**When the Church Stops Working**

By Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand

**Study Guide**

**What do I do with this book? In terms of the language and the stories and the illustrations used, this book is a pretty easy go. However, the concepts are tricky. They are not difficult or all that abstract. Rather, they are counter intuitive. When you encounter some thing in the book that does not make sense, or seems strange or unlikely, or just does not “click” with you, hang in there. Dwell on it. The authors are not out to give us more stuff to think about; their goal is to challenge and reorient how we think about things. This does not happen a moment. We need to ponder and discuss these ideas before we decide if they are good ideas.**

**Root and Bertrand supply a lot of stories and illustrations of their ideas. I have left those out to make this concise and focus on the ideas and argument. It is worth your time to read their stories and illustrations to help fully grasp those ideas.**

**Also, this is my take on the book. Feel free to disagree, correct, or challenge it.**

**Ch. 1: “Why Your Church Has a Problem, but It Isn’t What You Think”**

Statistics show that church attendance has been declining for decades, and many see a decline of the church’s influence in society and even a decline in the faith of church folk. Many congregations are facing a dismal future and perhaps closure if this trend does not reverse.

**Typical Diagnosis**: the church is in decline.

**Typical Prescription**: innovate to attract folks to church.

**Root and Bertrand’s response**:

Decline is a misdiagnosis.

Proper diagnosis: the secular age has infected the church.

Innovation is the secular age’s prescription; it will not help.

**Secular:** What does “secular” mean? What do you think Root and Bertrand mean by it?

At the very least, a secular age is a time in society when the values and outlook of the broader culture are not informed by the Christian (or any other) faith.

Many have argued that American is entering a “post-Christian” age. That does not mean the there are no more Christians, but that Christianity is no longer a dominant influence on the larger culture.

**Symptoms of decline:**

1. Influence: The sacred has separated from the secular. The church does not have the influence on the state it once had.
2. Attendance: Faith has become private rather than public. People are not going to church.
3. Unbelief: Secular society focuses on the immanent (what is before us that we can see, touch, and feel) rather than the transcendent (that which is beyond our immediate perception). Society does not see God’s transcendent activity in the world.

A return to a more sacred age does not seem to be likely, so we need to figure out how the church functions in a secular age. Root and Bertrand argue that most of the approaches discussed in Christian literature and thought today adopt strategies, such as efficiency and innovation, that come from the secular world. By applying secular strategies, we fail to distinguish or selves from the secular world to see what God is doing in the world. This, the secular age has infected the church.

**Imagination:** What do Root and Bertrand mean by the “secular imagination?” How we “image” the world—our “imagination”—shapes what we see and value. The secular imagination is the frame and values system of secularism that shapes how we see and interpret our world.

**Acceleration:** The secular age tells us to work at balancing a variety of goals and commitment. We do not know how to decide which is of the most value or how much is enough, so we constantly race for more of everything. Thus, the need for efficiency. To be efficient means to move faster, and we get caught up in a cycle of acceleration. To be “good,” we think we need to do “more.”

**Resonance:** Root and Bertrand say that the opposite of acceleration is not slowness but resonance. Resonance is connectedness, being in sync, being fully present; it is experiencing fullness. When resonant, the clock does not matter. It is finding meaning beyond the immanent; “it is about the sacred, the public, and the transcendent.” We begin to understand resonance when we experience or remember moments that are more amazing than others, moments when the passage of time is irrelevant.

Root and Bertrand argue that the church does not need more influence, or people, or faith, it needs resonance. Then membership numbers become less important than relationships.

Ch. 1 concludes with the claim that when the church is uncertain about how to relate to the world, the answer is not efficiency and innovation, but **waiting**.

**REFLECTION:** Consider the concepts used in ch. 1: secular, imagination, acceleration, and resonance. Do they seem relevant to how you experience life? Do they challenge you to consider a different way of understanding your place and activity in the world, how you prioritize, experience, or relate to your life and activities? What role does the clock play in your life?

