

The Decline and Renewal of the American Church

By Tim Keller



This PDF is an aggregation of a series of four articles by Tim Keller originally published in Life in the Gospel (the quarterly journal of Gospel in Life) between 2021 and 2022. In this PDF Dr. Keller has added a significant amount of additional content and restructured the four articles into one seamless white paper of 6 chapters. This paper is intended to help pastors and church leaders go deeper on the topics addressed in the original four part series.

3 CHAPTER 1

The Decline of the Church: The Mainline

The Last Flourishing
The Shrinking Begins
Three Critiques
The End of American Cultural Unity
Where are we today?

16 CHAPTER 2

The Decline of the Church: Evangelicalism

What is Evangelicalism?
The Crises of Evangelicalism
Reasons for Hope

33 CHAPTER 3

The Cultural Moment

The Need for a Missionary Encounter
The Reality of the Great Decline
The Factors behind the Decline
The Problem of the Weather Vane

45 CHAPTER 4

The Renewal of the Church: What We Seek (The Ends)

The Need
The Vision
The Revival and Movement

57 CHAPTER 5

**The Renewal of the Church: How To Get There
(The Means—Laying the Foundation)**

The Leadership
The Foundational Initiatives
Appendix- The Clapham Group

74 CHAPTER 6

**The Renewal of the Church: How To Get There
(The Means—Accomplishing the Mission Projects)**

Church Planting and Renewal
Counter-Catechesis Discipleship
Post-Christendom Evangelism
A Justice Network
A Faith-Work Network
The Christian Mind Project
A New Leadership Pipeline
Christian Philanthropy

CHAPTER 1

3

Decline of the Church

The Mainline

There is no more urgent question for American Christians than this:

“What is wrong with the American Christian Church and how can its life and ministry be renewed?”

Virtually everyone agrees that something is radically wrong with the church. Inside, there is more polarization and conflict than ever, leading all sides to agree that the church is in deep trouble. Outside, journalists, sociologists, and all other observers bemoan or celebrate the church's decline numerically, institutionally, and in influence. We must find a new way forward—to spiritual, theological, and institutional renewal until the Christian church is thriving again, until it is growing by appealing to and reaching people with truth and serving and changing people with love.

The best method for understanding the way forward is to begin by recounting the story of the American church's decline. In this series I will take two articles to do that, and then another set of articles to map out a possible path forward.

A. THE LAST FLOURISHING

The American church after World War II seemed to be strong and flourishing. In 1952, a record 75% of Americans said religion was “very important” in their lives. In 1957, over 80% said that religion “can answer today's problems.” Church affiliation during the 1950s jumped from 55% to 69%.¹ From 1950 to 1960 the U.S. population went from 150 to 180 million, a record growth aided by the post-war “Baby Boom.” In the late 1950s, almost one-half of all Americans were attending church regularly. This was the highest percentage in U.S. history.²

Another remarkable feature of this religious surge was how ubiquitous it was. Religion flourished, it seemed, in

every class, race, region, and denomination. Catholicism seemed to finally be entering the cultural mainstream, no longer just a working-class ethnic church. Archbishop Fulton Sheen had a large popular following on radio and television. The African-American church took front and center in the great social changes of the Civil Rights movement, led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Even conservative white Protestants were on the upswing with the unprecedentedly successful ministry of Billy Graham who was himself part of a new alliance of organizations and leaders who sought to distinguish themselves from fundamentalism, calling their movement “evangelicalism.”

Mightiest of all was mainline Protestantism, consisting of the Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, American Baptist, and the United Church of Christ (congregational) denominations. Their buildings were at the center of nearly all historic downtowns, their schools and institutions were of the highest prestige and their endowment funds were enormous. And even their theologians, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, were respected public intellectuals, prominently appearing on the cover of *Time* Magazine and on network television.

