus builds on the image of a system filled with shalom. Christ locates this source of fruitfulness in Himself, explicitly telling His followers, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Fruit is the result of having God as our input. It’s the output that feeds and nourishes others, contributing to the health of a bigger system. For we don’t exist as unconnected individuals; we are connected to a more extensive system.

KEY RENEWAL PRINCIPLE

**The spiritual fruit that our lives produce is part of God’s plan
to renew the system we know as the world.**



DESTRUCTIVE INPUTS

Psalm 1 also offers us another illustration, showing us what a toxic and destructive system looks like—a system into which inputs other than God’s presence flow. Sin, wickedness, and mockery are used to describe human behaviors and attitudes of the heart that result from choosing to walk away from God’s presence in rebellion.

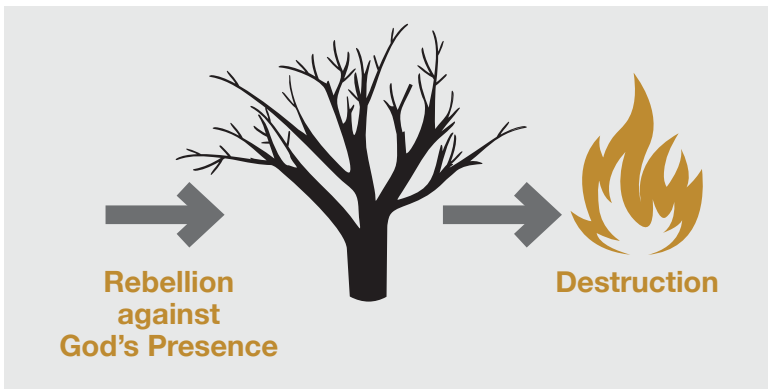
Not so the wicked!

*They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.*

*Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

*For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

The person, community, or culture that chooses to “walk in step with the wicked” connects themselves to the input of these ungodly influences, cutting themselves off from the influence of God, and allowing toxicity to flow into their system. The system becomes toxic; the tree no longer flourishes, but dries, dies, becoming “chaff.” With such a harmful contagion in its system, the results are devastating. The output is destruction, setting fire to the broader system.



WESTERN CULTURE HAS BECOME AN ANTI-RENEWAL SYSTEM

Cultures, individuals, and organizations have only three options—decline, stagnation, or renewal. The growing sense of dissatisfaction about the direction of Western civilization across the board is a signal that our system has become toxic. When we look at Western living standards, levels of peace, prosperity, and development, this can seem a strange outcome. The hardware of the West—our roads, our hospitals, our safety initiatives, our institutions—is good hardware, which creates the possibility of living lives of flourishing. Yet we are running infected software in our system—a vision of individual life, freedom, and happiness that undermines the benefits of our hardware.

Lifestyles in the West now trend toward immaturity, paralysis, and isolation. At a personal level, the Western life script creates an anti-renewal system. Its inner contradictions and contagions drive us away from flourishing and instead push us into decline.

Of course, some outliers are able to flourish within the West personally—from those who refuse to engage with new technologies, or who possess large reserves of personal will or discipline—yet these people do so by ignoring the powerful formational tools operating across the social and personal environment. Such individuals are definitely the minority, for the system is increasingly rigged against us. To understand this process, let's examine one aspect of the West's inner contradictions to discover how it sets us up to fail. Let's see how this works with our concepts of freedom and individualism.

FREEDOM AT THE EXPENSE OF MEANING

The West is based on a belief that as individuals are given freedom, we will flourish. There is truth in this idea, for it grew at a time in history when most people lived under controlling forms of social,

political, and religious control. Humans are happy when we are free, but we also need other things to flourish, such as meaning and deep relational connections. Humans need to know that what we are doing counts, that there is a more significant purpose to our lives, that our decisions and direction matter.

We need reserves in our lives of freedom, relationships, and meaning. These reserves need to be balanced with each other, as they are systematically connected in our lives.

Too much relationality and our individualism may be compromised. The individual who is unable to make any personal choices, to have individual thoughts, or to express a differing opinion, will find that the quality of their life suffers. The West maximizes concepts of freedom. Reacting to the rise of totalitarian regimes like Nazism and Communism in the twentieth century, one of the great fears of the West was the re-emergence of a culture that elevates the rights of the group and enforced codes of meaning upon others at the expense of their individual freedom.

HOW THE LEFT AND RIGHT WORK TOGETHER TO UNDERMINE US

Those on the political right pushed forward with this project of freedom, seeing salvation in the expansion of individual rights, looking to free markets unleashed from government control and restraints. Many on the political left were rightly concerned, seeing this trajectory as creating a kind of mutant hyper-capitalism, mammon on steroids, in which the unbridled pursuit of profit undermined community, relationships, and cultures.

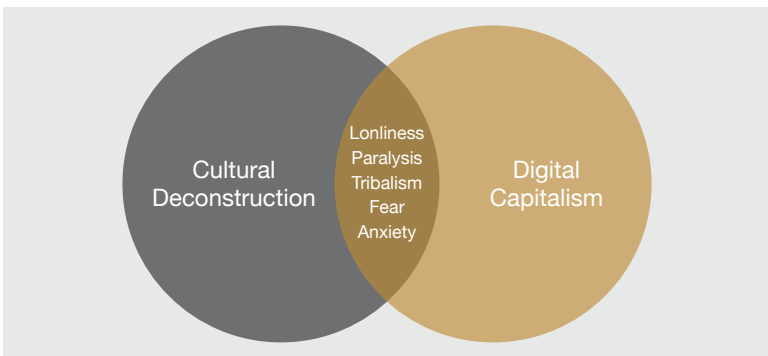
The left was engaged in their own project of expanding freedom, seeing the enemy of freedom in the traditions, structures, and inherited wisdom of the West. Viewing the entire structure of the West as venomously oppressive, they continued their great project of deconstructing

preexisting norms such as family, sexuality, gender, language, and culture, the foundational containers in which people found place and meaning. Many on the right were appalled as this project gained pace, seeing little nuance between its approach of rooting out genuine oppression and injustice and what seemed like an indiscriminate carpet bombing of the West's achievements and an endless search to discover or even create new victims and sources of oppression.

