

# How This Young Spirit-Filled Pastor Learned to Reach a Post-Christian World

John Mark Comer, pastor for teaching and vision at Bridgetown Church in Portland, Oregon, woke up to disturbing news July 28. Best-selling author and former pastor Joshua Harris had renounced his Christian faith. Twenty-four hours later, as he speaks to *Charisma* for this story, Comer's still torn up about it.

"He's originally from the area," Comer says. "He's about my age and a smart guy, and I feel that weight in my heart. Even in the last 24 hours, I just feel that on my soul. Like, how do we stay faithful? How do we create space for people to live? He's obviously been through a lot of hard church experiences. I'm sure that's taken a toll on him. How do we live? ... That's the soul stuff that I carry before God in our city."

But it's not just Harris. Increasingly, postmodernism and pleasure are outpacing faith and theological fidelity in urban cities across Western civilization. Christians are becoming the minority. In Portland—the second-most “religiously unaffiliated” metropolitan area in the U.S., according to the Public Religion Research Institute—Comer has courtside seats for the post-Christian revolution.

"I continue to be really discouraged by the level of influence that the world—in the language of the New Testament—has over people's minds and bodies," he says. "Over the level of moral and theological compromise and assimilation and syncretism. I just feel that weight as a pastor."

Comer knows what it's like to get caught up in that cultural stream. But the answer is not to withdraw from the public

sphere, protect ourselves and hope it gets better. Trends are not in the church's favor. Comer describes Portland as "20 years behind Europe in its secularization, and 10 to 20 years ahead of, say, the South."

"I think America will increasingly become post-Christian, secular and pluralistic in both ethnic background and—with that—cultural and religious perspective," Comer says. "I think everything is trending that way."

So how can the church turn the tide and change culture? It begins—counterintuitively—with a call to stop doing so much. Comer points to Jesus' call in Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV): "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

When the weight of the world is closing in, transfer that weight to God. Resist the cultural push to hurry and do more; instead, slow down, dwell with God and give in to what Eugene Peterson called the "unforced rhythms of grace" (Matt. 11:29, MSG). Comer believes the future of the church may depend on it.

## **Burnout and Rebuild**

In his book *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, Comer explains how he learned the hard way how to give in to Christ's easy yoke. In his early 20s, he was part of the team that planted Solid Rock Church, a Portland megachurch with multiple campuses. The church was an immediate success. Solid Rock grew by roughly 1,000 people per year for seven years straight. Then the church began to plateau—just as Comer began to burn out.

"It was just, you know, heady and intoxicating," Comer says. "And it was both a move of God and full of all sorts of humanness and ego and ambition too, you know? It was that

beautiful mix that is life and reality in the church. The first year or two were exhausting but so much fun, and we had such a sense of momentum. It was so exciting. Then by about year three or four, it started to get less and less fun, and it started to feel more and more exhausting. And then, I don't know, four or five years in, I just hit a wall, and I was dead tired. You just can't run at that pace for very long. It's not a sustainable way of life—emotionally, spiritually or relationally.”

He says he fell for the great modern lie: The more you do and achieve, the more purpose you have.

“Bigger is better,” Comer says. “Take the next step. Move up in the company. Expand your thing. Make it replicable. I mean, that's the whole mantra of culture. Is it any wonder that we're just churning people up emotionally, and spiritual life is dying on the vine?”

Comer distinctly remembers waking up one morning and thinking, *I don't think this is a healthy way to live—and I'm not practicing what I preach.*

“I was up there preaching about Jesus' ‘life to the full,’ yet my life felt less and less like that,” Comer says. “I just felt more and more tired, on edge, always in a hurry and not present. It was difficult to hear God's voice in the chaos and rush and busyness of life. To put a very long story short, I essentially had an early midlife crisis at 30 years old.”

In *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis says that each person is in the process of becoming either an “immortal horror” or “everlasting splendor,” based upon their present decisions and ultimate destination in the afterlife. As a 30-year old, Comer says this quote struck him. He imagined the man he might become just 20 years later—and that man scared him.