B. THE SHRINKING BEGINS

Yet this seeming high water mark led almost immediately to an unprecedented church decline that began first with the mainline. From a high of 3.4 million members in the mid 1960s, the Episcopal church declined to 2.4 million by the early 1990s. In 2019, it recorded 1.6 million members. The mainline Presbyterian Church had 4.25 million members in 1965, but by 2000, they numbered 2.5 million and in 2020, 1.25 million. Other major denominations have shown more or less similar precipitous declines. By the mid 1970s, it had become clear that something was afoot that had never happened before. “For the first time in [the] nation's history most of the major church groups stopped growing and began to shrink...Most of these denominations had been growing uninterruptedly since colonial times...now they have begun to diminish, reversing a trend of two centuries.”³

¹ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Simon and Schuster, 2010, 87.

² See Robert Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict*, Rutgers U. Press, 1997.

³ Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion with a new Preface*, Mercer University Press, 1996, 1.

Those words were written by Dean Kelley in his bombshell 1972 book, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. Kelley was a legal scholar who worked for the National Council of Churches—the council of mainline Protestantism. He was not a conservative: he lobbied against prayer in public schools and served on the board of the ACLU. Yet Kelley's criticism of the mainline was searing.

In those early years of decline, Kelley heard mainliners complain that “people are just not as religious anymore,” but he responded:

“not all religious bodies are shrinking. While most of the mainline Protestant denominations are trying to survive what they hope will be but a temporary adversity, others are overflowing with vitality, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, the Churches of God, the Pentecostal and Holiness groups, the Evangelicals, the Mormons... Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, Black Muslims, and many smaller groups...”⁴

The decline of mainline Protestantism has continued to the present day. I remember speaking to an Episcopal priest in New York City some years ago. He had gone to seminary in the 1950s when, he said, mainline, liberal Protestantism was in the ascendancy. He had been trained to take a

highly skeptical view of the assertions and accounts in the Bible. He was taught to interpret them as legends and to find the places where the Bible coincided with the best of modern psychology and thinking—and to preach those things. The Bible never was allowed to critique modern thought or popular opinion, but only to mirror it. He was taught that more traditional Christians—mainly Catholics, evangelicals, and fundamentalists—were hopelessly behind the times and would soon die out.

That was the 1950s, but in the first decade of the 21st century, many mainline churches in New York City could only keep their doors open by renting out space to a host of new congregations from all around the world who believed in traditional, born again Christianity. These churches were growing while the mainline was dwindling. “It feels like God's judgment against us, frankly,” he said.

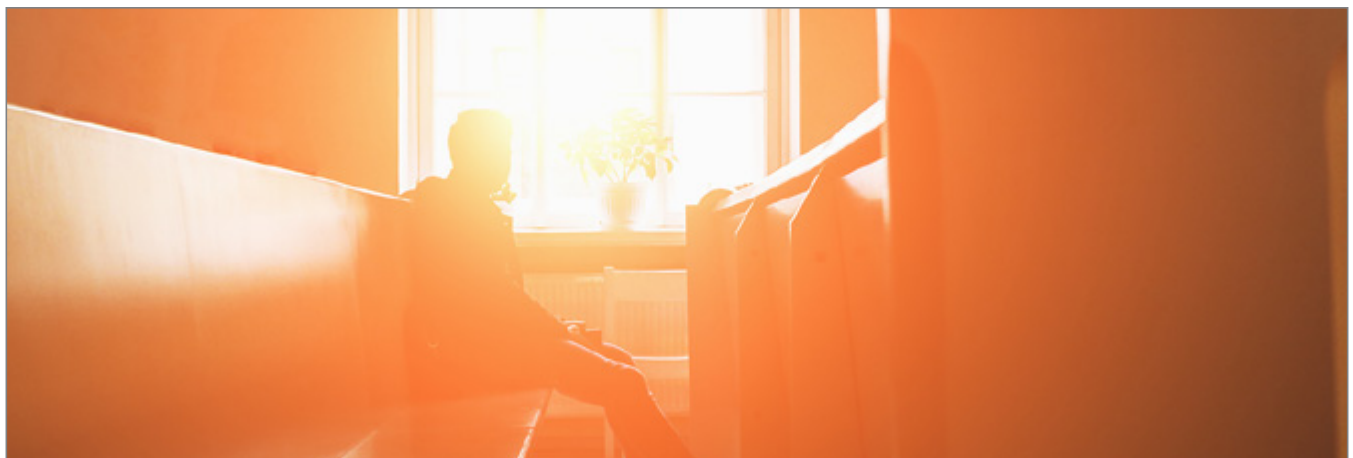
C. THREE CRITIQUES OF THE MAINLINE:

