



An Awkward Church

by Douglas John Hall

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Preface

Many people believe that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is in crisis. Declining membership, shrinking budgets, organizational disarray, and loss of influence characterize the General Assembly, most presbyteries and synods, and many congregations. Do these realities constitute the crisis, or are they symptoms of a deeper crisis?

Douglas John Hall maintains that "The crisis behind the crisis cannot be submitted to computer programming. For that rudimentary crisis is a *crisis of thinking*." [*Thinking the Faith*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989 p.12] Professor Hall 'thinks the faith' from within our North American cultural and ecclesial context. His theological work is not a timeless abstraction, but a rigorous attempt to engage Christian faith with social and historical actuality so that the gospel may be more faithfully proclaimed and lived.

The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit invited Douglas John Hall to address its final meeting in January, 1993. We asked him to help us think about the current state of the church, and to suggest possibilities that go beyond the treatment of symptoms. His two addresses comprise **Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 5, *An Awkward Church***. The Theology and Worship Unit offers them to the church in the hope that they will provoke conversation in congregations and presbyteries, helping us to 'think the faith' together as a way toward greater faithfulness.

The second of Professor Hall's lectures, "Ecclesia Crucis: The Theologic of Christian Awkwardness," has appeared in a somewhat different version in the theological journal *Dialog*. The Theology and Worship Unit is grateful to the publishers of *Dialog* for their permission to publish this address.

Douglas John Hall is Professor of Christian Theology in the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Among his many books are the first two volumes of a proposed trilogy, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*, and *Professing the Faith; Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross; The Reality of the Gospel and the Unreality of the Churches; The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death; and God and Human Suffering*.

Much of the work of the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit will be carried on by the Christian Faith and Life Program Area of the Congregational Ministries Division. Christian Faith and Life staff hope that many readers will continue the conversation begun in *An Awkward Church*. Please write, sharing any reflections you may have, including proposals for ways the church can respond.

Joseph D. Small, Coordinator
Theology and Worship

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**THE SPIRIT TO THE CHURCHES IN
NORTH AMERICA:
"DISESTABLISH YOURSELVES!"**

"And to the angel of the church in Ephesus write . . . 'I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance . . . But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first' . . ."

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write . . . 'I know where you dwell; where Satan's throne is; you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my witness . . . But I have a few things against you . . ."

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write . . . 'I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead . . ."

"And to the angel of the churches in North America write . . . 'Disestablish yourselves!' . . ."

Or so it seems to me. In these two addresses I shall try to explain *why* such a message might be appropriate, especially for the edification and reformation of the once-mainline Protestant churches of this continent. In this first address, I shall formulate what 'disestablishment' would have to mean within our particular context. There will be three sections. In the *first*, "The Future of a Glorious Past", I comment upon the confusion that reigns in the churches today as we find ourselves deprived of the triumphs that fifteen centuries of 'Christendom' promised us. In the *second* section, "The Tenacity of the 'New World' Form of Christian Establishment," I discuss the character of the 'cultural establishment' in our setting and the manner in which this complicates all attempts at liberating the faith from its societal moorings. And in the *third* and final section, "Disestablishing *Ourselves* as the Alternative to Being Disestablished," I come to the main thrust of this first lecture: that responsible Christians ought not to be fatalized by the humiliation of Christendom but ought rather to attempt to discern in this process of de-constantinianization new occasions for authenticity and, accordingly, ought to give positive *direction* to the process instead of allowing it simply to happen to them. In the second address, I shall speak about the *rationale* of such a counsel—the end in

relation to which a purposive, church-directed disestablishment can be a vital means.

I. THE FUTURE OF A GLORIOUS PAST

It is instructive, sometimes, to read older works of theology. It can also be humiliating, because apart from a few classics it is hardly possible to find any theological literature of the past which does not strike one as being so 'dated' that one is stung into the realization that one's own work will soon bear that same abysmal stamp of time. Probably it bears that stamp the minute it is uttered!

This is particularly true where theology has taken upon itself the awesome task of addressing the future, and more particularly still where it attempts to anticipate the future of Christianity itself. Recently, I came across a book published in 1934, *The Christian Message for the World*.¹ Subtitled "A Joint Statement of the World-Wide Mission of the Christian Church," its authors were great American Protestants of the period such as John A. MacKay, Kenneth Scott Latourett, and E. Stanley Jones.

The whole 'Statement' warrants careful reflection in the light of our theme; but what struck me with particular force was its way of reading *the Christian past*. That might seem an odd thing, since my object here (like the object of the book under discussion) is to consider the *present and impending future* of the Church in North America. But, of course, every assessment of what is coming to be begets and is begotten by an interpretation of what has been. We interpret the past in ways commensurate with our anticipation of the future for which we think we should strive.

Let me share with you a brief segment from the seventh chapter of this work, "The World Reach of the Christian Faith." What I would like you to notice is the way in which the past forms of Christian establishment are tacitly and unambiguously celebrated—a celebration needed by a church that conceives of its present mission in terms of the maintenance and further expansion of this same establishment:

From its inception Christianity has been expanding geographically. Beginning as an inconspicuous Jewish sect, one of the least of the many cults seeking to make a place for themselves in the Graeco-Roman world, it early outgrew its Jewish swaddling clothes, became cosmopoli-

tan in membership, and within less than four centuries was the dominant faith of the Roman Empire. When the Roman Empire collapsed, Christianity, although by that time closely associated with it, not only survived but won to its fold the barbarians who were the immediate cause of the overthrow, spread into regions in Northern and Western Europe which had not before known it, and became the chief vehicle for the transfer of the culture of the ancient world to the Europe of medieval and modern times. In the middle ages Christianity was an integral part of the intellectual, social, economic, and political patterns of the day. Its theology was formulated in terms of the prevailing scholasticism and it was apparently a bulwark of the existing feudal society.

Yet when the medieval world disappeared, Christianity persisted. Not only so, but when, in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries, European peoples spread into the Americas and won footholds in Asia, Christianity went with them, became the faith of the peoples whom the Europeans conquered, and ameliorated the cruelties of the conquest. When, in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, European peoples again expanded, colonizing fresh sections in the Americas, occupying all of Africa and the islands of the Pacific, and subjecting to their control much of Asia, Christian missions followed and in some instances anticipated the advancing frontiers of Occidental power, and modified profoundly the revolutionary results of the impact of Western upon non-Western peoples and cultures.

Occasionally Christianity has suffered major territorial reverses. In the Seventh and Eighth Centuries Islam won from it vast areas and numerous peoples. In the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries the wide-flung posts of Nestorian Christianity in Asia were almost wiped out by Tamerlane and his cohorts. In the present century the church in Russia has been dealt staggering blows. Yet in spite of the fact that Christianity has never fully regained the ground from which it was driven in these defeats, usually it has more than made good in other regions the area lost. Never has it been so widespread as today.