“I could plot out and see who I was becoming, and it was actually really terrifying,” Comer says. “I saw myself not

losing my faith or something, but being grouchy, on-edge and ambitious. Relationships like my marriage and family had really taken a backseat to church and ministry. I basically hit this combination of burnout, early midlife crisis and a little existential questioning: *What has God called me to do with my life? Because I actually don't think I'm made to lead a giant church like this.* And it was the beginning of a new path."

After months of discussion by Solid Rock's leadership team, the megachurch disbanded. Each site became its own independent church. Comer chose to lead not the largest of the sites—the one in the suburbs—but the little site in the heart of the city: Bridgetown. The church switched to an elder system that split up leadership responsibilities; Comer became "pastor for teaching and vision," while co-elder Gerald Griffin became "pastor of staff and community."

In short, Comer demoted himself. He's never regretted it.

"I learned the hard way that I'm not an apostle," Comer says. "To lead a really large multi-site church, you need somebody who is at least apostolic in that nature, who is a father and a leader of leaders. I just had to make peace with the reality that, *Oh well, that's not who I am.* I'm introverted. I'm a teacher. I love to do spiritual direction one-on-one, but I don't come alive leading teams of people. I'm horrible at management. You know, I got into this thing to teach the way of Jesus and help people pray, and I ended up becoming the executive director of a nonprofit with 93 people on staff, and I'm like, 'Wait a minute!'"

Comer says it's difficult to gauge spiritual fruit or ministerial effectiveness. After all, those things can't be judged by human metrics—and none of us has heaven's perspective. But he believes it was the right decision—for both him and his church.

“I feel like God is using me more than I ever have been used, even though our church is much smaller than the one I used to lead,” Comer says. “I think it’s a myth that more busyness equals more effectiveness. I find that the more I pare my life down and just do a couple of things to the best of my ability—and my ability isn’t even all that great sometimes—the more effective I become. Maybe I’m going deeper, not wider. At the time, it felt like I was sacrificing role, calling and effectiveness. But I think it’s turned out to be exactly the opposite.”

And though his journey was intensely personal, Comer believes it’s a process most people will go through at some point.

“If you live and have any kind of vocation that you do for a living—whether it’s church or something else—at some point you have to really make peace with both your potential and your limitations,” he says. “Recognize what you can do and what you can’t do, and make peace with that. Let go of comparison, let go of envy and let go of ambition, and just begin to do your work—not out of ego or striving, but really just out of love.”

## **A Creative Minority**

In many countries in Europe, passionate believers in Jesus are already a minority. And though America’s future is not yet set, Comer says it’s hard to believe anything short of a miracle or disaster could shift the U.S. from following the same post-Christian trajectory.

“I don’t say this out of lack of faith, but—barring like a Third Great Awakening or some kind of zombie apocalypse where America is brought to its knees by great suffering—I don’t see a world where we go back to the archetypal Christian America,” he says. “...I think that secularism is here to stay. And now the shift is, ‘All right, how do we become a church in exile?’”

Like many theologians today, Comer compares the state of the

Western church to the exile of the Israelites into Babylon. During that time, the Israelites had to find ways to maintain their spiritual distinctiveness in the face of a larger culture that sought to assimilate them. From a position on the margins of society, ancient Israel had to learn how to operate as a creative minority that could not only thrive spiritually but bless and impact the host culture.

Co-elder Griffin says the unique intensity of the charismatic church is well-suited to secular urban environments, because it fosters a certain desperation for a move of God. He points to the 24-hour prayer movement, which in London was birthed out of passion and necessity.

“What we’ve experienced is there’s a sense of desperation,” Griffin says. “People aren’t going to come to church just because you’ve got a good speaker and a good band. ... If you’re going to be a Christian in Portland or one of these other cities, you’re not doing it because your parents did it. You’re doing it because you mean it.”

So if the future of the United States (and the broader Western world) is Portland, then what does that mean for the church? Bridgetown—like many other young urban churches—is proof that a Spirit-filled church can grow and thrive in the midst of a hostile environment. Comer attributes it to four primary emphases: radical discipleship, strong communities, rigorous fidelity to orthodoxy and evangelistic hospitality.