1. Kelley's sociological critique

So what was the problem? The appeal of religion, Kelley wrote, was that it provided ‘largest-scale meanings.’ These are not the genuine but small-scale meanings we can discover such as helping

others in the neighborhood or volunteering for a good cause. Rather, largest-scale meanings enable people to face suffering and death with confidence and hope and to

⁴ Ibid, 20-21.



seek the longest-term common good, making sacrifices for it, all because you know you are part of a “cosmic purpose.” The only “largest scale meanings that seem suitable to produce such results [are] those offered and validated by religion.”⁵

Kelley argued that conservative churches continued to focus mainly on spiritual needs and supernatural “largest-scale” cosmic meanings—the reality of God, the truth of Jesus’ resurrection, the power of the Holy Spirit for inward change, the efficacy of Jesus’ death for the forgiveness of sins, the eventual arrival of the kingdom of God.

Liberal mainline churches, on the other hand, had adapted heavily to modern secular thought. They rejected the concept of miracles, of being born again by the Spirit, of Jesus’ bodily resurrection, of a trustworthy Bible. They adopted, in Kelley’s words, “relativism...lukewarmness... individualism...” all of which he identified as “Evidences of Social Weakness”—that is, marks of a weakening community that cannot coalesce powerfully around a life of shared faith, meaning, forgiveness, love, and spiritual growth in God.⁶ The mainline churches adopted the therapeutic view of the self and dropped traditional Christian ethical strictures around the use of sex and money. Kelley responded with what he called the “Minimal Maxims” for a strong religious body:

“Those who are serious about their faith: 1. Do not confuse it with other beliefs/loyalties /practices, or mingle them together indiscriminately, or pretend they are alike, of equal merit, or mutually compatible if they are not. 2. Make high demands of those admitted to the organization ... and do not include or allow to continue within it those who are not fully committed to it. 3. Do not consent to, encourage, or indulge any violations of its standards or belief or behavior by its professed adherents. 4. Do not keep silent about it, apologize for it, or let it be treated as

though it made no difference, or should make no difference, in their behavior...”⁷

So what was the ‘mission’ now of the mainline? Kelley said that these denominations had come to concentrate almost completely on political causes rather than focusing on leading people to faith and building them up in their faith. They also moved beyond the simple call (that the church had done for centuries) for Christians to be ‘salt and light’ in the world, caring for their neighbor, working for a more just society, and helping the poor. Instead, the mainline identified themselves—and therefore Christianity—with particular political parties and social policies. The unique things that the church could do had been abandoned and things that were better done by the liberal political parties were now seen as the main job of the modern denominations.

Kelley, though himself a political and theological liberal, predicted that churches that continued to turn themselves into political organizations would see continued decline. And, in hindsight, there was a warning to conservative churches not to do the same thing with the Republican party that the mainline had done with the Democratic. Kelley has been almost completely ignored on all fronts. He received heavy criticism from the Left and, after a little enjoyable *schadenfreude*, conservative Christians did not take his warnings seriously. That is why most of the readers of this essay would have hardly heard of him.