**Ch. 2: “Busy People, Busy Church—A Killer Cocktail”**

**Origins stories:** When did the church begin? Often Acts 2:46-47 is considered the origin of the church, the fellowship and worship of the new church in Jerusalem. That congregation grew daily: growth = success! More is better. So says our secular values. Whatever that congregation was doing, we should as well to be successful.

This is the post-Pentecost church. Root and Bertrand claim we have pointed to the wrong passage in Acts to find the origin of the church. They see it in Acts 1:4. Jesus was about to ascent from the earth, to physically leave the disciples, and he told them to stay in Jerusalem and wait.

**Wait:** The church was born not born in a flourish of triumphant growth but in a huddle of frightened people waiting and wondering what was going to happen next.

A major point of this book is that we deal with our problems first by waiting. We object that waiting is not success, not productive, not efficient. But when we evaluate it in those terms, we are deploying a secular view of the life, a view that has infected the way we think about faith and the church.

**Not Quietism:** This waiting is not a theological quietism, the claim that all is God’s action, and we are to do nothing. Our waiting will lead to action, but we must first wait, because “the secular age blinds us to God’s action, and so all we are left with is our action.”(23)

God’s people only ever act in response to God’s act. The do not plan their own activity and proceed. The encounter God and act in obedience to that encounter. God acts through God’s people, not in the way a puppet master manipulates a marionette but in the manner of a relationship that starts with God’s action. (24)

**Meaning in Life:**  We associate meaning in life with productivity and success, which leads to a value system of “more” which drives acceleration and tramples resonance. In that process, we miss the real meaning in life. (See the story of George, pp. 25-29.) This impacts our relationships; we do not value those who go slow—the young, the old, the disabled. We associate slow with stop with dead!

**Resonance in the Church:** Church life is busy, too, and we associate successful ministry with ever more—more people, more money, more mission activities, etc. Acceleration is a symptom of our frustrated search for meaning. The antidote is not slow, but genuine meaning. Busyness distracts us from meaning.

**Waiting in Hope:** When we begin by waiting on God, we wait in hope and anticipation of God’s action. When we get busy and take things into our own hands, our actions may not be God’s action. Abraham and Sarah got impatient with God and used Hagar to get the promised child. But that did not work. In God’s time, Sarah conceived and bore Isaac, the fulfillment of God’s promise and activity.

**Isaac means “Laughter:”** Sarah’s response to God’s promise was laughter, but the birth of Isaac, the fulfillment of that promise delivered a greater laughter, joy as God’s brought life out of bareness—a new meaning to life for her and Abraham. When, in our accelerated urge to act, to achieve, we bypass the waiting, we miss out on the very meaning that we crave.

**God’s Presence as a Problem:** To give slightly different language to Root and Bertand’s point, we have difficulty with waiting because the secular age tells us that value and meaning are in doing, and doing a lot, and doing it fast. That is a trap with no end in sight. Waiting feels like nothing, but if we act before waiting, we act on that secular value system and lose the resonance of connecting with God. Then, with all the good intentions of serving God, we end up trying to manage God. That is what Sarah and Abraham did, and it led to the abuse and suffering of Ishmael and Hagar.

**REFLECTION:** Do these ideas resonate with you? Do you feel caught up in the acceleration of life, driven to move ever faster to accomplish and find meaning? Or, is your working life over, and now you feel empty and of little value because you are not driving forward, being efficient and producing? Do we bring the secular world of ever more to our approach to church? Do we expect to make Southminster better by doing more?

What would it mean to us to seek resonance rather than more? What would it do for Southminster if we first waited for resonance with God, for God’s action, before we set our agenda for action?

**Isaiah 40:30-31 (NRSVUE)**

30 Even youths will faint and be weary,

and the young will fall exhausted,

31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;

they shall mount up with wings like eagles;

they shall run and not be weary;

they shall walk and not faint.

**You might find these YouTube videos interesting:**

**The Church in the Accelerating Age: Part 1 - Reforging the Horizons**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3AtwuFkY3k&authuser=0>

**The Church in the Accelerating Age: Part 2 - Resonance vs. Relevance**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLma6tvGc8U&authuser=0>