In the history of mankind no other religion has been

professed over so large a proportion of the globe or by so many people. From the outset Christianity has claimed for its message universality: it has maintained that it has a gospel for all men. More nearly than any other faith it has progressed toward the attainment of that goal. While of the other two great surviving missionary religion, one, Buddhism, has long been practically stationary, and the other, Islam, has made few if any major gains in the past hundred years, Christianity, in spite of the many obstacles which beset its path, is still spreading. In no similar length of time have its boundaries expanded so rapidly and so widely as in the past century and a half.²

Thus did our immediate theological and ecclesiastical forebears recount the history of the Christian movement. Thus did they lay a foundation in the past for the yet more auspicious future towards which they felt themselves moving. Today, informed and reflective Christian thinkers tell this story very differently, not only as to its details but also its general tone. It is a different story that is told in Langdon Gilkey's recent book, *Through The Tempest*,³ or Hans Küng's *Theology for the Third Millenium*.⁴ It is a different story that is assumed in David Tracy's *Plurality and Ambiguity*.⁵ Both *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*⁶ and *Christianity: Social and Cultural History*⁷—two of the most ambitious recent surveys of Christianity—tell the Christian story in a manner that diverges markedly from the book I just quoted. Concomitantly, all of these recent works entertain a quite different future.

Many influences have brought about this historiographic change: the decline of Christianity in the West; the decline of the West itself; the failure of the Modern vision; the new consciousness of their own worth on the parts of non-European peoples; a critical perception of the technological society on the part of many who have experienced its most 'advanced' forms; the impact of religious and cultural pluralism, especially perhaps in North America; and (not least) the *self-criticism* of serious Christianity—its recognition of its own questionable triumphalism, of patriarchalism, of the equation of the Christian mission with Christian and Euro-American expansionism, and so forth. Expressing a new realism about Christian history that is shared by many reflective Christians in our time, Hendrikus Berkof writes, "To a great extent official church history is the story of the defeats of the [Holy] Spirit."⁸

On the whole, however, the realism about our own Christian identity and vocation that informs contemporary Christian scholarship has not, it seems to me, penetrated the life and thought of the *churches* on this continent. Large segments of North American Christianity are content to tell the Christian story - past, present and future - in pretty much the same way we heard it in that lengthy quotation. In fact (and somewhat ironically), the missionary enthusiasm present in *The Christian Message for the World* — an enthusiasm engendered by liberal Christian expectations of the rapidly evolving 'Kingdom of God' — is today represented more consistently by conservative and so-called 'evangelical' Christians, who look to the twenty-first century in rather the same way the Liberals looked to the twentieth: as 'The Christian Century.'

Our conspicuously depleted once-mainline churches, with (to be sure) important exceptions, appear to waver between indifference and confusion. We do not know, either how we should think of the Christian past or what we should hope for by way of a Christian future. *Indifference* to this dilemma is indefensible and can only be sustained by persons who are not serious Christians. *Confusion*, on the other hand, is entirely understandable.

How could ordinary churchfolk *not* be confused about the identity and vocation of the Church? For fifteen centuries, Christians have been conditioned to believe that being Christian and being European or American were essentially the same thing, and that the Christian 'calling' was to spread Western Christian Civilization—to wit, Christendom!—over as much of the surface of the globe as possible. We have all, in one way or another, been nurtured on the same basic line of reasoning that permeated the 1934 book that I read from a moment ago. But while our liberal Christian forebears who created that statement really *believed* it, we, for the most part, harbour in our souls a deep if unacknowledged skepticism about such a story and its attendant vision. Yet, apart from a few thinkers, experimenters, and perhaps fools for Christ, most of us do not know what could *replace* such a conception of the church; and so we carry on . . . 'as if.'

II. THE TENACITY OF THE 'NEW WORLD' FORM OF CHRISTIAN ESTABLISHMENT

Confusion about the character and calling of the church is present in all the provinces of Christendom today, but in the United States

and Canada this confusion is both extraordinarily complex and . . . poignant. Yes, *poignant* because here, as (I suspect) nowhere else in the world, we are not only unprepared—psychically and spiritually—for what we must regard as failure, including Christian failure; but by the very nature of the case Christian failure is here bound up with failures of national visions—indeed, with the very ideological foundations of our society: what is called Modernity. That Christianity has not continued to manifest the unimpeded upward surge that so inspired the writers of the 1934 document is accompanied by the recognition that neither of our countries has made good the promise which, even in the midst of economic depression, could instill enormous pride in the hearts of Americans and Canadians sixty years ago. The humiliation of Christendom and the humiliation of New World optimism are inseparably linked. Thus, having little spiritual courage for undergoing humiliation at any level, we manifest in our common life today what I can only consider a kind of repressed melancholy—the melancholy of those who wish above all not to appear melancholy. Hence my word: *poignant*.

How should one account for this? So far as its ecclesiastical aspect is concerned, I attribute the complexity and ‘poignancy’ of our confusion about ourselves in large measure to the peculiarity of *our* form of Christian establishment. The establishment of the Christian religion in both Canada and the United States, particularly the United States, has been infinitely more subtle and profound than anything achieved in the European parental cultures. The reason for this is not very complicated. While the old, European forms of Christian establishment were legal ones—*de jure*—ours have been cultural, ideational, social—*de facto*. Or, to put it in another way, while the traditional establishments of European Christendom were at the level of *form*, ours have been at the level of *content*.

I suspect that our very refusal of *formal* patterns of Christian establishment has blinded us to the power of our *informal* culture-religious pattern. In both of our countries, there have always been influential voices reminding us of the separation of church and state. But only rather recently have a few voices alerted us to the paradoxical manner in which, while disclaiming any ties with government, representatives of the Christian religion could always assume highly if not exclusively favorable attitudes towards Christianity, not only on the part of most citizens, but also of officialdom. Soren Kierkegaard’s critical witness against ‘Christendom’ in mid-nine-

teenth century Europe was coterminous with what Sydney Mead identified as the point at which Christianity and Americanism became merged into a unified sort of spirituality.⁹ But I suspect Kierkegaard [1813-1855] would not have known what to say in the face of a Christian establishment which had refused the status of legality and was, partly for that reason, all the more entrenched socially and even (in a hidden way) legally!

The tenacity of the North American cultural establishment of Christianity is evident today as both Europe and North America encounter the effects of Christendom's decline. I find it interesting to notice the quite different ways in which Western European churches and North American churches have responded to the processes of secularization and ecclesiastical reduction. On the whole, I think, the Europeans have managed this transition much more gracefully than we. I do not admire everything that is transpiring in European Christianity today—and certainly not the presumptuous hope, entertained in some very high quarters, that with the disintegration of Marxist states, Christendom may reclaim exclusive cultic rights to its old European home! But I confess that I do admire the way in which many European Christians, West and East, have *accepted* the new, minority status of believing Christianity, and have experienced this as both release and opportunity: release from the duties of chaplaincy to authority; opportunity for truer, untrammelled service of God and creation. This is what I covet also for us in North America; but I know that for us it is not easily come by.

