

CHAPTER 1

THE INVENTIVE AGE



In 2003 I wrote about the holistic, missional Christian community called Solomon's Porch where I am a pastor. At the time, the church was three years old. Now, in 2011, the church is eleven years old. We've changed quite a bit since 2003, and like a house that's starting to show its age, this book needed a bit of a remodel.

A few years ago, Shelley, my wife, and I remodeled the kitchen of our 110-year-old house. The purpose of the remodel was not just to make the kitchen look different; it was to give us a new way of living in our house.

Our house was built in Minnesota toward the end of the Agrarian Age. While the official paperwork on the house dates it at 1930, I discovered it was actually built in the late 1890s. As I opened the walls in preparation for the remodel of the kitchen, I found newspapers used for insulation that were dated 1897. So either the builders of the house were quite the pack rats and hoarded newspapers for 30 years, or the house was redated when our part of town was officially incorporated in 1930. I chose to believe the latter.

In the one hundred-plus years since our house was built, the way people use a kitchen has changed. Back

then, there was likely only one person doing the cooking, so the folks building the house didn't worry about making space for multiple people to work in the kitchen at the same time. Back then, they didn't have appliances that sat on the counter. They didn't have recycling bins. They didn't have snack drawers or dishwashers or giant upright refrigerators and therefore didn't need the space those things require. We wanted to be able to eat in our kitchen, something unheard of in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—that's what the dining room was for. So we remodeled the house to fit the way we live in it.

After several months of upheaval, we had a "new" kitchen. But it wasn't entirely new. The walls are the same walls and one of the windows is from the original kitchen. It's in the same location relative to the family room and dining room. So it's a mix of what was there before and what needed to change to reflect the way we live in our house.

This book is a bit like our kitchen—a refreshed version of what was there alongside new ideas that make it a bit more inhabitable.

In part, the remodeling of this book is due to the way our community has changed since the book was first published. But it's also due to the way the culture in which our church exists has changed. When we started Solomon's Porch, we had just entered a new millennium. What we didn't know is that we had also entered a new era, one I have come to call the Inventive Age.

If you've come to this book having read my most recent book, *Church in the Inventive Age*, then you already know what that term means. If you're new to the phrase, let me give you a quick overview.

For most of human history, changes in broad social structures came occasionally and were limited in

geographic scope. But in the last two centuries, cultural change has become far-reaching, constant, and increasingly rapid.

In the last two hundred years, American culture has moved through three distinct ages—the Agrarian Age, the Industrial Age, and the Information Age—and is heavily engaged in a fourth—an era I have dubbed the Inventive Age. With each of these ages has come a shift in what we think, what we value, what we do, and how we do it.

I was once in a small group meeting with famed organizational expert Peter Drucker. Out of everything he said at that meeting, one thought has stuck with me more than the others. He said, “The world my parents were born into was essentially the same as the world of Abraham and Sarah from the Bible.”

He was, of course, right. Drucker, born in Vienna in 1909, was pointing out that the world into which his parents were born—specifically Austria in the nineteenth century—operated under a social structure that had been in place in rural areas for a millennium. He contrasted that with the world into which he was born—Austria at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. Just one generation earlier, the majority of human beings lived like their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents had. They worked the land, rarely lived more than one hundred miles from where they were born, and knew they’d be lucky to see their fiftieth birthdays. Mid-nineteenth-century culture was, as Drucker said, nearly identical to the culture of the ancient Israelites. Both were part of the Agrarian Age.

The Industrial Revolution of the late 1800s brought about dramatic cultural upheaval in Europe and the United States. Certainly earlier inventions like the printing press had a broad impact on society. But the printing press didn’t directly change the way people fed themselves or

moved from place to place or earned a living. The Industrial Revolution did.

People moved from farms to cities. Men and women who had once worked alongside each other in the fields left their families at home to work in factories. Manufactured goods became the currency of the culture.

The next cultural shift began while the Industrial Age was still booming. During the 1920s and '30s, the Information Age began to take hold, thanks in no small part to the growth of the manufacturing and shipping industries that had taken place during the Industrial Age. As people had access to books, newspapers, radios, and eventually televisions, knowledge and information became the most valuable assets of the culture.

In the same way, the Inventive Age is being born out of the Information Age. Knowledge is no longer the goal, but the means by which we accomplish new—even unimagined—goals.

Few cultural institutions have been able to move through all of these shifts with their central identity intact. The church has been a steady—though not unchanged—presence in each age. It has remained when so many other cultural institutions have either fallen away completely or morphed so cleanly that they no longer resemble their former selves. I believe that's because the church has been both shaped by and a shaper of culture.

There are people who hate the idea that the culture impacts the church. They like to think of the church as a bastion of stability in a sea of turmoil. They want to believe that the church has somehow maintained a pristine, untouched essence even as the muck of society has swirled around it.

That's simply not the case.

This isn't an insult to the church. The church ought to place itself squarely in the midst of a culture. Everything from the kinds of buildings we call churches to the way we expect our pastors to preach, our theology to be laid out, and our furniture to be arranged is meant to communicate something to the culture in which a church functions. I think that's good news.

