

In Days of Darkness

In DAYS *of*
DARKNESS

A Manual for Ordinary Christians
Facing Unusual Times

ANDY COLEMAN



NASHVILLE

NEW YORK • LONDON • MELBOURNE • VANCOUVER

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A Manual for Ordinary Christians Facing Unusual Times

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ISBN 9781636985732 paperback

ISBN 9781636985749 ebook

Library of Congress Control Number:
2024946302

Cover & Interior Design by:

Christopher Kirk

www.GFSstudio.com



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As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

Ezekiel 34:12

Preface



Writing this book was not easy. I wanted to provide a simple manual for everyday Christians who sensed troubles ahead. Their eyes and ears—and maybe even their hearts—alerted them that all was not well. But they didn’t know how to make sense of things, let alone discern what they could do about it. Maybe this describes you. You are sincere in your faith but behind the power curve when it comes to synthesizing your faith and circumstances. You are not alone. Making heads or tails of the madness engulfing societies around the globe is tough.

This is the itch I hoped to scratch in writing this book. But as I said, it was not easy. The project quickly ballooned into hundreds of pages of content. I know what it is like to be a new believer, painfully aware of how much I don’t know. But God also gave me unique opportunities to grow spiritually and gain key insights into the realm of persecuted Christianity. There was so much to share. But the larger this book swelled, the more difficult it would be for busy believers to read. Time is of the essence. You need a quick primer, not a textbook. Something to help you quickly gain ground spiritually and in your understanding of what’s in play.

The whittled-down book you hold in your hands is all that remains after the chopping block. My challenge to you is this: strap in. Commit to fin-

ishing this. When you're done, you will have a simple but sturdy baseline for bracing up under pressure. That is at least my prayer. Our foundation is Christ. This context merely helps us walk with him. May God bless you and guide you.

Soli Deo Gloria.

Introduction



This book was almost titled something different. It was going to be called *Blood Trails*, a far scarier construction of words. My goal then and now was not to alarm you or sensationalize our circumstances. Instead, my goal was (and is) to encourage and enlighten you. That's one reason I abandoned the former title. But even though it was discarded, the term *blood trails* was fitting for a few reasons. Ones that warrant a brief mention as we begin.

The idea of blood trails admittedly conjures up sobering thoughts. This is appropriate. Christians around the globe sense a chill in the air. The cultural grounds they long recognized have shifted under their feet. A sense of foreboding hangs heavy. They feel unprepared for the mounting pressures around them. And they are—unprepared. When Christians express fear that they and their families will soon taste persecution, they are sometimes met by snickers and chuckles. This is particularly true in the West. Some who roll their eyes are fellow believers. They dismiss these fears as figments of the imagination. Scoffers insist the frog in the pot is wrong; the water is simply warm, not simmering to a boil.

Some dismiss concerns by highlighting how weak the Church already is. There is little left alive to persecute. One commentator played along, imagining a scenario where a ship of barbarians arrived on the shores of

America, hell-bent on finding Christians to martyr. The story is as comedic as it is tragic. The barbarians delight to learn how many people self-identify as Christians but then realize how few hold to historic Christian beliefs. They wander the streets dismayed. They stumble upon churches, but the pastors and members flounder. They either mirror the world or outdo the barbarians in ridiculing the Church. The milk toast Christianity—spiced with seeker-sensitive strategies, relativism, and outright paganism—offers the barbarians nothing in which to sink their battleaxes. Crushed, the heathens slouch back to their ships and sail away, dejected.

This critique of the modern Church is fair. Much of Christendom today is soft and sickly. The Church has been broadly comfortable and content to list along for decades. Why would darkness tremble? A church striving to be like the world has nothing to offer the world. At the same time, your fears about rising pressures against Christians remain valid. You are not imagining things. No doubt you picked up this book looking for help. That is precisely what I aim to do. And here is a little spoiler: no one will be laughing about the Church when everyday Christians like you and me better understand our faith, our circumstances, and the God who redeems the broken. When ordinary Christians embrace their identity in Christ and renounce the world's applause, chilly air becomes charged.

If simple Christians, like you and me, take baby steps in obedience to Christ's commands, the script will flip. The Church will suddenly taste different. We'll be salty and distinct from the world. This contrast in faithful obedience will catch the attention of our neighbors sleepwalking through life. We'll have something to offer a dying world. And something to oppose. The fictional barbarians will not sulk in their ships for want of authentic Christian presence, and the Body of Christ will pose a legitimate threat. When everyday Christians shake off the fog of comfort and take clear-eyed steps of faithful action, the world will notice.

We have a long way to go. Many Christians today would sadly nod along and agree with the parody of barbarians having nothing of genuine

faith to skewer. They shrug their shoulders and admit they have little to offer. They don't know what to do themselves, let alone what to tell their kids. Too many believers feel clueless and hopelessly outgunned by the chaos cratering our communities. Cheer up. This book is for you. There is incredible hope right before you. I know this because I know what the world looks like through your eyes. And God tenderly walked me through the shadowy darkness and grew me through unusual opportunities. I believe the insights I found on this path can help you in your walk.

I did not come to a saving faith in Christ until I was a young adult, and when I did, I was biblically illiterate. I knew nothing. But over time, God placed me in the paths of others who disciplined me. Importantly, I also found myself overseas with persecuted Christians. Lots of them. As the years passed, I found myself in full-time ministry to Christians across North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Those are hard lands for Christians. The experiences of those Christians who counted the cost and overcame—they offer lessons for you and me to draw on. These basic insights can provide you with valuable context to help you find your feet.

Before my ministry in the Middle East, I served in the military. I knew little about the Armed Forces when I first entered, just as I knew little about faith and missions when I became a believer. Looking back, spinning up new military recruits looks a lot like what the Church needs to do to ramp up ordinary Christians into their spiritual roles.¹ We are, after all, in a spiritual war. New cadets entering the United States Air Force Academy (where yours truly attended) do not have a pleasant initial experience. Those cadets face many challenges and trials in their first year, but they also learn in leaps and bounds.

Amid the training chaos, new cadets can be seen studying a small book of basic military information. It contains rudimentary details, such as ranks, leadership quotes, historical dates, and the principles of war. Cadets keep this little book on them at all times, ready to pull out and review it if there is ever a free minute. At the Air Force Academy, this pocket-sized text is called *Contrails*. It is a fitting name. *Contrails*, short for condensation

trails, are the line-shaped clouds you see in the sky left behind by airplanes. These streaks of ice crystals are produced by hot aircraft engine exhaust hitting frigid atmospheric reality. They paint paths in the sky, demarcating where planes have flown and hinting at where they are going.

Perhaps you can see why I originally chose the title *Blood Trails*, in honor of *Contrails*. In the same way, this book provides basic information to everyday Christians who need to make sense of the chaos around them. This work will point to how the Church has viewed and handled persecution in the past, identify ways believers can stand today, and hint at what Christians can expect tomorrow. The material presented is also borne of the knowledge and experiences—sometimes dipped in their shed blood—of Christians who have walked the difficult paths before us. As *Contrails* helped to spin up young initiates into military life, *In Days of Darkness* will do the same for Christians who sense they need to grow in faith and prepare for spiritual warfare. Many biblical Christians have been caught flat-footed by the chaos engulfing them and the prospect of persecution. Like stammering, scared cadets entering basic training, these Christians feel blind-sided, confused, and unable to tell up from down. This book will help readers draw order from chaos.