2. Machen’s theological critique

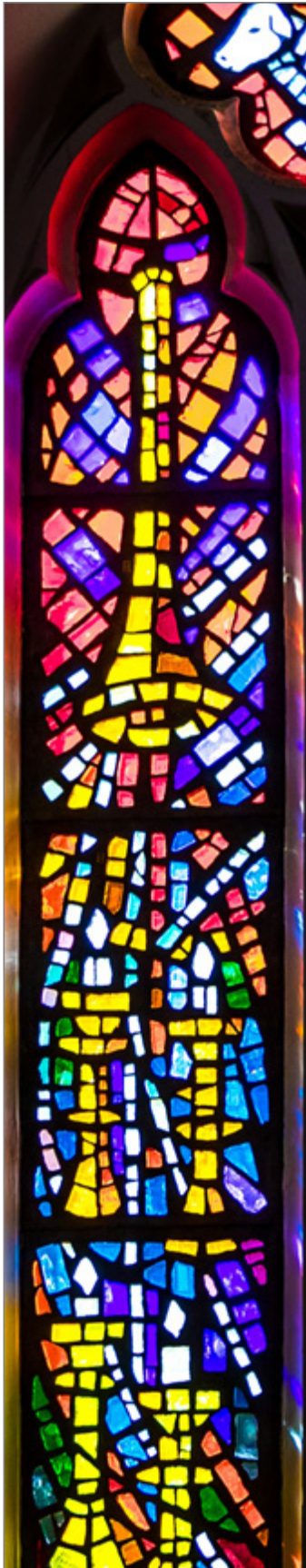
Fifty years before Kelley wrote, a completely different kind of critique against the mainline church was launched. In 1923 J. Gresham Machen published *Christianity and Liberalism* with a major New York publisher (MacMillan). Machen was professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, the oldest and most prestigious of the theological schools of the mainline Presbyterian church. Machen was embedded in the establishment of mainline Christianity, much like Kelley.

But Machen wrote when there was no numerical or

⁵ Ibid, 43-44.

⁶ Ibid, 84-85.

⁷ Ibid, 121.



institutional decline at all. There had been no diminishment or loss to be analyzed from a sociological viewpoint as Kelley did. Yet Machen took aim at the Protestant mainline because he saw it shedding its historic religious beliefs and faith in an effort to become acceptable to the modern world. He argued that:

“The great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive...because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology...[M]anifold as are the forms in which the movement appears, the root of the movement...is naturalism—that is, in the denial of any entrance of the creative power of God (as distinguished from the ordinary course of nature) in connection with the origin of Christianity.”⁸

This “modern naturalistic liberalism” is what philosopher Charles Taylor called the “Immanent Frame”—the worldview that brackets out the supernatural or transcendent, that insists all things have a natural, empirical cause. Protestantism knew that modern science would object to Christian “particularities”—all the main doctrines of the Christian faith as historically held, such as the virgin birth of Christ, the pre-existence and incarnation of Christ, the atonement on the Cross, and of the bodily resurrection. In response, Machen observed: “the liberal theologian seeks to rescue certain of the general principles of religion, of which these ‘particularities’ are thought to be mere temporary symbols, and these general principles he regards as constituting ‘the essence of Christianity.’”⁹

So the main Protestant denominations accepted historical skepticism about reliability of the Bible, including the accounts of Christ’s life and death. Protestant leaders ‘re-interpreted’ Jesus as a great moral teacher who may or may not have been executed, and who certainly did not rise physically from the dead. However both his teaching and the legends of his life were unsurpassed as inspirations to live lives of love, peace, and justice. That, it was now declared, is the “essence” of Christianity, not the outdated supernatural doctrines.

Machen’s assessment was searing. He argued that liberalism’s attempt to create a de-supernaturalized Christianity:

...has really relinquished everything distinctive of Christianity, so that what remains is in essentials only that same indefinite type of religious aspiration which was in the world before Christianity came upon the scene....Here as in many other departments of life it appears that the

⁸ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, New edition, Eerdmans, 2009, 2

⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

things that are sometimes thought to be hardest to defend are also the things that are most worth defending.¹⁰

This is the heart of Machen's critique. The changes were no mere 'tweaks' or updates. They altered Christianity at the most fundamental level, turning it into something that was not Christianity at all.