Perhaps legally established relationships are always more readily dissolved than the more indefinite relationships of mind, will, and heart. Legal arrangements such as those between European states and churches, even if they have lasted for centuries, are set aside with relative ease as soon as both parties desire it or (what is more likely) the stronger party, the state, no longer benefits from it. There are religious leftovers, of course: church taxes may still be collected and—as in West Germany—most people may still dutifully pay them; state occasions, like the coronation of British monarchs, will still require religious pomp and sanction. But it is relatively clear to everyone concerned where the line is drawn between serious faith and civic cultus. With us in North America, on the contrary, Christ and culture are so subtly intertwined, so inextricably connected at the subconscious or unconscious level, that we do not know where one leaves off and the other begins. The substance of the faith and the substance of our cultural

values and morality appear, to most real or nominal Christians in the United States and Canada, virtually synonymous.

(Allow me a homely personal illustration: Several years ago I spoke to an ecumenical gathering in a far western state of this country on the theology of stewardship. In the discussion that followed my lecture a middle-aged man remarked, with little ceremony, that he had “never heard such un-American stuff!” When I confessed to him that I hardly knew, as a *Canadian*, how to respond to this categorization of my message—what did he mean by ‘un-American’—he quipped, “Easy! It just means unChristian.”)

Our new world variety of Christian establishment has enormous staying-power because it is part and parcel of our whole inherited ‘system of meaning,’ a system intermingling Judeo-Christian, Enlightenment, Romantic-idealist, and more recent nationalistic elements so that even learned persons have difficulty distinguishing them. One cannot, therefore, judge ordinary folk who equate unchristian and unamerican sentiments, or what they hear as such. For the average North American church-goer, it is confusing in the extreme to entertain the ‘different’ picture of the Christian past that much scholarship is painting today, because that entails entertaining a different conception of his or her nation’s past as well—in short, of the *whole* past. And if it is hard for such persons to accept another rendition of our *past*, it is even harder for them to conceive of a *future* that may be fundamentally discontinuous with that officially glorious past. In some of the traditions springing from the radical wing of the Reformation the idea of a Christian community separate and distinct from the majority culture can still achieve at least a formal hearing; but in our formerly ‘mainline’ denominations the thought that the Christian identity and vocation would require a deliberate *distancing* of the church from the pursuits and values of dominant society is still so foreign as to be ungraspable, even at the intellectual level. Emotionally it is mostly abhorrent—“unamerican!”

III. DISESTABLISHING OURSELVES AS THE ALTERNATIVE TO BEING DISESTABLISHED

And yet, our *effective* distancing from the dominant culture is happening quite apart from our willing it. We are no longer ‘mainline churches’ or ‘major denominations’ in anything but the historical sense of having grown out of older families of Christendom. We are not ‘mainstream

churches' if that term implies (as it does for most people) a certain social status: the status of unquestionable social respectability; the status of right-thinking American Christianity; the status of the unofficially official churches of our society. We may be allowed to play that role here and there, but I think we are deluded if we imagine that it is a role our society reserves for us alone, or that it will simply be held open for us, world without end! I do not mean that we are socially insignificant—in fact (as I shall say later) I believe that we have greater potentiality for genuine public significance now than we actually had in the past, in part because we are *not* 'mainline.' But for the moment my point is only that most of the denominations which formerly could claim for themselves such distinctions as 'mainline' or 'mainstream' or 'majority' status are undergoing a shift to the periphery.

This shift is partly—but only partly—made conspicuous at the quantitative level. According to the recent work, *Christianity: Social and Cultural History*, "... most of the denominations that dominated America's religious life before the Civil War (Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists) are in decline." Between the years 1940 and 1986 there was an increase in the population of the United States from 130 million to over 240 million, a rise of 83%. "Denominations defined by their European origins—for example, Lutherans and Mennonites—have grown at rates roughly comparable to the rise in population. Most of the older Protestant denominations have had rates of growth considerably below the rise in population, and some of the mainline denominations actually lost membership in the 1970s and 1980s."¹⁰ Specific figures are provided in this source and many others, such as David Barrett's exhaustive *World Christian Encyclopaedia*. Of particular importance is the marked increase of those who claim 'no religion'. According to the Barrett investigators, "White Westerners cease to be practicing Christians at a rate of 7,600 per day."¹¹

While theologians should not scoff at statistics, numbers do not tell the whole story. The effective disestablishment of Christianity in its traditional 'Western' form is experienced by all of us at levels of recognition which go deeper than our knowledge of church membership rolls and finances and other readily quantifiable data. If we have lived in North America for 50 or 60 years, then, unless we are amongst the exceptions, we have witnessed the advent of public attitudes towards religion which are vastly different from those that were prevalent in our teens and twenties. We have seen the rapid growth of

an almost complete religionlessness on the part of many; we have observed the erection, in our towns and cities, of temples and mosques and pavillions of faiths known to us formerly (if they were known at all) only out of storybooks; we have lived to witness the proliferation of *Christian* sects and (what is more unnerving to us!) their elevation to high social respectability, and even to the status of "normative Christianity"; we have observed, accordingly, how the instinct to belief (if there is such a thing) may now satisfy itself in literally thousands of ways that have little or nothing to do with the Christianity that we took for granted in, say, 1948. But beyond all that the discriminating amongst us have discerned the appearance of new attitudes towards the whole business of religion: that it is strictly an option; that it is a purely individual decision; that there is no reason why the children of believing parents should be considered potential members of religious communions; that religion may be useful, but truth doesn't apply to this category; and so on. Such nonquantifiable experiences as these were, I am sure, in the mind of the American Church Historian, Robert T. Handy, when he wrote in the final chapter of *History of the Churches in the United States and Canada*,

The American and Canadian churches entered the period following World War I devoted as they had always sought to be to the service of God and to the continuation of the patterns of western Christendom. . .

In the half century following World War I increasing numbers of persons both inside and outside the churches came to believe that their civilization was no longer basically Christian and that Christendom was a fading reality.¹²

The question with which these observations leave us is not whether we can continue to assume the supposed privileges of our historical form of establishment. Rather, the question is whether we shall simply allow the process of *being* disestablished to happen to us, or whether, as Christians and churches, we shall take some active part in directing the process. I do not believe that the process itself can be reversed; moreover, I do not believe that Christian faithfulness is well-served by *trying* to reverse it. The scramble to regain or retrieve or recreate 'Christendom,' entertained in various forms and programs by several powerful Christian groups in North America and beyond, seems to me both socially naive and theologically questionable. Even if it could be achieved (and it could not be achieved without violence, psychologi-

cal if not also physical), it would not, in my opinion, represent a faithful reading of the gospel for our context. After all, Christianity in the West 'enjoyed' fifteen centuries of almost monopolistic religious establishment. If we consider that history in the light of the Scriptures and our own best doctrinal traditions on the one hand, and of the socio-psychic realities of our contemporary world on the other, we can hardly with integrity desire a repetition of that highly ambiguous form of Christian existence. This truism was highlighted in 1992 by the 500th anniversary of the voyage of Columbus.

