

gospel, many of its children have left, and its stark silhouette casts a ghostly shadow which Christians from earlier eras would be unlikely to recognize. As David Kinnaman so succinctly puts it, "The culture war is over. We lost."

As a result of changing times, many of the great families of Europe were forced to sell their family treasures and heirlooms out of their run-down castles, just so they could live. There are many in the church who have been willing to give up on the faith of the church, a jot here and a tittle there, so as to reconcile Christian teaching with contemporary culture and its changing interests and demands. Without knowing it such fire sale sell-offs were not simply robbing the fringe ornaments from the church's existence, but sapping its very life force.

The old doctrines of the church triumphant, the church militant, and the church glorious are a far-cry from the profile of the Western church today. Apart from a few notable exceptions, churches are smaller, congregations older, and their coffers less well-resourced. Frequently they are less well-taught, and less integrated with their surroundings communities. They are also likely to be less able to find meaningful points of engagement between their Jesus-centred reason-for-being in the world and the life, interests, thoughts and activities of post-Christian, post-secular, and post-modern men and women, youth, boys and girls. What has the church become?

So today, metaphorically and spiritually – on the place where the dead tree once stood, on the place where the Christian church once existed, I prayerfully kneel in the earth to plant a sapling. Whether that sapling will survive the cultural glacier-shifts currently unfolding in our world; whether it will grow to be used like Napoleon's saplings planted with the intention of repairing his fleet of ships; or whether it will grow to form an entirely new church which is more able to reflect the character and calling of Christ – I do not know. But I do know that the church – despite its frailties and failings – is a central part of Christ's redemptive purposes on the earth. Christ loved the church and gave himself for her (Ephesians 5:25); and his intent was that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God would be made known, according to his eternal purposes in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:10-11).

I also make my confession that I, like many others who have pledged themselves to Christ to "feed my sheep" and to care for his church, am guilty of either worshipping the church (which is idolatry), or talking-down and destroying the church (1 Corinthians 3:17) (which is dangerous). I repent of my sin and remember that the church is not separate from me, but *I am the church* in my prayer, service, life, and love for Christ and others. The future of the *ekklesia* called-out-church is not in the hands of men with chainsaws, or councils of bishops, or the new generation rising; the future of the church is in my hands and your hands. Lord, help!

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