For Bridgetown, radical discipleship means a faith rooted in spiritual disciplines, not in cultural Christianity.

“Cultural Christianity burns up in about three seconds in this city,” Comer says. “The only thing that will last is rigorous, disciplined, joyful, serious followership to Jesus.”

Those disciplines include prayer, Scripture reading, life in community, Sabbath, and silence and solitude. And because most Millennials did not grow up being taught the spiritual

disciplines, Bridgetown has made it a point to teach them. For more than two years, the church has slowly been working through a series called "Practicing the Way," which—in coordination with small groups—trains believers to carry out these disciplines. Comer says the hardest ones to teach have been Sabbath, silence and solitude—really, anything that requires people to slow down and reorient their schedule.

The second emphasis for Bridgetown is on building tight-knit communities that encourage both service and growth. Though many churches stress the importance of small groups, Bridgetown emphasizes them over Sunday gatherings or any other church program.

"We practice the Lord's Supper actually as a full meal around the table in homes, rather than a cracker and juice on Sundays," Comer says. "It's all pretty much neighborhood-based. So these are people who live in the same part of the city together. The groups are built around eating together around the Lord's Supper and then helping each other follow Jesus."

Bridgetown's third major emphasis is a "rigorous fidelity to orthodoxy," as Comer puts it. One look at the church, its young members or its social media accounts is enough to mark it as a hip, trendy church. But its leaders say it's important to never forget the church must never bow to the broader culture.

"We're a counterculture in the city," Comer says. "So we're not just here to play spiritual chaplains to either the progressive vision of life or the conservative vision of life. We're here to follow Jesus and live as an alternative society of heaven right in the middle of earth—to the best of our human, messy ability."

That's sometimes easier said than done, but Comer believes it's vital for building a church that will flourish in

Babylon.

"We try to teach people from Day One: 'This is a counterculture. You're a part of a counterculture,'" Comer says. "We don't live, we don't do money, we don't do sexuality, we don't believe, we don't think, we don't relate in the same way that people on the left or the right relate in our city. But we're attempting to live out the way of Jesus. The myth that I think so many people believe in cities is that progressive or liberal theology and practice is the future, but ... the data is overwhelming. When churches or followers of Jesus go progressive or go liberal, 9 times out of 10, they just filter out. They either move away from God completely, or they move into this quasi, post-church, post-Bible, vague spirituality kind of space."

The final emphasis for Bridgetown is hospitality as a form of evangelism. Comer refers to evangelism as "relationship with people who don't follow Jesus yet." He says that though he has a lot of respect for the late evangelists Billy Graham and D.L. Moody, their altar-call model may not work for a post-Christian context.

"In the old model of evangelism, there's a 40-minute sermon or gospel presentation, and then an altar call at the end," Comer says. "Wonderful! But if you read not just Billy Graham but even, before him, Moody, ... they said, 'This model works, because we're basically calling people to just act on what they already believe.' All these people already believed in God and Jesus in the Bible; they just weren't living into it. They were living into all sorts of other behaviors and lifestyles. So D.L. Moody was just calling people to come to Jesus. He didn't have to start with, 'Are you an animal or an image bearer of God? And is there a God? And is there morality?'"

"You know, we just have to start so much farther back with secular people. So for us, the entry point to evangelism is

more hospitality. Then it's church—things like Alpha, through communities and neighborhoods—and then just through individuals and families around tables. We really are leaning into hospitality as our go-to practice for evangelism."

## **Supernatural Future**

In sermons, Comer will sometimes joke that Bridgetown used to be "theologically charismatic but functionally cessationist." But over the last decade, the church's leadership team has made pursuing the gifts of the Spirit an emphasis for the church. Griffin names John Wimber and the Vineyard Church, as well as several ministries in the United Kingdom—Soul Survivor Warford, Worship Central and Holy Trinity Brompton (which founded Alpha)—as major influences on Bridgetown.