If, then, we find ourselves amongst those who can neither pretend that nothing has changed, nor ignore the whole situation, nor seek to reconstitute the Humpty-Dumpty that was Christendom, and if, at the same time, we are not content simply to allow the process of effective disestablishment to happen *to us*, the alternative that remains is to accept the reality of our new situation, looking for the *positive* possibilities that it presents, and seeking to give meaningful direction to what historical providence appears to have in store for us.

We could, of course, simply fall into despair. Many, I think, have opted for that choice—quietly, even wordlessly. One can understand their discouragement, but it is not necessary. Given a modicum of grace and imagination, thinking Christians today may prepare themselves to see in our disestablishment, not an impersonal destiny such as may be the fate of any institution, but the will and providence of God. Protestant traditions of theology insist that God is at work in history, and that the divine Spirit creates, recreates, judges and renews the body of Christ. What is happening to the churches of Europe and North America today cannot be received by us as though it were devoid of purpose. The hand of God is in it.

But our Protestant traditions of theology also insist that God's hand reaches out to the human counterpart, the covenant partner. History—including the history of the church—Christianly understood, should never be conceived of as that which willy nilly happens *to us*. Even though Christians must reject the Modern idea that we human beings are the 'makers' of history, the covenantal basis of our faith places upon humankind a participatory responsibility for the unfolding of God's purposes. Christians know themselves to be "stewards of the mysteries of God" [I Cor. 4:13]. Accordingly, we are called to participate in the judgement which begins at the household

of faith [I Peter 4:17], and to participate also in the re-forming of that household. *Semper reformanda!*

If, then, I say that the message of the Spirit to the churches of North America is, "Disestablish yourselves!" I mean precisely *that* kind of participation and stewardship. God is offering us another possibility, a new form, indeed, new *life!* But as always (and why should this surprise us?) we may accept this gift of the new only as we relinquish the old to which we are clinging. We may re-form ourselves according to the new (but is it not also a very old?) form only as we give up time-hallowed assumptions, automatic practices, beliefs so conventional as to be thought eternal, comfortable relationships with our world—all those things which belong to a form of the church that is no longer viable, which no longer truly lives and no longer gives life. If we just wait for more and more of those things to be taken from us by societal forces over which we have little control, we shall not even save for the future what was good in our past. If we disengage *ourselves*; if with courage and trust we release our hold on what we have been conditioned to believe was the immutable form of the church; if, to use a newer Testamental image, we lose our life, ecclesiastically speaking; then we may in fact gain our life as Christ's living body.

Conclusion

In the second address, I intend to speak to the question: What would disestablishing ourselves mean, concretely? In particular, what is the end that could be served if, instead of passively accepting the process of reduction and marginalization, Christian leaders and people sought to give it form and direction?

For the present, I conclude with the final sentences of Robert Handy's *History of the Churches in the United States and Canada*:

The churches have faced many times of testing; those that lie ahead may be far more thorough than any recounted in this history.

The stamp of the centuries is heavy on the churches of the present. To understand how to treasure what was right and good in that complex past and how to abandon what was wrong or outdated will take all the wisdom and guidance which Christians seek in their worship of God as known in Jesus Christ.¹³

- ¹ E. Stanley Jones, Kenneth Scott Latourett, John A. MacKay *et al.*, eds.; New York: Round Table Press, Inc.
- ² *Ibid.*, pp. 149-151.
- ³ Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.
- ⁴ trans. by Peter Heinegg; New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1988.
- ⁵ San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987.
- ⁶ Ed., John McManners; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- ⁷ New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., and Toronto: Collier Macmillan Canada, 1991.
- ⁸ *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. by Sierd Woudstra; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979; p. 422.
- ⁹ “. . . . during the second half of the nineteenth century there occurred an ideological amalgamation of [denominational] Protestantism with ‘Americanism,’ and . . . we are still living with some of the results.” Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment*; New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963; p. 134.
- ¹⁰ Howard Clark Kee *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 731.
- ¹¹ David Barret, ed., *The World Christian Encyclopedia*, Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982. John Taylor, in an essay entitled, “The Future of Christianity” which forms Chapter 19 of the aforementioned *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, indicates that this trend has been particularly marked in Western Europe: “There is no society more saturated with Christian influence. Yet the main thrust of that steep rise in the number of people in the world who are without religion . . . has occurred, not under anti-religious despotism, but in West Europe.” [p. 657]. Hans Kung’s one-sentence summary of the global situation seems generally accurate: “Of the three billion inhabitants of the earth, only about 950 millions are Christian and only a fraction of those take any practical part in the church.” (“The Freedom of Religions,” in Owen C. Thomas, ed., *Attitudes Towards Other Religions*; Lanham: University Press of America, 1986; pp. 195, 199.
- ¹² New York City: Oxford University Press, 1977; p. 377.
- ¹³ *Op.cit.*, pp. 426-427.

**ECCLESIA CRUCIS:
THE THEOLOGIC OF CHRISTIAN
'AWKWARDNESS'**

In the first address I proposed that Christians ought to provide positive guidance for the process of deconstantinianization in which, willy nilly, the formerly 'established' forms of the church are presently immersed. Now I would like to elaborate the larger rationale for such an exhortation. From a vantage point within the faith, disestablishing the church cannot be justified as an end in itself; it can only be a means, a strategy, a mode of transition to some better end. Therefore, I intend to discuss the *end* in relation to which cultural disestablishment is a means—in my view, a *necessary* means. Let me begin, without much subtlety, simply by stating the thesis that I want to demonstrate here. I would like to show that *intentional disengagement from the dominant culture with which, in the past, the older Protestant denominations of this continent have been bound up is the necessary precondition for a meaningful engagement of that same dominant culture.*

The demonstration of this thesis involves three steps. *First*, I must clarify what is entailed in an intentional disengagement from the dominant culture. *Second*, I must explain in a general way how such a disengagement could facilitate meaningful re-engagement of that same culture. And *third*, I must provide enough concrete examples of such a process to give it contextual credibility. There are probably many other things that I should have to do to persuade everyone here of the viability of this hypothesis, but I will have to leave the rest to heaven!