As already mentioned, the term *blood trails* also evoked a mental image of following the crimson footsteps of believers who suffered for righteousness's sake. But in another sense, it brings to mind hunting (at least for my peeps in America's heartland). Hunters follow blood trails—drops of blood left by injured game—to find an injured animal that has fled. While your mind may naturally drift to comparing Christians to wild game fleeing for their lives, let me stop you there. Yes, Christians under persecution can be considered prey. But God has changed the narrative, using the weak to shame the strong and display His glory. Christians faced with an impending crisis should pause and consider how they are, in fact, to be the hunters. Again, Christians are engaged in a spiritual war. Wars include defensive maneuvers. But they also require offensives.

To borrow from another military example, cadets must complete a combat survival course during their military training. Over several weeks, they dabble in the dark arts of staying alive in hostile conditions with little support. A powerful tool for overcoming these odds is counterintuitive: cadets adopt a hunter mindset. Simulating the role of a downed airman in enemy territory, cadets evade scores of instructors pretending to be enemy forces looking for them. The cadets struggle to live off the land, remain undetected, and move out of harm's way and toward friendlier pastures. In every sense, they are being hunted. It is a natural response to feel like prey. But cadets are taught to reject this temptation. They instead embrace the role of the fox, not the hare.

Granted, the cadet may be hiding from a platoon of heavily armed infantry. Yes, the cadet's clothing may be wet and chilled. And yes, the cadet may have nothing at their disposal apart from a knife and some parachute cord. Sounds like a rotten setup. But the cadet is a trained hunter. Adopting a hunter mindset prompts you to take the fight to those pursuing you while taking stock of all the resources at your disposal. Hunters consider themselves on offense, not relegating that role to the hostile forces pressing upon them.

By flipping this switch, you realize you have more in your favor than you imagined. Your focus shifts from all your problems to all your opportunities. An abundance mindset kicks in, replacing a scarcity mindset. In this case, the cadet can take measures to shore up their body temperature, such as moving whenever possible. They are armed with trees and tall grass to conceal their movements. The enemy may not know the cadet's location, but the cadet may be watching their every move. The cadet reminds himself that he has an incredible brain, and with a few tricks he's learned, he can throw off his pursuers.

In the same way, Christians must toggle their mindset. You are the hunter, not the prey. The Kingdom of Christ is taking ground, not paralyzed into inaction. Christians are reminded they are hunters in the spiritual

realm. We have the Word—the Bible, sharper than any two-edged sword. We are backed by the most powerful force, not just on the planet but across the entire universe: the triune God, Creator of heaven and earth. We have direct access to the one true God in the form of prayer, which we are invited to use daily as a war-time walkie-talkie. Born again believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of the one true God, drawing from His power and counsel. He is with us always. And we belong to a massive family—the Church, a spiritual family that spans borders and tribes and numbers in the millions.

Adopting a hunter mindset becomes easier when we take fresh stock of our myriad spiritual blessings. When we add in all the other ways that God has resourced His Church—in the form of opportunities, influence, finances, technology, and knowledge—the fears we harbored just moments before melt away. Our situation is placed in a better context. Threats become framed by spiritual realities and become less intimidating. When Arnold Schwarzenegger’s character finally got a belly full of running away from the Predator (in the film aptly named *Predator*), he put on a hunter mindset and took the fight to the monster tracking him, an alien that appeared invincible. The soldier realized he was far more capable and better equipped than he imagined. (He also realized the alien had vulnerabilities that could be exploited.) And he went to war, took rounds, but prevailed.²

Christians are called to do the same in this darkening season. The degrading persecution climate actually blesses Christians by reminding us of the spiritual war that has always raged around us. Many of us missed it previously. We were lulled into sleepy inaction by comfort, cultural applause, and living our best life now. But in His severe mercy, God is stripping away the spiritual sedatives. We are not called to limply observe developments from the sidelines or bury our heads in the sand. We are called to engage and inflict serious damage on our serious enemy. We may take rounds, but we are also to return fire—and advance.

In Days of Darkness will provide you with quick takes on various aspects of our faith, Christian history, and the insights arising from con-

texts where persecution is the norm. This work is merely an introduction and is by no means exhaustive. My prayer is that it helps believers find their feet, get their bearings, and encourages them on the adventure that is their life's mission.

For any of this to make sense, the Bible must be your northern star. In the Bible, we read of a group of learners called the Bereans (Acts 17:10–11). They listened intently to the teachings of Paul when he shared the Gospel. They paid attention, but they also checked all that Paul taught against Scripture. You must do the same. Verify what I share against the benchmark of Scripture. For while Scripture is free from error, yours truly is not.

As you evaluate and apply the contents of this book, recognize the times in which you live. Gone are the days when it was culturally advantageous to be a Christian. Going to church for some was once seen as a good opportunity to network, or sell more cars, or garner favor in the local press. With few exceptions, this is no longer true anywhere on Earth. Publicly identifying as a Christian today will increasingly place you in a cultural crosshair rather than on a pedestal. And hold on to your hat if you speak up for biblical principles in public. The blowback will be fierce. Many Christians today stand stunned and blinking, shocked by the rapid cultural collapse around them. Perplexed, they know not how to respond, how to prepare, or how to shepherd their families. The culture before them is alien, angry, and arid.

Fortunately, some recognize this terrain and can help you navigate it. Let us borrow from them and shore up our capacity to think and act. When I entered boot camp, the advice I received from current soldiers and veterans helped immensely. I had a better idea of what to expect. This made a huge difference when I later felt overwhelmed and confused. I reminded myself that the yelling and harsh treatment were to be expected, but I could cope, knowing they, too, would end. In the same way, *In Days of Darkness* will help you better shape your expectations. Unmet expectations breed frustra-

tion. Frustration, in turn, prompts us to *react* poorly to our circumstances, rather than *respond* in wisdom. Let us learn and grow together, and remind ourselves that our heavenly hope lies ever before us.

A few final comments. You will encounter some redundancy in the pages that follow. I will mention stories or concepts at different points. Part of that is simply because I have room to grow as a writer. Part of that, however, is also intentional. By repeating key themes at different stages, they are reinforced and, hopefully, better retained by you. In my life, I sometimes need a couple of passes before a concept fully sinks into my skull. There are also times when the same story or concept touches on different factors, which warrant further examination. Bottom line: don't get frustrated if you see some details more than once.