In the commotion of the culture war, with eyes fixed on the enemy across the political and cultural divide, what both sides failed to recognize was that for all their differences, they were both working toward the same project.

Both the contemporary left and right seek to expand personal freedom as the solution to the human condition.

The hyper-mutant capitalism and the project of cultural deconstruction work together, pushing the individual into increasing atomization and meaninglessness. Both see the height of human good as the experience of pleasure and positive feelings. Hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure, becomes foundational to our vision of the good life. The individual offered unparalleled consumer choice, the ability to construct an identity, to grasp a bold new future of freedom and opportunity through accelerating technology.



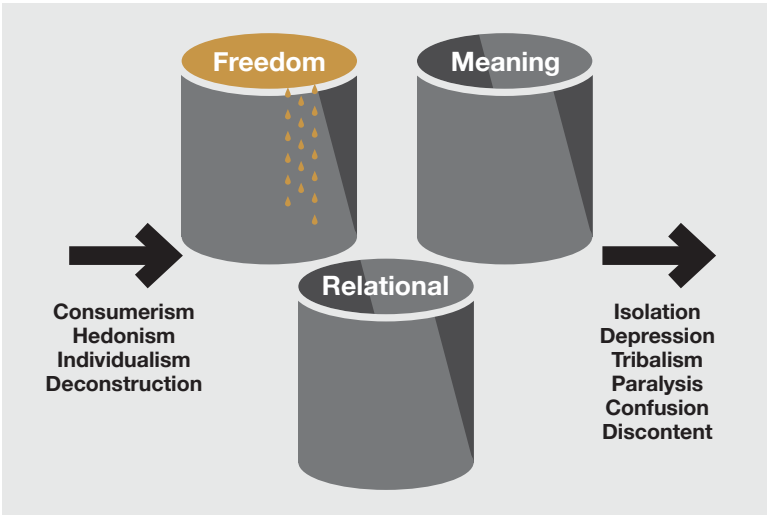
This bold new future ended up looking very different than what we imagined. Instead of the free future that radical individualism promised, our lives became radically reshaped by a combination of technology and consumerism. The very fabric of our habits, thoughts, and behaviors shaped by large corporations and tech giants, who use methods of control that dictators of the past could only dream of.

New technology connects us across time and space, but only in loose ways, offering a tempting alternative to enflashed forms of human connection. Our new connectivity accelerates the atomization and social isolation already within the system. With cultural forms, traditions, and received wisdom deconstructed, there are few places to find meaning. Hedonism offers countless pleasures but cannot produce meaning.

We are drowning in freedoms but thirsting for meaning.

The individual receives constant messaging from the culture that to be happy and content we need increase our input of freedom. Releasing more freedom into our already overflowing tank of freedom would not solve the problems created in our system by our low reserves of meaning and the relational. Just buying more stuff and consuming more experiences cannot fill these gaps. Our tanks of freedom are overflowing, bursting at the seams, yet our tanks of meaning and the relational are dry and empty.

The output of such a lopsided system is isolation and an increasing mental health crisis of escalating levels of depression and anxiety. The expansion of choice anxiety and information overload has created an endless sense of confusion and lostness, leading many to recoil from making any forward steps, in fear of making the wrong decision. For many, especially in emerging generations, a sense of paralysis has become the norm.



Our Western system is founded on a reading of humans as free individuals who would become happy and content with more freedom.

We have forgotten the wisdom that to find happiness and fulfillment, we sometimes need to reduce our freedom to gain meaning and relationships.

THE RETURN OF TRIBALISM

“When systems do change, they tend to do so relatively rapidly and often quite drastically,” notes Joseph O’Connor and Ian McDermott, for “if you put a system under enough pressure for long enough, it can suddenly collapse.”¹⁰ With such pressures building up in the Western system, tribalism has returned across our culture both in the identity politics of the left and the return to nationalism on the right. This dynamic only makes our cultural crisis worse, creating constant frictions, outrages, and clashes in our culture, pushing us further into isolation or digital silos of like-minded people.

We become intimately aware of everyone's feelings, concerned about offending someone's shifting emotional landscape. Ambient anxiety accompanies this social dynamic, made worse by constant technological and cultural change.

OUR PERSONAL FAILINGS UNDERMINE OUR CULTURE'S HEALTH

The failing individual system of the West undermines the larger social system of the West, driving the individual toward emotional immaturity and leading the broader culture into decline. The need for renewal becomes acute as the culture begins to regress at an emotional level. Its internal dynamics work against the potential of creating influencers, cultures, and leaders who can lead it out of its descent. As the German philosopher Byung Chul-Han observes, in our emotionally regressing society, “people are turning their aggression against themselves,” noting that those who wish for change “are not inclined to revolution so much as depression.”¹¹ So often those who wish for change turn on themselves rather than turning around the communities they are part of. To be effective agents of change, we must understand why this is so.

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