I. DISENGAGEMENT AS WORK OF THEOLOGY

What, then, is entailed in an intentional disengagement from the dominant culture? It is one thing to respond to such a question in societies such as most European societies have been, where Christian establishments are of the legal variety. It is something else to do so in our North American context, where what pertains is a cultural establishment. Just *because* ours is an establishment more of content than of form; just *because* our close ties with our dominant culture have existed at the level of fundamental beliefs, lifestyles, and

rudimentary moral assumptions; any effective extrication of ourselves from this severely limiting relationship has to occur at that more subtle level: the level of original *thought*. To put it quite clearly, for North American Christians who are serious about re-forming the church so that it may become a more faithful bearer of divine judgement and mercy in our social context, there is no alternative to a disciplined, prolonged and above all critical work of *theology*! I do not mean merely academic theology, but that passionate reflection Luther had in mind when he wrote, "Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligende, legendo aut speculando." ["It is by living—no rather, by dying and being damned that a theologian is made, not by understanding, reading or speculating."]¹

We must learn how to distinguish the Christian message from the operative assumptions, values, and pursuits of our host society, and more particularly those segments of our society with which, as so-called 'mainstream' churches, we have been identified. And, since most of the denominations in question are bound up with middle-class, caucasian, 'liberal' element of our society, what we shall have to learn is that the Christian gospel is *not* a stained-glass version of the world view of that same social stratum.

Of course this is easily said. It is also—in these days—said rather frequently. But I am not at all convinced that it has been grasped, except by a few. Moreover, the minorities in our midst who *have* taken seriously the need for Protestants in North America to distance ourselves from the world view of our conventional socio-economic constituency seem to me to err, often, in two fundamental ways:

First of all, some of these voices convey the impression that such distancing is the very *goal* for which we should strive, and not a means to our more authentic re-engagement of this same society. They give many indications of disliking this social stratum and everything that it stands for. They often seem to assume that First World, white, middle-class societies are by definition irredeemable; that they are driven by an irreversible logic of oppression and injustice. They tell us, in one way or another, that our only salvation as Christians is to cut ourselves off from our WASPish past and to align ourselves instead with those whom we oppress. One may understand the peculiar vehemence of such persons, especially those amongst them who know profoundly the plight of the victims of our society. Yet the abandonment of the oppressor is not a likely way of

effecting change. As Professor Wendy Farley of Emory University has aptly written,

... sensitivity to injustice and suffering often becomes a new dualism that categorizes human beings according to membership in the group of the oppressed or the oppressor. . . .

I am not convinced that this objectification of humanity into victim and executioner does justice to the complexity of the human individual or to the dynamic of evil. . . . The web that unites victim and tyrant in the same person is more complex than the white hat/black hat caricature that seems banal even in its natural habitat, the 'grade B' movie.²

The second questionable way in which minorities in the oncemainline churches try to re-form the churches is by identifying true Christianity with the adoption of what are perceived as radical positions on various contemporary issues of personal and social ethics. They insist that Christianity means advocating economic reforms aimed at greater global justice, or full scale disarmament, or the preservation of species, or gender equality, or racial integration, etc. Those who know my writings, will realize that I am entirely in agreement with such ethical conclusions. But they are *conclusions*. I do not think that one starts there. Perhaps the presentation of a radical ethic of economic justice, for example, might be a catalyst for genuine Christian evangelism. But on the whole, profoundly altered moral attitudes and specific ethical decisions are *consequences* of the gospel. When we present such consequences of grace and faith as if they were immediately accessible to everyone we are confusing gospel and law.

In that connection, one of the important insights of the recent publication, *A Social and Cultural History of Christianity*, is that *some of* "The difficulties of the older Protestant denominations may stem from their willingness to embrace ideas and trends as defined by the nation's media and educational elites, elites that are remarkably unrepresentative of the religion, politics, and values of the nation's population."³ It seems to me an incontrovertible truth that the Christian gospel erases all distinctions of worth and status between races and sexes. But it is the *gospel* that achieves this levelling. If, instead of gospel, what is proclaimed in the churches is nothing more

than the kinds of 'musts' and 'shoulds' and 'ought to's' that one can hear from many other quarters — along with the ubiquitous language of 'rights' — then we cannot expect church people to be any more receptive to such exhortations than are their counterparts in society at large.

The point is, the great changes that need to be effected in our churches are not first of all changes of behavior but changes of understanding and will. If the *thinking* of the churches—including congregations of middle class whites!—is altered, then we may expect changes in the realm of deeds as well. If, on the other hand, being Christian continues to mean little more than being predictable middle-class liberals with a tinge of something called spirituality, then the few exceptional things that congregations occasionally manage to perform ethically will lack any foundation in repentance and faith. They will show up (as they do now, for the most part) as exceptions: ad hoc ethical non sequiturs kept going by the enthusiasm of the few and the guilt of a somewhat larger cross-section of churchgoers.

By criticizing these two positions I am seeking to establish that, insofar as we are committed to genuine renewal in the churches that we represent, there are no short-cuts; *we must begin with basics*. We now have two or three generations of people in and around the churches who are not only unfamiliar with the fundamental teachings of the Christian tradition, but largely ignorant even of the scriptures. I realize that some denominations have been more diligent than others in the area of Christian education, but from what I can see—even where candidates for ministry are concerned—it is rather ludicrous for contemporary Protestants to boast that we insist upon an educated laity and uphold the principle, *sola scriptura*. We even have to ask ourselves whether we have a well-educated professional ministry, or at least a ministry whose basic theological education is continuously renewed, supplemented, and then incorporated into preaching and congregational leadership.

Gabriel and Dorothy Fackre have recently conducted an extensive survey on "The State of Theology in Churches", and in their Newsletter No. 30, dated Advent, 1991, they report: "The vast majority of respondents judged the state of theology in the churches to be 'abysmal,' 'dismal,' 'confused,' 'mushy,' 'sparse,' 'inarticulate,' 'deplorable' . . ."⁴ Such surveys, especially when they are conducted by

working theologians, are of course susceptible to the charge of professional bias. But even if the adjectives gleaned from the responses to the Fackre survey do not represent *every* church, they are too descriptive of the overall situation to be ignored by any of us. If there is so little understanding of Christian foundations in our congregations, how can we expect ordinary churchgoers to distinguish what is Christian from the usual amalgam of religious sentimentalism and what Ernst Käsemann called bourgeois transcendence? Until a far greater percentage of churchgoing Americans and Canadians have become more articulate about the faith, it is absurd to imagine that North American church folk could stand back from their sociological moorings far enough to detach what *Christians* profess from the mish-mash of modernism, secularism, pietism, and free-enterprise democracy with which Christianity in our context is so fantastically interwoven.