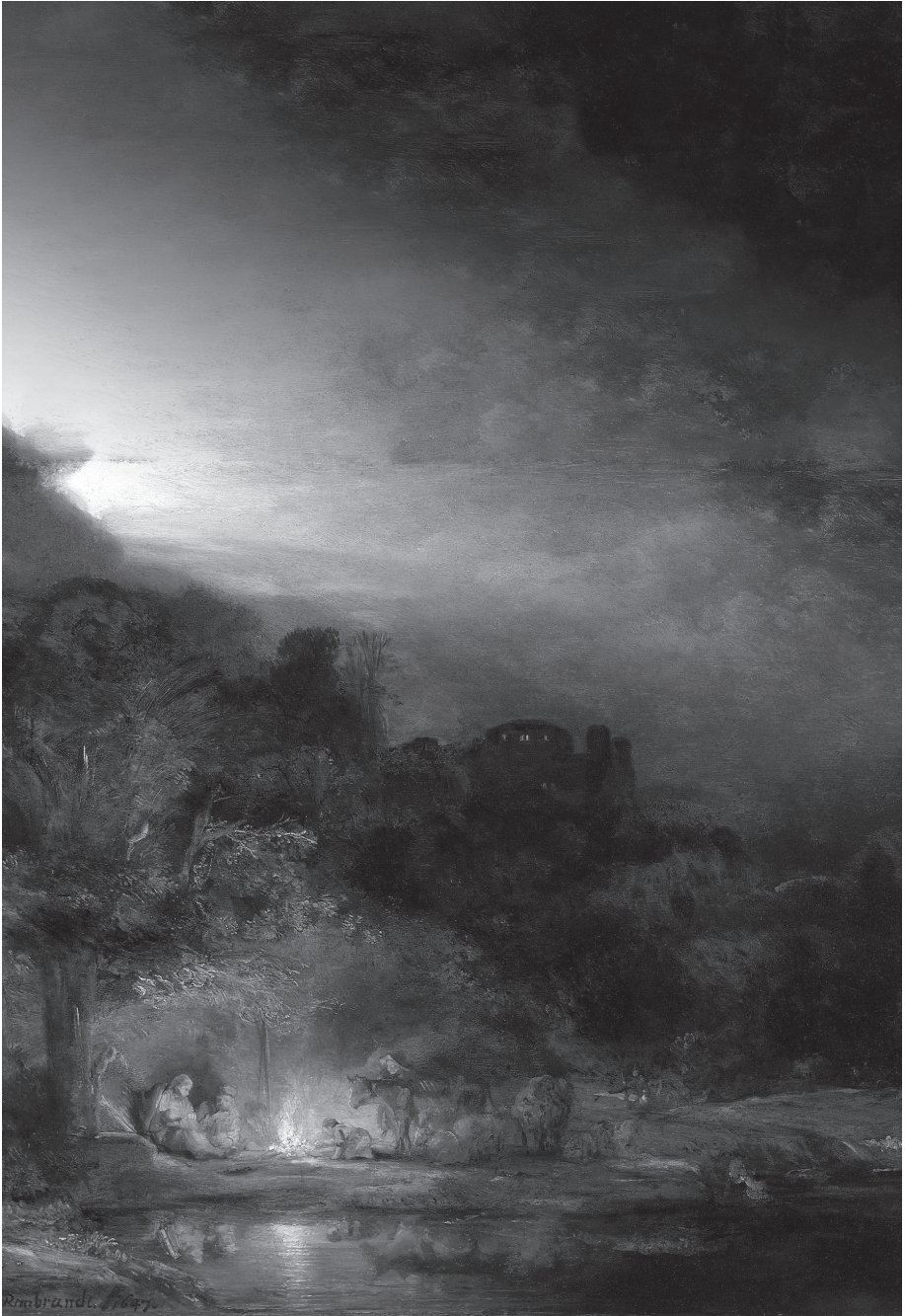
Some of the material is also intended to help new believers and those taking their faith seriously for the first time. Hopefully, all will find the lessons and examples helpful. Even if you are a mature Christian, well-grounded in history, theology, and culture, I suspect you will be blessed by different parts of this book. At a minimum, this material should allow even the spiritually mature to recognize areas where new believers in their midst likely need help and encouragement.

As you can see, the term *blood trails* carried a lot of relevance for the themes teased out in this book. But alas, that title was kiboshed. As already pointed out, one reason was to avoid shocking you or sensationalizing things. That is not my goal, and there are already enough shock jocks out there. Another reason: the material I present is not formulaic. This is not a guidebook in the truest sense. I do not have everything figured out and you will not “fully arrive” by implementing any quick fixes.

Instead, what I provide is more akin to context than a recipe. Hints and tips, some welcome light shed along the shadowy trail you find yourself on. These are insights borne from those more familiar with spiritual darkness. In a sense, your persecuted family—from both other cultures today and prior ages—offer you the soft glow of candles in the night. It's as if they've

jumped down into the murky hole you feel trapped in, showing you paths previously hidden. These embers in the dark provide you with light trails to navigate the shadows that once seemed impenetrable.

May *In Days of Darkness* help you prepare for what is coming or what already confronts you. Armed with context, insight, and a dash of encouragement, may we prepare ourselves, our families, and our fellowships for the spiritual war around us. It's time to see the world through the eyes of a spiritual hunter and the truth of Scripture. Lord of Heaven and earth, may you work through our lives, our circumstances, and the pages of this book to glorify yourself and purify your Church.





Part One:

The Basics

Chapter One

Getting Your Bearings



You live in Babylon. I don't know who you are. I don't know your citizenship or where you're reading this. But spiritually speaking, I can confidently say you are living in an ungodly culture during ungodly times. There is no Christian West. There is virtually no country on Earth that champions the Gospel or biblical Truth. If Christians run into the buzz saw of persecution somewhere in the world, there is no political covering fire to rely upon. From a worldly perspective, the Church is on its own. The straits we sail are more dire than we realize, yet we are also more loved than we could ever dream.

You will be despised, ridiculed, and rejected if you carry yourself publicly as a biblical Christian. We should dispense with the pleasant-ries if you are to get your bearings and accurately apprise the situation around you. Painful testing is upon us. Shallow faith will not survive. Today's post-Christian world—in its self-centeredness, rootless pursuit of happiness, and rejection of transcendent values—is a rival religion to the historic Christian faith. Jesus Christ warned us that to truly follow him would cost us.

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me (John 15:18–21).

Preparing for pressures ahead of time is wise. Richard Wurmbrand, a Lutheran pastor who spent fourteen years in prison in Communist Romania, knew pressures were coming when he decided to prepare. “I had prepared myself for prison and torture as a soldier prepares for the hardships of war. I had studied the lives of Christians who had faced similar pains and temptations to surrender and thought how I might adapt their experiences. Many who had not so prepared themselves were crushed by suffering, or deluded into saying something foolish.”³ As we better grasp the circumstances we face, preparation will help us absorb impacts and respond thoughtfully.

Discerning the Darkness

Understanding the circumstances we face can take time. Years ago, I became aware of a spiritual phenomenon masquerading as a geopolitical movement. Around the time I entered full-time ministry in the Middle East, the Arab Spring was sweeping the region. Mass protests flared quickly, metastasizing in countries like Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Euphoria electrified the air as unpopular governments dropped like dominoes. The people were fed up with flagging economies and endemic corruption. New tools like social media allowed them to organize in ways previously impossible. Crowds clogged streets and celebrated the exciting future

suddenly before them. Democracy, freedom, and a new era free of cronyism were at hand! World leaders and major global media figures joined voices to the celebratory chorus, pondering the historic developments cascading on their feeds.

As I watched everything unfold from the Arab streets, I couldn't join the jubilee. I sensed something ominous approaching. Based on my previous military experience, I recognized that what was truly cropping up were failed states. Yes, oppressive tyrants were gone. But I knew the danger of failed states: they were unstable power vacuums. I also knew the regional players who would love to fill the void. Some would demand control and fight viciously to attain it.

History is a helpful guide here. For example, when the Iranian government fell in 1979, it was preceded by rolling protests from disaffected Iranians. Today, we tend to think only of the stern-faced mullahs who ultimately prevailed following the revolution. But the truth is that many groups protested in Iran. These included democratic activists, women, and students. Their combined voices helped dislodge the Shah. But in the power vacuum that followed, instability gripped the nation. The hardline Shia Islamists turned on their fellow protestors. The Islamists proved stronger and far more vicious. Consequently, what arose from the ashes of 1979 was not a beacon of democratic freedom but an Islamic theocracy.