"John Mark and I both were kind of 'closet charismatics,'" Griffin says. "When we first met, he asked, 'Do you ever speak in tongues?' I said, 'Yeah. You speak in tongues?' He said, 'Yeah, but not at church.' And we're not the only ones. ... There's a lot of people who grew up in Bible churches that were basically cessationist, and I think there's just a desire for more."

Trying to train a large church of young intellectual Millennials to not only acknowledge but operate in the gifts of the Spirit has been a wild ride, Comer says. He'll be the first to say they have a long way to go. But he also calls it "one of the most joyful, life-changing, radical shifts in my church experience."

Comer says it's counterintuitive to try and reach cerebral, secular Portland with the supernatural. But he quotes Albert Einstein: "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used to create them."

"Our experience has been that it's really hard to argue people into the kingdom of God or to intellectually convince people who aren't interested," Comer says. "But it's really hard to

argue with a healing or a prophetic word, or love and forgiveness and hospitality. You know what I mean? It's what Paul would call the demonstration of the Spirit's power. Paul was a brilliant intellectual and was radically in tune with the cultural currents of his day. He goes out of his way to critique the religious and political and cultural narratives in his Greco-Roman world. Yet at the end of the day, Paul said, 'You know this is true, because we heal people, we cast out demons and we offer prophetic words.'"

Comer also believes newfound interest in Eastern spirituality like yoga and mindfulness may be rekindling spiritual openness among the next generation. That opens the door for a genuine miracle to point them to Jesus.

"I guess we're trying to fight for both/and," Comer says. "We do want to present an intellectually compelling case for Jesus and a faith that is based on knowledge and makes sense. But at the same time, we just recognize that alone will not remotely do it. We also have to live in a demonstration of the Spirit's power."

Comer believes the next generation of the Spirit-filled movement will simultaneously look very similar and very different from the last generation. The theological truths must stay the same, but the culture and politics surrounding them will inevitably change—and that's OK.

"Take a church movement, like the Pentecostal movement, or the charismatic movement or the Jesus movement," Comer says. "Often, two things come up together and get intertwined. One is a genuine theology and practice, which in this case would be life in the Spirit, ... and then the other is a culture that comes up with it."

For example, he says, "When people hear 'Pentecostal,' they don't just think of doctrines about tongues or prophets. They also think of a whole culture—everything from fashion to

socioeconomics to various cultural emphases around politics. Right or wrong, those two things are tied together. So I think a lot of the culture that people associate with that 1970s and '80s charismatic renewal and Pentecostal movement around America will shift and change. But the throughline of a robust theology of the Holy Spirit at work through the manifestations of the Spirit, like prophecy, healing, tongues, faith and miracles? I think that is not only going to continue, but I think it's actually going to shoot through the roof."

Comer believes the church is on the precipice of another charismatic renewal. He sees enthusiasm for the gifts of the Spirit rising among his peers.

"I know so many young leaders who do not fit that kind of Pentecostal or charismatic cultural mode, who are often in urban, sophisticated cities but who are hungry for more of the Spirit," Comer says. "They are actively attempting to find ways to host the work of the Spirit in gatherings and offstage, even if it's in a different kind of cultural expression. And I have so much hope. I think we're coming into a charismatic renewal across the Western church."

When that renewal comes, the younger generation will need the wisdom and blessing of mature believers.

"The more that the last generation can pass the baton and just prophesy blessing over the emerging generation, the better," Comer says. "We're in such desperate need of fathers and mothers as a generation, [particularly] fathers and mothers who call out our destiny and prophetically empower and release us into the future. Take that role of spiritual parents who move from parenting little kids—who need to be policed and protected—to parenting adult kids who need to be released and empowered. Lots of churches right now are turning over leadership, and a whole next generation is waiting in the wings. I think the future of [the movement] will depend on the level of release and empowerment that comes from the previous

generation.”

Though there are challenges, Comer says it’s exhilarating to minister in a post-Christian city like Portland.

“There are days when it’s just exhausting, the level of hostility to Jesus and His way,” Comer says. “How jarringly different the worldview is in Portland to that of Jesus and the writers of the New Testament. ... But man, it is also really exciting to be here. Because we don’t have all the answers, but it feels really good to be asking questions in a city like this.”

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