But that such a 'right dividing of the word of truth' is precisely what we have aim for is borne out by recent sociological studies as well as theological-ecclesiastical investigations like Fackre's. In their 1987 study, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future*, Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney write—

If a revived public church is indeed on the horizon, moderate Protestantism will play a key role in bringing it into being. This will require forms and qualities of leadership that have seldom been forthcoming from the Protestant middle; a revitalized ecumenicity and new, bold *theological* affirmations are critical . . . , especially a theology that resonates with and gives meaning to the experience of middle Americans.⁵

Disengagement from our status of cultural establishment is *primarily*, then, a work of theology. (And whoever thinks that theology is a remote, abstract undertaking has not yet been grasped by the Word of the Cross!)

II. AN ANCIENT DIALECTIC: 'NOT OF', YET 'IN'

My thesis (to remind you) is that intentional *disengagement* from the dominant culture is the necessary prerequisite to Christian *engagement* of that same culture. My first point is that the work of detachment is a theological work. The second step towards demon-

strating the viability of this thesis involves asking how *disengagement* can facilitate authentic *engagement*. Is that doubletalk?

I think not. The idea of *disengaging-in-order-to-engage* is by no means either contradictory or novel. Indeed, every meaningful relationship involves something like it, not as a once-for-all movement but as a continuous process. If you are part of something, simply part of it, you cannot engage it. With what, on what basis, would you do so?

Interestingly, the converse is also true: if you are altogether distinct from a given entity—completely different, of another order altogether—you cannot engage it. You lack the necessary connections, involvement, reciprocity. Genuine engagement of anything, anyone, presupposes a dynamic of difference and sameness, distinction and participation, a dialectic of transcendence and mutuality. Surely just such a relation is what the newer Testament has in mind when on the one hand it calls the disciple community to distinguish itself *from* 'the world,' and on the other sends it decisively *into* the world—and expects it to be all the more intensively *in* the world just *because* it is not (simply!) *of* the world.

The same dialectic of separation and solidarity may be applied to the situation in which, as North American churches of the classical Protestant traditions, we find ourselves at this juncture in our historical pilgrimage. George Lindbeck, in his seminal little book, *The Nature of Doctrine*, has expressed our present ecclesiastical situation vis-'a-vis our society in the clearest possible way: we are, he says, "in the awkwardly intermediate stage of having once been culturally established but . . . not yet clearly disestablished."⁶ In terms of the dialectic in question, the North American churches are both part of our culture and yet distinct—outside of it, or on the periphery.

Given the almost unequivocal accord between Protestantism and middle-Americanism that has characterized our past, the present duplicity of this relationship is indeed an "awkward" position for the churches to occupy; and therefore it is not surprising that our first inclination is to overcome it as soon as possible! Accordingly, Professor Lindbeck recognizes two ways, quite opposed to each other, in which Christians try to surpass their present ambiguous estate, socially and religiously.

One is the basically 'liberal' theological inclination to attempt, in whatever ways one can, to present the Christian message in "currently

intelligible forms." That is, to bridge the gap between gospel and situation, engaging in an apologetic that will reinforce the ties of trust and co-operation between the church and the sociological segments with which, traditionally, we have made our bed. Here, in other words, the 'awkwardness' is overcome by accentuating the dimension of participation and involvement: We are part of this dominant culture and we intend by hook or by crook to keep our standing with it! To that end, we will sacrifice many things dear to the tradition.

The other way of getting beyond the current 'awkward' stage in the relations between "Christ and Culture" (to use H. Richard Niebuhr's convenient nomenclature) is to accentuate the dimension of distance, difference, discontinuity vis _ vis the two. Lindbeck calls this the postliberal approach, though he explains that he intends that term to include such concepts as 'postmodern,' 'postrevisionist,' and 'post-neoorthodox.' The posture of this postliberal stance is kerygmatic rather than apologetic. According to this position (and I quote Lindbeck), "Theology should. . . resist the clamor of the religiously interested public for what is currently fashionable and immediately intelligible. It should instead prepare for a *future* when continuing dechristianization will make greater Christian authenticity communally possible."⁷

By that definition, it will be obvious to you that there is an element of 'postliberalism' in what I have been saying to you: 'Disestablish yourselves!' For the churches will have nothing to say to our ethos if we simply take our cue from our society and fill its ever-changing but always similar demands from the great supplyhouse of our traditions, loosely interpreted. We must stand off from the 'liberal' culture with which we have been so consistently identified, rediscover our own distinctive theological foundations, and allow ourselves to become, if necessary, aliens in our own country. In this, I am with Barth, with the late Bill Stringfellow, and perhaps (though I hardly know how to read the man!) with Stanley Hauerwas.⁸

And yet And yet I am also *not* with these people, for I am stuck with the belief that the gospel was made for humanity—not just for some *future* humanity, to be addressed by some *purser* form of the church, but for human beings, sinners, here and now. And because I cannot find myself at home in either the liberal *or* the postliberal camp, I question whether these are the only alternatives that we have—indeed, whether we should even admit the legitimacy of these alternatives!

If it is true that we are in the position Lindbeck describes as “awkward” (and I think that we are!), then instead of trying to escape from that position by resolving it one way or another, why should we not seek the positive and beneficial implications of just such a position? Awkwardness may be an embarrassment to the urbane ecclesiastical mentality that wishes always to seem cool, but perhaps it is also part of being fools for Christ!

Could we not make the awkward relationship between the church and the dominant culture serve the Christian evangel? Is it not—could it not become, in fact—a highly provocative situation in which we find ourselves: being at the same time ‘in’ but no longer quite ‘of’ our world of primary discourse? Such a situation could serve the mission of the crucified one only insofar as we sufficiently disengage ourselves from that world—intentionally, and not as pawns of an impersonal fate! If we are faithful and imaginative enough to disentangle our authentic tradition of belief from its cultural wrapping, we shall have something to bring to our world that it does not have: a perspective on itself, a judgement of its pretensions and injustices, an offer of renewal and hope. Only as a community that does not find its source of identity and vocation *within* its cultural milieu can the church acquire any intimations of ‘good news’ *for* its cultural milieu.

But while this ‘postliberal’ sense of discontinuity with the liberal cultures of the United States and Canada is a necessary stage on the way to church renewal, it is only a stage. The end in relation to which it is means is a new and existentially vital engagement of the same society from which it has to distinguish itself. And here, I think, the liberal insight is right. Because, as ‘liberal’ churches, we have *known* this particular segment of our society, we have both a responsibility towards it *and* a genuine potentiality for re-engaging it. Our ‘belonging’ to that so-called ‘dominant culture’ (if it is still dominant) constitutes the dimension of reciprocity and continuity without which it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve a re-engagement. Because most of us are also, in some continuing way, ‘of’ that white, middle-class, Protestant milieu, we know (from the inside) its questions, its anxieties, its frustrations, as well as its answers, consolations, and dreams. Thus, our former ‘establishment,’ which in the foreseeable future will still affect most of us at least at the personal, psychic level, is not a complete loss. Rather than something to be regretted and shunned, our former ‘establishment’ is a long and deep historical experience from which, if we are

sufficiently wise, we may gain much insight for the representation of the divine Word to that same world of expectation and experience. Indeed, if we did not have knowledge and memory of our 'establishment,' we would not be able to engage our 'world', no matter how stunning might be the message that we have for it!