Just as darkness had draped the land of Persia, the Arab Spring threatened to blanket the Arab region in violence and suffering. These concerns materialized in short order. Brutal civil wars erupted. Think Libya and Syria. Support for radical Islamist movements spiked. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood rose to power and constricted civil society with its radical agenda. The Muslim Brotherhood was even poised to challenge less volatile nations, like Jordan. But it was the horrifying rise of the Islamic State that caught most off-guard. In short order, the extremist group exploded across Syria and Iraq, taking vast swaths of territory in its blood-soaked campaign.

From a temporal standpoint, the suffering and human carnage left in the wake of these movements was immense. Thousands of people lost their lives. Families were torn apart. Entire communities were dislodged and forced to abandon the only homes they had ever known. Entire generations of children went without basic education. The darkness ran deep.

But there was something more going on. Something only detectable through a spiritual lens. Invisible strongholds were being broken. It was as if the scorched sky above the Middle East had, until then, been made of reinforced concrete. For a thousand years, this hardened shell had largely blocked the spiritual light of Christ. Yet suddenly, these seismic events fractured the foundation of that cement canopy. Cracks were spidering out and chunks were crashing down. Spiritual light spilled through and penetrated the harsh lands. And Arabs looked up. For the first time in a millennium, millions of Arabs were suddenly asking ultimate questions. What was *really* true? Is what I was always told to accept and never question actually right? Is Islam really the way?

Each time the Islamic State carried out an atrocity, they clearly explained how their actions were not simply justified by Islam but compelled. Shocked and suffering people heard these words and considered them against the ghastly images of the Islamic State's atrocities. They wrestled with confusion and sadness. I observed the people of these lands breaking largely in two ways. One group shrugged and concluded, yes, this bloodshed must be proper since Islam clearly prescribed it. These people went hot, so to speak. They were nominal before but now began to radicalize.

The other group, however, took a long look at the devastation and hate and recognized it was false. This was not where truth resided. They rejected the claims of Islam and began a quest to discover what was actually true. They went cold on Islam. Many, though certainly not all, ultimately came to Christ through their searching. It was not just despite the trials—but because of them—that many ultimately experienced spiritual

blessings pouring out on them. These people were previously impervious to the Gospel. Biblical Christians and missionaries in the area had prayed for decades that God would draw out and save the lost in the Middle East. God answered their prayers, albeit in unexpected ways.

Spiritual Earthquakes

I share this story because it provides a helpful context to Christians trying to get their bearings today. You may feel like the ground under your feet is shaking, and you don't know what's going on. So let's learn from previous cultural and spiritual earthquakes like the Arab Spring. Some quick take-aways: *God is shaking people out of their trances*. Many have been sleep-walking through life, uncritically accepting whatever they've been told. No more. Like in the Middle East, seismic societal shifts force us to consider what is true. Have you been told the key to success is a cushy job? Have you bought into the idea that early retirement, or status, or sex, or bloated bank accounts are the keys to life? Maybe you bought into the notion that gender is fluid or that biblical marriage between one man and one woman was just one of many options. The time to squarely consider what is true is today.

God is also forcing people to choose—to go hot or cold. God does not desire people to be spiritually lukewarm. He wants you all in or all out. “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:15–16). The same is true for Christians today. What you conclude to be true, go all in on. “And Elijah came near to all the people and said, ‘How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; But if Baal, then follow him’” (1 Kings 18:21). The hearts of mankind will soften toward God in the days to come. Sadly, many hearts will similarly harden as they grow stubbornly cold. We will witness a strange phenomenon: a great revival amid a great falling away.

Societal shakings are often spiritual stress tests. During the Arab Spring, the Middle East was shaken. For many, Islam was found wanting. People saw horrible things done in the name of Islam and learned the acts were prescribed in Islamic scripture. In disgust, they turned away from the lies. Trials can be great, but they remind us of the eternal. We are citizens of a heavenly Kingdom. Christians are undergoing our own spiritual stress test right now. For cultural Christians who only sought the benefits of Christianity when times were better, many will walk away. If it's no longer advantageous for their business or public standing—or worse, comes with a cost—they're out.

Others will be enamored by the philosophies and ideologies of the world, some of which cloak their aims in biblical-sounding terms. But these worldly teachings are anything but biblical. Sadly, many will be caught up and deceived. They will fall away. So will those ensnared by distractions. Video games, social media, smartphones—behavioral engineers have worked wonders in developing strategies to addict the masses. One more click, one more minute of engagement, one more advertisement. Unless trials shake these people from their narcotic trances, they, too, will drift into irrelevance. Today, cultural tsunamis shatter countries around the world. *The idols of the lands are being revealed and tested.* In time, they will be discredited.

Cultural Idols

How can you identify a cultural idol? *Cultural idols are the things people are prohibited from challenging.* Blasphemy laws in Muslim countries punish anyone who speaks against Islam. In the West today, that could include so-called gay marriage, LGBTQ+ celebrations, and ESG and DEI initiatives.^{4,5} So-called “hate speech” laws now punish anyone who speaks against the idols of new gender ideologies. Authorities brand some speech “misinformation” because it runs counter to officially sanctioned narratives. In these cases, it does not matter how kindly the words are spoken. It

does not matter how sincere or even accurate the speech is. Where speech dies, you will generally find an idol.

Cultural idols will ultimately be shown as impotent. *Remember, you live in an era of great delusion and distraction but also a period of revealing.* All that holds itself up against biblical Truth and the claims of Christ will fail. Like metal refined by fire, cultural dross will melt away and worthless chaff will turn to ash. The worldly “truths” we were told cannot be challenged will be challenged, whether the powerful like it or not. They will be revealed for what they are: lies. Like dry rot, lies have penetrated the foundations of many institutions, even those once rooted in biblical Truth. Only a scaffolding of other lies keeps them upright. *The Church is similarly being refined of its idols through trials.*

Effects of Spiritual Unrest

Spiritual earthquakes produce twin effects. They gin up suffering and instability. At the same time, they reveal truth and prompt revival. When I first noticed these patterns in the Arab Spring—great trials, great revealing, great falling away, and great revival—I was reminded of how a similar phenomenon had struck China in previous decades. The spiritual earthquake may be more akin to the impact of a powerful wave. Over recent decades, a careful observer could recognize a spiritual tsunami sweeping the earth, rolling west. The cultural tremors I heard about in China during the 1970s had ushered in a powerful move of the Spirit. The Church in China exploded, even under the whip of a communist government. Today, China likely boasts the largest contingent of biblical Christians on Earth.

The front-leading edge of the spiritual tsunami that struck was marked by signs and wonders. Average Chinese people had dreams and visions of Christ. Most of the foreign missionaries had already been kicked out by the Communists following the 1949 revolution. Churches previously planted in the country were snuffed out or clung to life by a thread. But

these people, supernaturally spurred by the Spirit, managed to access Scripture and learn the Word. These new believers proved bold and resilient. They connected with small church movements to fuel a rapid expansion of the Kingdom.