As American society has moved from the Agrarian Age through the Industrial Age into the Information Age and now on to the Inventive Age, the church has moved right along with it. In each age, the church has adopted new values (the small, rural communities of the Agrarian Age gave birth to the parish model of church), new beliefs (the growing literacy of the Industrial Age changed beliefs about who could and should read the Bible), new aesthetics (the Information Age gave us education wings and Sunday School curriculum), and new tools (microphones and song lyrics on the big screen are products of the Inventive Age) that reflect the changes in the culture in which it exists.

HERE WE ARE, IN THE THICK OF THE INVENTIVE AGE.

It's an age when we have no idea what's coming next or where it will come from—and for many of us, it's thrilling.

Much of what we knew for certain fifteen, even ten years ago—that you needed a cable coming into your house to make phone calls, that a car could only run on gas, that once you started wearing glasses you had to wear them for life—has been turned upside down.

Right now, we live in a world filled with ideas and tools and discoveries we couldn't have imagined twenty years ago. There is bioengineered corn growing in the African desert. You can carry a library's worth of books in your hand and your entire CD collection in your pocket. Scientists can create entirely new materials at the sub-atomic level. You can get a college degree from your living room. There are people living in a space station. What's more, I can talk to them through my Twitter account!

In 1963 the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office processed 90,982 applications. In 2008 it processed 485,312. While the U.S. population doubled in that time, patent applications have increased more than five times.

But the Inventive Age isn't solely about inventions any more that the Agrarian Age was solely about farming. As in the previous ages, the Inventive Age is marked by changes in the way we think, what we value, what we do, and how we do it.

In every sphere of society—the hard sciences, social sciences, art, sports, music, health, technology, economics, transportation, communication—there is a level of creativity that surpasses even the Industrial Age for its impact on the culture.

That creativity has altered the way we think about ourselves. Children, young adults, and even older folks no longer wonder what they will be when they grow up. Now we ask, What do I want to do with my life? How do I want to spend my time? What can I contribute? These aren't questions about vocation. They are questions about impact, about meaning. We sense that there is no end to the options and that the future is ours to make.

The Inventive Age is one in which inclusion, participation, collaboration, and beauty are essential values. The values of the previous ages still exist, but in different, even

subservient, roles. Knowledge is important, but only as a means to discovering something else. Repeatability matters but only as it relates to advancing an idea. Survival, however, is barely on the radar of most Americans; where nature was once a major threat, it is now something we have tamed and used and manipulated so heavily that there are cultural movements designed to save it. Not long ago, humanity feared the earth. Now we fear for the earth.

This is the age of Pandora, where I tell an online radio station what to play. It is the age of the App Store, where a major corporation hands control over to an open-source network of ordinary people. It is the age of Wikipedia, where anyone can decide what a word or concept or cultural touchstone means. It is the age when a bunch of college kids create a social network and seven years later it has more than 500 million users.

It is the age of ownership and customization and user-created content.

The impetus behind all of this personalization is not narcissism. It's the longing to attach meaning to experiences. People in the Inventive Age are looking for a sense of ownership, not of things or even ideas, but of our lives. We are keenly aware of our global community and how interconnected our lives are with the lives of people all over the world.

That sense of global community can be overwhelming. We want both to create our own place in that community and to contribute to its vitality. We don't want to simply use resources created by and controlled by others. As a result, there is a shift in the seat of authority. It isn't in the wisdom of the village leaders or the deep pockets of the factory owners or the knowledge of the corporate executives. Authority is found in the way our experiences come together and create reality. It is found in

relationships. We tend to be suspicious of objectivity, uncertain if it is possible or even desirable. Instead, we give great credence to authenticity, to context. Authority—as much as anything else in the Inventive Age—is user generated.

The implications for the church are just beginning to emerge. In the last ten years or so, the values of the Inventive Age—the drive to create, the search for meaning, the sense of ownership, the open-source mentality that pushes the Inventive Age ever faster into the future—have scattered across the landscape of American Christianity like seeds in the wind.

How they will take root remains to be seen. What is clear is that just as the previous ages created the norms of the church in their day, so it will be in the Inventive Age. And just as church leaders in those ages asked difficult questions about change, so it will be up to you to decide how you will be the church in this age.

That's where this book comes in. Solomon's Porch is a church of the Inventive Age. As I look back over our last eleven years, I see the ways that our values as a community reflect the values of the Inventive Age. The ways we have changed over these eleven years have echoed the ways in which our culture has changed in that time.

This hasn't really been intentional on our part—it's just what happens when Inventive Age people start a church. But we have found much that is life-giving about being the church in the Inventive Age and we want to share that with other communities.

It's far too early to know where all of this will lead—there are churches all over the world working on their experiments in being the church in the Inventive Age and there's no telling what will take hold and what won't. To be

sure, churches in the Inventive Age will have our share of mistaken notions, questionable practices, and bad ideas. But right now, at the dawning of a new age, it all feels like a beautiful revolution.