III. FOUR WORLDLY QUESTS—AND CHRISTIAN WITNESS

My third and final task is to attempt to illustrate the principle of disengagement and engagement, discontinuity and continuity, which I have just described. I shall single out four human quests that are, at least in my perception, strongly present in the dominant culture of our two countries today. In each case, I want to show, first, how our society longs for something that its performance denies and its operative values frustrate; and second, how, as those who themselves participate in that longing, Christians may engage their society from the perspective of faith and hope. The four quests to which I will devote a little (but only, by necessity, a little) space are: (1) the quest for moral authenticity; (2) the quest for meaningful community; (3) the quest for transcendence and mystery; (4) the quest for meaning.

1. *The Quest for Moral Authenticity*: The emphasis here should be placed on the word "authenticity." I think that there is quest for *authentic* morality strongly present in our society today. The reason for this is bound up with the failure of *both* the old and the so-called 'new' moralities. People know now, better than they did in the 1960's and 1970's, that the permissiveness of the new morality leads to moral chaos, indeed to life-threatening danger. AIDS has dramatized this, but it is visible everywhere—to those who have reason to care.

Christopher Lash in *The True and Only Heaven*, considers the world from the perspective of a caring parent:

To see the modern world from the point of view of a parent is to see it in the worst possible light. This perspective unmistakably reveals the unwholesomeness, not to put it more strongly, of our way of life: our obsession with sex, violence, and the pornography of 'making it,' our addictive dependence on drugs, 'entertainment,' and the evening news; our impatience with anything that limits

our sovereign freedom of choice, especially with the constraints of marital and familial ties; our preference for 'nonbinding commitments;' our third-rate educational system; our third-rate morality; our refusal to draw a distinction between right and wrong, lest we 'impose' their morality on us; our reluctance to judge or be judged; our indifference to the needs of future generations, as evidence by our willingness to saddle them with a huge national debt, an overgrown arsenal of destruction, and a deteriorating environment; our unsated assumption, which underlies so much of the propaganda for unlimited abortion, that only those children born for success ought to be allowed to be born at all.⁹

The failure of 'the new morality' sends some of our contemporaries scurrying back into various and mostly desparate attempts to revive 'the old morality.' Yet while old moral codes may serve the private interests of some, they are impotent in the face of great public moral questions. Those who, like the parents Lash describes, know that private and public morality are inextricably connected find little comfort in the ethical absolutes of the past.

Most of us who are members of the once-mainline churches, whether lay or clerical, are well-acquainted with this dilemma personally. We ourselves, as parents or teachers or simply citizens, know from the inside how difficult it is to experience anything approaching moral authenticity today. We hardly dare to examine our own lives, for we sense both their moral contradictions and their deep but largely unfulfilled longing for authenticity.

Surely this is an integral aspect of our real participation in the 'world' that, as Christians, we are called to engage. We know the moral confusion of this world because it is also our confusion. What we have not yet fully grasped is that this very fact—our own participation in the anguished quest for moral authenticity—constitutes the apologetic necessity without which we could not begin to reach out to others. Instead of retreating into theological and ethical systems which only *insulate* us from the moral dilemmas of our contemporaries, we Christians must learn how to go to our scriptures and traditions as bearers and representatives of those existential dilemmas. How *does* 'gospel' address those who, in our time and place, "hunger and thirst for righteousness"—for moral integrity?

How *would* Jesus speak to affluent young parents, caught between yuppidoism and genuine concern for their children's future, and asking how to be "good"? If we can identify with those parents (and we can!) then perhaps we shall also begin to hear what our Lord would say to them. I suspect that what we would hear would be something quite different from what is proffered by the television sitcoms.

2. *The Quest for Meaningful Community*: The quest for meaningful community, like the quest for authentic morality with which it is closely related, is also conspicuous today because of a double failure: the failure of individualism, and the failure of most forms of community.

The pursuit of individual freedom and personal aggrandizement has been the ideological backbone of new world liberal society.

It grew out of ancient constricting and oppressive forms of human communality. It was never all bad, but we North Americans drove it to its absolute limits; it takes little wisdom to recognize that this cannot continue to be the cornerstone of *society*. There have always been inherent contradictions here, and the contradictions have caught up with us. There is no significant problem of either private or public life that can be answered responsibly today by liberal individualism. At the same time, we have witnessed the failure of most familiar forms of communality—dramatically so in Eastern Europe, but also in our own society, where a deep cynicism informs all public life and institutions.

In the churches that we represent, we are (to say the least!) not unfamiliar with all this. Most of us, as members and ministers of churches, know about this double failure. Our very congregations, which are supposed to be the Christian answer to the human quest for genuine community, are for many (if not most) church goers ingenuine—not to say artificial. And they even accentuate the failure of human community for those who do not 'fit' the economic, educational, racial or sexual mold that the churches still project.

We participate, then, as middle-class Christians, in this quest, and in its terrible frustrations. But instead of allowing the specifics of both the quest and its frustrations to challenge and inform our understanding and profession of the faith, we retreat into well-rehearsed,

rhetorical 'answers'. Because we do not permit the *quest* and the *questions* a significant place in our consciousness, we also fail to discern *responses* which, from the side of the tradition of Jerusalem, might indeed *engage* those who ask, including ourselves.

What would it mean to go to the scriptures—for example, to the Pauline metaphor of the body and its members—with such contemporary experiences and questions fully present and articulated? Not the familiar questions of generations of theological classrooms, but concrete questions posed by the lives we know, and honed into graphic forms by the best of our novelists, film-makers, and social commentators. Would a congregation whose life and work were informed by such an meeting of text and context be satisfied with the kind of community gathered for worship on Sunday mornings in towns and cities throughout North America, or at coffee hours after the worship?

3. *The Quest for Transcendence and Mystery*: Several important theological books in the 1960's celebrated the secular city: at last we could see the world for what it was, without investing it with all sorts of semi-pantheistic holiness! But secularism too has failed. Technology, its most precocious offspring, now appears to ordinary people as the mixed blessing that some wise ones of the Western world recognized much earlier. Scientist-theologian C.F. von Weizsacker wrote in the final paragraph of his 1949 book, *The History of Nature*, "The scientific and technical world of modern man is the result of his daring enterprise, knowledge without love."¹⁰ During the past ten or so years — primarily, I think, in the wake of environmental awareness — Western peoples have become newly conscious of the devastations humanity is capable of when it thinks itself accountable to nothing beyond itself.