It was like God, through His Spirit, parachuted in passionate believers across the land. They were small lights in the darkness, heralding the Good News to countless hopeless souls. House church networks soon organized, preached the Gospel, and disciplined new believers. All under an atheistic regime that insisted God did not exist and only the state should have god-like powers. The Communist experiment in China had ushered in great trials, great revealing, great falling away, and great revival. This is a spiritual blood trail worth pondering and tracking.

While working in the Middle East during the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, the similarities to the Chinese experience struck me. When I met believers in North Africa, the Middle East, or Central Asia, several individuals and churches traced their origins back to a dream or a vision of Jesus Christ. Unlike previous decades, an organic desire for Bibles in Arabic, Farsi, and other languages spiked. People were coming to Christ in areas famous for their hostility toward Christ. From my vantage point, a move of the Spirit was underway.

If the developments were connected, I wondered if that spiritual tsunami that first hit China, and later the Middle East, would continue its trajectory and impact the West. I suspected it would, and I realized the West was poorly prepared for a spiritual stress test. This realization troubled me. It prompted me and others to pursue ministry that would help the Western Church prepare for and overcome the trials barreling for her shores. My heart is to serve the Persecuted Church until the day I die. Expanding my ministry focus to include Western nations was not something on my radar screen back then. But God is at work long before anyone notices. This is true in our personal lives and across continents.

The Tsunami Strikes the West

At that time, I felt like I was standing on a beach, squinting at the ocean's horizon, and spying a small swell that made me nervous. That swell proved to be the spiritual tsunami I suspected. It has struck the West in a flurry of supernatural division, delusion, and fear. Political and economic systems are melting down. Wealth and comfort are jeopardized, and major cities sink into squalor. Most institutions—the academy, the military, medicine, big business, sports leagues—have been captured by anti-Christian ideologues. Pathological philosophies have invaded many churches, their pastors blindsided, flat-footed, or outright compromised. God's design for men, women, and the family is openly mocked and vilified.

This is the context you need to understand. This is the soup you and I swim in. And the spiritual concussions are not felt by us alone. The tsunami is global, and the Church is profoundly vulnerable. Accepting this realization is important and strangely liberating. Drunkards need to admit they are drunkards before things can turn around. Sinners like you and me need to admit we are sinners before we can come to the Father, repent of our ways, and accept the gift of salvation offered through Christ. Like the cadets training to be downed airmen behind enemy lines, we face the dire state of our circumstances. But we dust ourselves off, determine what needs to be done, take stock of all God's blessed us with, and take our first steps. We toggle our mindsets from prey to hunter. Then we stand.

But what needs to be done? Broadly speaking, the Church needs to be strengthened. It needs to be shored up in myriad ways. There is one body, but it has many parts (1 Corinthians 12:12). The global Church is the Body of Christ on Earth. It should be a witness to the dying world around it. But the global Church needs healthy local churches scattered across the nations. Like a physical body needs healthy cells to flourish, the global Church needs healthy local churches. Local churches must be nourished by biblical Truth through faithful preaching of the Word. Healthy local churches disciple individual believers, share the Gospel with the lost

in their midst, and prayerfully partner and intercede with other churches in their area and around the world. Local churches can serve as spiritual battleships for engaging the enemy, fortresses in which believers can take refuge, and hospitals in which we heal and minister to the wounded.

Healthy local churches require spiritually maturing biblical believers. This requires intentionality and discipline, although we rest in the completed work of Christ. Christians can do nothing to earn their salvation. We have nothing to give God. Everything good in our lives is a gift from Him. But Jesus commanded his followers to share the Gospel and make disciples. Disciples, not simply believers. We are to put our faith into action. The Bible is a supernatural book authored by God himself. We need to know what it says. We need to learn to pray and depend on the Holy Spirit. All of this is why the first task we need to tackle is spiritual self-care. If you've flown on an airline, you've heard the pitch about putting your oxygen mask on first in the event of an emergency. This ensures you remain conscious so you can then help others around you. The same principle holds true in the spiritual realm.

Discipleship is properly done within local churches. Yet individual believers and local churches are both under fire today. We will consider the wisdom and experience of Christians well-versed in persecution. This will open our eyes to how we can shape our practices to better confront cultural challenges. God willing, you will also spot ways your unique background can help others who are in trouble. We will also be reminded of our membership in the global Body. Obligations come with that membership, and they flow both ways. Pressures may tempt us only to look after the troubles in our immediate vicinity.

Like a boxer getting popped in the nose, the sharp pain can snap our focus onto the threat immediately in front of us; everything else gets blocked out. That is a natural response, but it must not be ours. We cannot allow such self-focus to result from our trials. If we do, foreign missions will be neglected, as will any aid we can offer to suffering Christians abroad.

Remember, we are hunters, called to be on offense. We must resist that temptation and remember our brothers and sisters in harm's way over the horizon. They are part of our spiritual family, and together, we must strive to spread the Gospel and raise up the next generations.

War Is Upon You

Whether you are new to the faith or have spent decades as a Christian, my prayer is that this context helps you grow your spiritual strength. Initially, this may resemble a life preserver you can don in the deluge. The waters are rising fast. In time, may it help you swim against the cultural currents. Eventually, you will be able to climb aboard a vessel, a local church where you can serve and be served. But have no illusions. That vessel is not a cruise liner; it is a battleship. The hunter mindset you hone will translate well into a wartime mindset.

You are in a spiritual war, whether you like it or not. Your loved ones, your friends, and the strangers you pass in the street are in a spiritual war, whether they know it or not. You and I are in enemy territory—or more accurately, enemy-contested territory. The Body of Christ is in the middle of a massive spiritual pincer movement. The enemy is deploying a divide-and-conquer strategy that is yielding results. But those gains will ultimately prove futile. Abraham Kuyper accurately observed, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”⁶ The stakes are high. But if you are a follower of Christ, you are on the side that ultimately wins. Eventually, you will realize that through your spiritual adoption into the family of God, you become effectively invincible. There is nothing this world can hurl at you that will separate you from your heavenly Father. Even if your faithfulness costs your life, you will open your eyes a moment later in the presence of Christ. “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

Amid the present madness, God is using all these dynamics to purify His Church. There are many problems ahead of us. But that also translates

into many opportunities. Through the eyes of a hunter, the spiritual landscape in front of us is a target-rich environment. There will be increasing needs to meet and increasing opportunities to minister to needs, each with the chance to share the reason for our hope. How we respond will mark the spiritual landscape for generations to come, until Christ returns. Brother Andrew noted that surely “this is what God has had in mind all along, that the brave remnant of His church scattered through many lands gain strength through coming together and lose their own fears in reaching out to help one another.”⁷ May it be so, to the glory of God.

Chapter Two

Allow Me to Introduce Your Family



To help one another and serve God, we need a baseline understanding of who we are as the Church. *In truth, there is only one Church.* One Body of Christ. One spiritual family. Now, you will no doubt hear people—including me—reference things like the “American Church,” or the “Chinese Church,” or the “Western Church,” or the “Persecuted Church.” These labels are helpful as descriptive terms. In a sense, they focus our attention on one part of the Church—a limb of the Body if you will. But don’t let these terms obscure the reality that there is no “us” and “them.” They are us and we are them. Something profound happens when this penny drops in the slot of your heart, and you realize that believers worldwide comprise your spiritual family. The Christians you’ll encounter in this book may live in distant lands and different cultural contexts. You will likely never meet them in this life. But they are your brothers and sisters. You can even think of the young ones as your spiritual nephews and nieces and the old as your spiritual aunts and uncles.