This realization, perhaps combined with the aboriginal human "restlessness" of which Augustine spoke in the first paragraph of the *Confessions*, has engendered in many a new and (even when it is packaged in tinsel) entirely earnest search for some sense of transcendence and mystery. Many can now understand such judgements as that of Loren Eiseley, who did not speak of human difference from other creatures in the glowing terms of the Enlightenment: how we are "rational", capable of "free will", and so on. Rather, he spoke about how this "different" creature, homo sapiens, "without the sense of the holy, without compassion," possesses a brain which can "become a gray stalking horror—the deviser of Belsen."¹¹

Yet the quest for transcendence and mystery is constantly inhibited by the haunting awareness of our one-dimensionality. The 'death of God' (or was it the death of Humanity—capital H) still dogs our footsteps. We try very hard to create depth, to see ourselves against the backdrop of an eternity in which time is enfolded. Steven Spielberg and others give us ersatz heavens, in which we find ourselves loved by strange beings from outer space. Everyone has learned the word 'spirituality,' yet it is not so easy to overcome the rationalist impact of two centuries of Science: Knowledge without love!

Those of us in the churches also know these inhibitions. Try as we may, our services of worship bear about them the aura of the theatre (mostly, I fear, a very amateur theatre!), as though God were really dead and all that remains are our ritual performances for one another. Too often, I confess, these attempts at divine service put me in mind of King Claudius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.¹²

Insofar as we allow ourselves as Christians to know, in all honesty, the longing and the dissatisfactions of this contemporary quest for transcendence and mystery, we are also in a position to respond to it out of the riches of the JudeoChristian tradition, newly revisited. Here and there Christians are discovering how to discern the transcendent *within* the imminent, to see creation itself as mystery. But such discoveries depend upon a greater exposure to the bankruptcy of old familiar forms of 'spirituality' than we have managed in our safe and sedate churches. We have been conditioned to look for God in 'the beyond;' we are unaccustomed to looking for 'the beyond in the midst of life' (to use Bonhoeffer's memorable expression). Perhaps if we were to rethink our own tradition, bearing with us the terrible thirst for transcendence and mystery as it manifests itself in the soul of humanity post mortem Dei, we would more consistently discover the means for engaging it from the side of the gospel.

(4) *The Quest for Meaning*: Paul Tillich insisted that the basic anxiety by which modern Western humanity is afflicted is the anxiety of meaninglessness and despair.¹³ For a time, I think, the euphoria of secular humanism temporarily blunted the edge of this anxiety. If, as the existentialists affirmed, we could not count on being heirs to a

teleological universe, then we would create our own purpose, our own essence. Indeed many found that they could laugh at the old-fashioned search for "the meaning of life."

But a dimension of the alleged 'paradigm shift' through which we are passing has to do precisely with the failure of that kind of anthropocentric bravado. All over the Western world there are covert and overt attempts to discover purpose—not a purpose we ourselves invent, but an horizon of meaning towards which we may turn. As Kurt Vonnegut says one way or another in all of his strange and wonderful novels (perhaps cynically or perhaps seriously): purposeless things are abhorrent to the human species; and if the human species suspects that it is itself purposeless, it becomes conspicuously suicidal. Under the now-more-conscious threat of non-being, humankind asks openly for the meaning of being. Religion is again interesting. The Faculty of Religious Studies in McGill University (my large, secular university) is the fastest growing faculty of all. And this phenomenon is duplicated all over the Western world.

Yet purpose is not easily found after the breakdown of the modern system of meaning. And certainly it is not easily found in traditional religions. The increase in curiosity about religion is accompanied by a marked decrease in those very churches that were formerly the cultic bulwarks of our culture. In those same churches, we who remain also know how hard it is to discover meaning for our lives, individually and corporately. We participate both in the quest for meaning and in its limitations and defeats.

And therefore—*therefore!*—we may be in a position to rethink the basic things of our tradition in such a way as to discover that through which we may address our age with fresh insight and conviction. But this will only be possible if we expose ourselves less guardedly to the cold winds of the late 20th century and are ready to carry its spiritual emptiness and yearning, with all the particularity thereto pertaining, into the presence of the Holy One. The gospel may again speak to us, and make of us ambassadors for Christ, if we appear before that One with empty hands, with the questions of those whom we represent (which are also our questions) and wait for answers. . . . or rather, for the Answerer.

To conclude: I began by asserting—no doubt presumptuously—that the most urgent message of the divine Spirit to the churches in

North America today is that they should disestablish themselves. For until they have learned to distinguish the gospel of the crucified one from the rhetorical values, pretensions, and pursuits of this society, our churches will fail to detect, *beneath* the rhetoric of official optimism, the actual humanity that it is our Christian vocation to engage. In the service of the crucified, who is as present in the largely hidden oppressions of First World peoples as he is in the more conspicuous sufferings of the wretched of the earth, North American Christians must liberate themselves from the conventions of cultural religion.

Christian disengagement from the dominant culture is not to be confused, however, with the abandonment of that society. The end that we are to seek is redemption of our world, a world that is truly ours and of which we ourselves are part. Ours is the 'First' world which, despite its continuing bravado, has been given intimations of the judgement that the first may turn out to be last. Our role as Christians, as the people of the cross *within* that world, is precisely what Jesus said it was: to be salt, to be yeast, to be light! Our Lord's metaphors for his community of witness were all modest: a little salt, a little yeast, a little light. But Christendom tried to be great, large, magnificent. It thought *itself* the object of God's expansive grace, rather than the beloved world. Today we are constrained by the divine Spirit to rediscover the possibilities of littleness. We are to decrease, that the Christ may increase. We cannot enter this new phase without pain, for truly we have been glorious, at least in this world's own terms. It seems to us a humiliation that we are made to reconsider our destiny as "little flocks": salt, yeast, light. Can such a calling, we ask, be worthy of the servants of the Sovereign of the Universe?

Yet, if that Sovereign is the One who reigns from the cross, could any *other* calling be thought legitimate?

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- ¹ WA 5. 163.28
- ² *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990; pp. 51-52.
- ³ Howard Clark Kee *et al.*, p. 734.
- ⁴ Privately circulated to "friends and former students" under the title, *Theology and Culture Newsletter No. 30*, G.& D. Fackre, Andover Newton Theological School, 210 Herrick Rd., Newton Centre, MA 02159.
- ⁵ New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987; p. 243.
- ⁶ Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984; p. 134.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- ⁸ See e.g. *After Christendom: How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991.
- ⁹ *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (N.Y. and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991; pp. 33-34).
- ¹⁰ trans. by Fred. D. Wieck; Chicago: University of Chicago Press (Phoenix Books), 1949; p. 190.
- ¹¹ Cf. Richard E. Wentz, "The American Spirituality of Loren Eiseley," in *The Christian Century*, April 25, 1984; p. 430.
- ¹² Act III, Scene III.
- ¹³ *The Courage To Be*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1952.

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