The moment you can read an account about Christians far removed from you, and regard them as family, things snap into focus. You humanize what would otherwise be a sterile consideration. You realize your need to

pray for them or lend a hand if they're facing dire circumstances. If your flesh-and-blood family members—your sister, nephew, or mom—faced dire circumstances, you would take selfless action to intercede and help. The same impulses begin to fire for our spiritual family.

The global Church is massive. *There are Christians in every single nation on Earth.* While working in the Middle East, I discovered believers even in the harshest—and remotest—corners of the region. They were scattered throughout the darkest areas, like little lights. Traveling in frontier areas and encountering indigenous believers scattered around reminded me of a scene from the film *Apollo 13*. In the movie, an astronaut was asked if he had ever faced emergencies as a naval pilot. He replied:

This one time I'm in a [plane] at night in combat conditions so there were no running lights on the carrier. It was the Shangri-[L]a and we were in the Sea of Japan. My radar had jammed and my homing signal was gone because someone in the Sea of Japan was actually using the same frequency. So it was leading me away from where I was supposed to be. And I'm looking down at a big black ocean. So I flip on my map light and then suddenly, zap! Everything shorts out right there in my cockpit. All my instruments are gone. Now I can't even tell what my altitude is. I know I'm running out of fuel so I'm thinking about ditching in the ocean. And then I look down there in the darkness. There's this green trail. It's like a long carpet laid out beneath me and its algae, that phosphorous stuff that gets churned up in the wake of a big ship. It was just leading me home. Now if my cockpit lights hadn't shorted out, there's no way I would ever have been able to see that. You never know what events are going to transpire to get you home.⁸

Finding pockets of sincere believers throughout the frontiers is like encountering pockets of candles on an inky expanse. Their soft glow is only discernable because the surrounding darkness is so deep. It is strangely

exhilarating to traipse across believers in unexpected places. I've entered their homes in far-flung places and sensed the Spirit's presence. If you've ever swum in a salty sea for hours, you became parched. You spat out any salt water that snuck into your mouth. But when you return to the shore and take a sip of cold, fresh water, it tastes different, almost sweet. It's the same water you've drunk all your life, but it tastes crisper and more refreshing. This mirrors my experience when visiting biblical Christians in harsh lands. You feel the joy and peace of the Spirit, only more powerfully.

Quantifying the size of the global Church is challenging. Actual numbers should be held loosely, as they could easily be wrong. The higher the persecution climate in a given region, the more likely the Church will be segregated into separate networks. These networks may never have contact with others or know they exist. Some follow security protocols that limit their exposure to outside Christian communities. Accurately tabulating how many believers exist in such areas is almost impossible. Even in countries with fewer pressures, statistics can deceive. Many reports on the United States, for example, show a majority of people identify as Christians. However, when observers consider whether those people actually hold to core biblical tenets, most do not. Such figures reveal the Church is much smaller than reported. However, when combined with the layers of Christians across the globe, the global Church remains massive.

Strong Local Fellowships, Strong Global Tribe

The global Church comprises thousands and thousands of local churches. These local churches are fellowships where the activity of the global Church gets carried out. The local church is made up of the people of God. They are called out, saved, baptized, gathered, growing in faith (through discipleship), and sharing that faith with outsiders (through evangelism). Local fellowships are small communities acting on Jesus's call to live missionally. Living missionally involves several goals. Local Christians seek to reproduce themselves with new believers and new churches. They sup-

port themselves financially. They live as communities, providing care for members. They choose leaders and seek to operate according to biblical polity. The activities observed among the early Christians in Acts 2 are helpful for understanding how these local churches operate and are committed to worship, discipleship, and missions. They seek to fulfill the Great Commission across the street, state, and earth.

Not all communities that hold themselves out as local churches should be recognized as such. *Many apostate communities exist today and are not a part of the global Church.* These communities abandoned biblical orthodoxy and now follow the spirit of the age. They celebrate what the Bible calls sin. False teachers present themselves as pastors but are “wolves in sheep’s clothing” (Matthew 10:16). They lead people astray and seek the applause of popular culture. Sadly, some of these communities were once faithful churches.

At some point, heresy crept in and corrupted the Gospel. *Apostate churches effectively deny Christ.* Often, this downgrade started out as a desire to be more sensitive to people seeking truth (that is, being more seeker-sensitive). Many adopted pragmatism as their paradigm. They concluded that they only needed to make their community more attractive, entertaining, or affirming. They focused on people, not God. Truth departed from their gatherings and so did the Spirit. Some churches today are in the early stages of this spiral and should be encouraged to return to faithfulness. However, apostate churches that stubbornly refuse to repent should be marked and avoided.

The global Church faces massive attacks and deception. Some hastily conclude that thwarting such attacks must necessarily be sophisticated. This is not true. All that is required for a spiritually healthy global Church are spiritually healthy local churches. This is no different from a physical body. If the cells of your body are healthy, you will be healthy as a whole. This does not mean you will be free from pain or immune from attack. But it does mean you’re better positioned to withstand and recover from trauma should it strike.

Healthy cells must function properly and draw the energy they need. Individual believers like you play these roles—the mitochondria of local churches. We channel energy not of ourselves but of the Lord, drawn from the Word, from the Spirit, and from our fellowship with fellow believers. We want to infuse the nutrient-dense vitamins into local churches while minimizing the toxins they encounter. The simple blocking-and-tackling of spiritual faithfulness that has marked historic, biblical Christianity—the basics—will dramatically strengthen the global Church.

Bigger Is Not Always Better

Local churches come in various shapes and sizes. Over recent decades, novel approaches to being a local fellowship have been crafted, like megachurches and multi-site churches. These new takes on the local church offer certain advantages, but many are only attainable in a setting free from cultural or governmental pressure. When pressures build—as they do today—these benefits can wither. The strongest vehicle for a healthy, resilient local fellowship may be smaller communities of committed believers. Smaller local churches, where believers truly know one another and are accountable to one another, may prove superior under pressure.⁹

Smaller fellowships do not come with all the bells and whistles of a megachurch. Programs and marketing are less slick. But it is also harder to get lost in the crowd, offering authentic fellowship through knowing others and being known. Community has been important since the early church. We will briefly examine church history in a bit, but for now, just recognize that the early church was born under pressure. Christian services were small and intimate. The Roman Empire dominated, and persecution flared at times against the believers. Yet the Church not only survived, it grew.

House Churches

The early church that expanded under persecution largely consisted of house churches. House churches are still prevalent in countries around the

world, particularly those prone to pressure and persecution. They are also found in Western nations. House churches are small, with perhaps ten to thirty believers meeting in homes. Leadership is generally fluid and adapts to changing circumstances. When house churches grow to a certain size, they typically divide into smaller groups, much like cells replicating in a body. This division returns the gatherings to a scale that makes meeting in homes feasible. House churches were the norm during New Testament times. They remain the norm in many parts of the world today. In many countries, house churches clandestinely carry out the Gospel.

In the Middle East, I learned how important house churches were for new converts coming from Islam. They had counted the cost and taken their lives into their own hands. They risked violent reprisals and ostracization from their families. House churches afforded them a more secure way of gathering with other believers facing similar trials. The world outside could be harsh. But inside a house church, there was teaching, worship, laughter, and bread breaking. House churches often associated with one another in loose networks. You might hear these called “house church networks,” “streams,” or “lines.” One network may or may not know of other networks active in its city. Depending on the persecution climate, house church networks will use security protocols to cabin risks.

House churches can spread rapidly. Many evidence a hunter mindset by their ability to grow, adapt, and evade those hostile to their faith. They are difficult to suppress because they are often decentralized. However, that same characteristic brings with it risks. The pace of growth in house church networks may outstrip the supply of trained leaders. Newer believers may be thrust into leadership before they are sufficiently disciplined. Spiritually immature leaders in a rapidly growing movement are ripe soil for heretical teachings to develop and metastasize. For example, a network in China became corrupted when a leader announced a new Doctrine of Crying. I know it sounds silly, but it inflicted serious harm. This false teaching insisted that believers were not truly saved until they had wept over their

sins for a long, prescribed period. Fortunately, other leaders in the line discovered and confronted the heresy, but not before it had spread considerably. Wisdom requires us to realize vulnerabilities exist even in solidly biblical practices.

The Underground Church vs. the Aboveground Church

House churches are sometimes associated with the Underground Church. *The Underground Church is not a physical building or denomination. Its activities are “underground” in the sense they are secretive and unauthorized by local authorities.* The Underground Church carries out the Gospel despite heavy pressures, whether they be from authoritarian governments, Islamic rulers, or Roman Caesars. They are not recognized in any official capacity. Visitors to their cities will likely never know they are there. People often use the term Underground Church as synonymous with the Persecuted Church. This is understandable but not entirely accurate.

The Persecuted Church can include not just underground churches, but also the Aboveground Church. Many countries with underground church networks also have aboveground churches existing in parallel. *Aboveground churches are those officially recognized and visible.* They have buildings and church property and are known in the community. Aboveground churches exist in countries prone to persecution, like Egypt, Pakistan, and Iran. People sometimes use the terms “Aboveground Church” and “Visible Church” interchangeably.

Aboveground churches are more vulnerable to coercion by local authorities. They are often closely monitored and subject to surveillance. To maintain their recognized status, these churches can be pressured to compromise. Not all succumb to the heavy-handed tactics applied to them, but some are tempted to compromise to preserve their influence. Some aboveground churches become co-opted. For example, when Communists dominated Eastern Europe during the twentieth century, the Aboveground Church was largely hollowed out. The Visible Church had been purged of

anything opposed to the regimes. Sadly, the Aboveground Church became little more than a mouthpiece for government, a puppet church.

Aboveground churches can struggle because of the conditions placed upon them by authorities. To maintain their standing, they must sometimes comply with restrictions. Their limited freedom comes with strings attached. In Iran, you will find some beautiful, ancient church buildings. Most belong to minority communities, like Armenians. These aboveground churches are permitted to conduct worship services, with strings attached. They could only do so in the Armenian language and within the four walls of the building. Worshipping in Farsi, the language used by most Iranians, was forbidden. The government did not want Persians (the majority ethnic group) coming to Christ. For an Islamic theocracy, this is deadly serious. If an aboveground church in Iran went so far as to do evangelism in Farsi, things would get ugly, fast.

This is a common feature of aboveground churches in difficult lands. Authorities can welcome visitors from abroad and drive them past church facilities. All stand as a hallmark of religious liberty and toleration. But the unspoken truth is that these churches are not permitted to share the Gospel outside their walls or engage with most locals.

In some areas, the Aboveground Church is thoroughly meshed into the government. In China, many church buildings have been constructed by the Communist regime itself. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement was established by the Communist regime to oversee and administer these churches. This was done in response to the rapid growth of evangelical Christianity over the decades. Communist ideology recognizes no God, only militant atheism. The government intimidated, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered many Christians, all in an attempt to violently suppress this rapidly expanding movement. But their effort largely failed. So instead of suppressing the Church, the Chinese government pivoted. Unable to defeat Christianity, they shifted their strategy to co-opting the faith. The Puppet Church is alive and well.

The explosive growth of China's Christian community has primarily arisen among the underground house churches. The Spirit of God moved powerfully through small home gatherings, rather than prominent buildings constructed by those opposed to Christ. But take note: the world, at times, is more nuanced than we appreciate. For example, it may be tempting to write off the Three-Self Churches altogether. However, look closely, and you will discover that in some, sincere believers can be found. These Christians are striving to make Christ known in a spiritually starved environment, sort of like believers who can be found in mainline Protestant denominations that long ago abandoned a biblically rooted, orthodox faith. In countries that have both an Aboveground and Underground Church, God can move through both.

In some countries, the Aboveground Church provides a toehold for Christians who help the Underground. Some Arab countries have permitted church compounds. This fenced-off area contains several church buildings for different denominations and represents an overture of religious accommodation. The space is tailored toward expats and foreign laborers working in the country, not local nationals. Locals may be forbidden from entering the church compound, let alone a church building. In one country, I watched as a local Bedouin stood outside the gate of a church compound. He seemed to know he was not permitted inside but looked longingly at the steeples beyond.

Sad scenes like this may suggest that some countries with aboveground churches may not truly have an Aboveground Church. This is fair. But we should not rashly conclude there is no one inside seeking the welfare of the lost around them. Church compounds are easy to monitor and control. No doubt informants exist inside, happy to apprise authorities of developments. Faithful Christians who share the Gospel or support underground believers must "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). All is not always as it appears. The Aboveground Church can be a blessing to the Underground, just as it can be a detriment or even a non-factor. Pray that God's love and truth would expand from these sometimes murky settings.

Nominal Christians

As we learn about our spiritual family, it is also helpful to reflect on what constitutes a Christian. Sometimes the term *Christian* is applied fast and loose. Nominal Christians are those who identify as Christians because of tradition but carry on without a biblical faith or lifestyle. They may never have heard the Gospel, let alone placed their faith in Christ. They are not born-again believers. You may have several in your family. They can be found in most Christian communities across the globe. One ministry partner lamented the need to evangelize Christian children in his village. They knew little to nothing about Christ. My heart goes out to these nominal Christians because I once was counted among their ranks.

Don't be too quick to write off nominal Christians. We have no idea how God might radically move in their lives. And here is an interesting observation about some of the nominal Christians I encountered in the Middle East. Some knew little about their claimed faith, but when push came to shove, they did not abandon their identity. For example, in 2014, I found myself serving among a veritable sea of humanity in northern Iraq. Islamic State militants had overrun Christian villages, stolen their homes, and threatened their families. The nominal Christians could have avoided all of these problems had they simply accepted the militants' offer to convert to Islam. They refused. They clung to the name of Christ and lost everything except the clothes on their backs.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange was happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. *If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of Glory and God rests upon you* (1 Peter 4:12–14, emphasis added).

These nominal Christians were insulted and banished *for the name of Christ*. They bore the shame of Christ rather than retain their earthly pos-

sessions. They did so even though they only saw the Messiah dimly. Our prayer should be that nominal Christians around the world be evangelized and disciplined—that they may know the Lord, the Gospel, and the Truth.

An Assortment of Christians

Christians come in all sorts. You probably know there are Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and Protestants. It is beyond the scope of this book to unpack the denominational differences, but it is important to know these differences extend around the globe. *Denominations are not monolithic.* Within each denomination, some movements or camps do not always see eye to eye. Churches that identify with a certain tradition may not resemble similarly described churches in other countries. A Baptist church in England may be very different from a Baptist church in the United States.

A practicing Christian is typically a genuine believer who is a regular, active member of a local church. These people can be distinguished from nominal Christians. However, only God knows the hearts of men and women. *A believer is a genuine, born-again Christian who enjoys a personal relationship with the Messiah.* Faith plays a strong role in their lives. While all genuine believers are practicing Christians, that does not mean all practicing Christians are genuine believers. Some people can be extremely active in church—and even hold leadership positions—but still be spiritually cold.

Converts to Christianity are sometimes described by the communities they left. When talking about foreign missions, these terms can come up. For example, many Muslims have come to Christ in recent years. **Muslim background believers—or MBBs—are Christian converts who once were Muslims.**¹⁰ There is a historic move of God going on among Muslim-majority people groups. Some suggest that more Persians have come to Christ in the last forty years than in the last 1,400 years. You may also hear about HBBs, for Hindu background believers, or BBBs, for Buddhist background believ-

ers. Some even use CBB—Christian background believers—to describe those who came to saving faith from a nominal Christian background.

When a person comes to faith, they know very little spiritually and must be disciplined, or trained up in biblical faith and living. New believers are sometimes called ***baby Christians***, as they were only recently born again spiritually. This is not a put-down or insult. It is merely a description of where we all start. These Christians need more spiritually mature believers to come alongside them and help them grow. Many believers may be new to the faith yet be highly educated and distinguished. Among the millions coming to faith in China, many hail from the upper echelons of Chinese society. Baby Christians may be new converts or Christians sincere in their faith but undisciplined for years. Either way, baby Christians need discipleship and should seek out spiritually mature mentors to help them.

Sometimes believers live isolated in societies hostile to the Christian faith. They may have come to faith in a surprising way and without knowing anyone around them who shared their faith. These believers are sometimes referred to as ***hidden Christians***. They are embedded in some communities but unknown to residents and observers alike. Just like with baby Christians, hidden Christians should strive to find biblical community and mentorship. This can be challenging. But to remain a hidden Christian would not be spiritually healthy.

Sometimes people confuse hidden Christians with another category: *crypto-Christians*. They are similar but distinct. Whereas hidden Christians are people who came to faith and remain isolated, ***crypto-Christians*** are small communities of people who discretely maintain traditions passed down from their Christian ancestors, who were forced underground by extreme persecution. When Christianity “died out” in an area, in the sense there were no known active believers, there may still have lurked pockets of covert believers.

Crypto-Christians may have originated as a community of active believers, but because of persecution, they went dark, morphing into a

clandestine group. In this sense, they resemble underground Christians. The difference is that over time, the teachings of crypto-Christians morph into something that can no longer be called Christianity. This typically occurs through syncretism. *Syncretism is the blending of two faiths into a fused tradition that, in reality, represents neither.* This highlights why it is important for hidden Christians—and underground churches, for that matter—to connect with other believers, even if risky. Isolated and without instruction, biblical Truth can cede ground to false teachings. Like a pond connected to other sources of water, churches can remain fresh. But if isolated, the water stagnates. Christians and churches were made to be relational, conduits of God’s Spirit and Truth.

Healthy Churches Channel Christ

Like the prior example of ponds, Christians and churches that remain “fresh” actively share Christ with those around them. They have inflows and outflows. *When they share the Gospel with the lost (i.e., non-Christians), they are performing evangelism.* Evangelism—sometimes called outreach—seeks to make Christ known to those outside the Church. *Discipleship involves training up Christians—people already in the Church—in the knowledge and love of the Lord.* Healthy churches perform both roles. They bring in new believers, train them, and deploy those who have matured spiritually to reach the lost.

When Christians leave their homes and travel to different countries or cultures, they serve as missionaries. *Missions generally involve evangelism or discipleship in cross-cultural settings.* Missionaries often have home churches that help train them, support them, and provide ongoing resources. *Missionary care describes this ongoing support and relationship for missionaries launched by a church.* Effective care is needed to encourage missionaries who face many challenges, preventing them from burning out. Missions-sending agencies can help churches by providing training, member care, and support to missionaries.

Martyrs

Martyrs are Christians who lost their lives because of their witness for Christ. Clearly, those who were murdered because of their active faith are martyrs. Christians who lose their lives because of their identification with Christ can often be grouped into this description, though it is not always as clear. For example, a majority Christian neighborhood may be bombed, presumably to harm the community. Those killed will often be described as martyrs, though they may or may not have been active believers. The term martyr points to our faithful efforts to be witnesses of Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Those who act as witnesses and attest to the truth of the Messiah are, in a sense, martyrs.

Hopefully, this brief overview of your spiritual family provides some helpful context. Context helps us better make sense of the world as it is and the situations we face. In some respects, the Church is simple to understand. There is only one Church. But as we just learned, there are important nuances we should not overlook. We are indeed one spiritual family, but we are also a Body, composed of complex, interrelated parts. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12).

If you are a biblical Christian, God has appointed you a unique role to play as part of this Body. This is exciting news, but it also comes with responsibilities. If challenges are growing in opposition to the Body, how can you strengthen yourself and others? Answering that question requires you to understand what those pressures look like. Let’s proceed.

About the Author



Andy Coleman is the president of the Christian Emergency Alliance, a ministry committed to helping biblical Christians stand under hostile cultural pressures. A graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy and the University of Kansas School of Law, Andy has leveraged his military and legal backgrounds to strengthen the Church where it is vulnerable. Andy has served for many years in full-time ministry, leading major field efforts to serve persecuted Christians in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. God has blessed Andy and his beloved wife, Liz, with three amazing kiddos.

Appendix



Below is a list of books—some great, some insightful and some simply joyful—that can season your life regardless of how serious your season of life may be.

Missions

- Piper, John. *Let the Nations be Glad*.
- Richardson, Don. *Eternity in Their Hearts*.
- Vegas, Chad and Alex Kocman. *Missions by the Book*.

Fiction

- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*.
- Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. *Sherlock Holmes* (entire series).
- Dumas, Alexandre. *The Count of Monte Cristo*.
- Erickson, John. *Hank the Cowdog* (entire youth series).
- Homer. *The Iliad*.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia* (entire youth series).
- Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*.
- Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*.
- Peterson, Andrew. *The Wingfeather Saga* (entire youth series).

- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings* (entire trilogy).
- Virgil. *The Aeneid*.
- Wodehouse, P. G. *Jeeves and Wooster* (entire series).

Christian and Missionary Biographies

- Anderson, Courtney. *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson*.
- Saint Augustine. *Confessions*.
- Bethge, Eberhard. *Costly Grace: An Illustrated Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.
- Bengé, Janet and Geoff. *Christian Heroes: Then and Now* (entire youth series).
- Colson, Charles. *Born Again*.
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- Paton, John. *John G. Paton* (autobiography).

Theology

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Apologetics, Evangelism, and Discipleship

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History

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- Shelley, Bruce and Marshall. *Church History in Plain Language*.

Current Events

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- Shrier, Abigail. *Irreversible Damage*.

General Interest

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Christian Living


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- Hughes, R. Kent. *Disciplines of a Godly Man*.
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- Lewis, C. S. *The Joyful Christian*.
- Murray, Andrew. *Abide in Christ*.
- Nee, Watchman. *A Living Sacrifice*.
- Schaeffer, Francis. *A Christian Manifesto*.
- Schaeffer, Francis. *How Should We Then Live?*
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