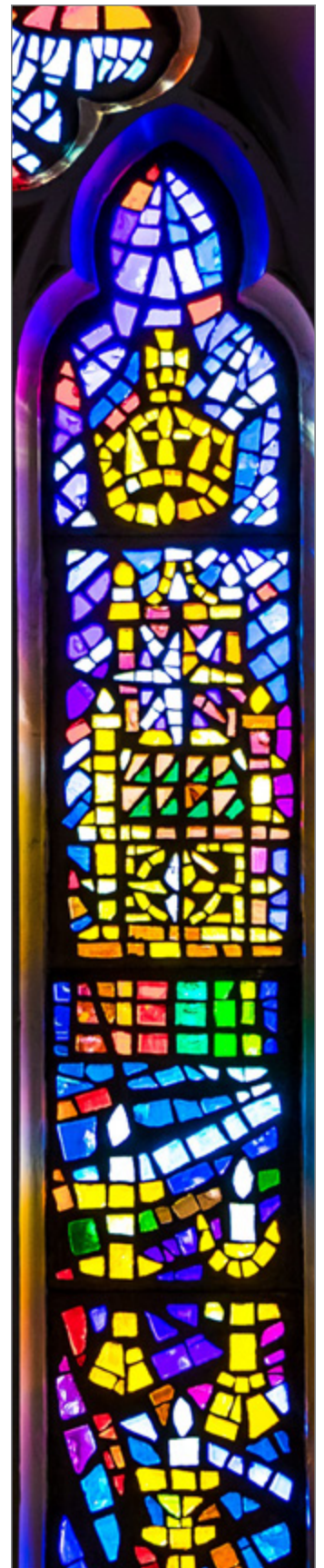
There have always been religions in the world that aspired to a higher form of living, that provided various sorts of inspiring stories that encouraged a higher-toned life. All of these religions were forms of self-salvation through various ethical practices, religious observances, and transformations of consciousness. If this is how contact with God was reached or accomplished, then the ancient stories in the religion's literature about the deeds of various religious figures served strictly as models for us. Whether they literally happened or not did not matter.

But Christianity was and is wholly different. It insists that we are saved not by what we do but by what God in Christ has done for us in history—in his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Machen understood that if one loses a belief in the historical reality of these events, then whatever Christianity is left is now re-made into just another religion of works-righteousness. And that removes the main thing that differentiates Christianity from all other faiths. In his chapter on salvation he writes:

If Christian faith is based upon truth [of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus], then it is not the faith which saves the Christian but the object of the faith...Christ. Faith, then...means simply receiving a gift. To have faith in Christ means to cease trying to win God's favor by one's own character; the man who believes in Christ simply accepts the sacrifice which Christ offered on Calvary. The result of such faith is a new life and all good works; but the salvation itself is an absolutely free gift of God.

Very different is the conception of faith which prevails in the liberal church. According to modern liberalism, faith is essentially the same as 'making Christ Master' in one's life; at least it is by making Christ Master in the life that the welfare of men is sought. But that simply means that salvation is thought to be obtained by our own obedience to the commands of Christ. Such teaching is just a sublimated form of legalism. Not the sacrifice of Christ but our own obedience to God's law is the ground of hope....The grace of God is rejected...and the result is slavery...the wretched bondage by which man undertakes the

¹⁰ Ibid, 6.



impossible task of establishing his own righteousness as a ground of acceptance with God.¹¹

As we have noted, Machen wrote when there were no signs of numerical or institutional decline at all. And his critique did not include a prediction of such decline—Machen believed that the changes were lethal to the actual life and mission of the Christian church, whether or not this led to changes in attendance and giving. At the end of his book he admitted he did not have any idea what the future held for the church. Machen refers to the entrance of paganism into the Christian church in the second century—a battle that was fought and won by the church fathers—and to the corruption of the medieval church, which resulted in the Reformation and the division of Christendom. Machen hinted that some kind of reckoning would come to such a massive change in the theology of the churches, but he did not guess how it would play out.¹²

It is impossible not to see how Kelley's analysis of mainline decline in many ways (despite the sharp difference in viewpoints) agreed with Machen's. Machen said the church was abandoning the main things that the church can do uniquely. Kelley agreed. (Kelley, speaking sociologically, spoke of connecting people to "largest-scale meanings" while Machen, speaking theologically, spoke of connecting people vitally to God). Instead the church was becoming a social service agency and political lobbying bloc, performing functions that could be done far better by secular organizations. No wonder it was in decline. The mainline church was increasingly offering people nothing that the secular culture and its institutions could not offer.¹³ If I want to work for inclusion and justice, there are lots of ways to do it. Why do I have to get up early on Sunday morning or connect to a Christian church with all its baggage in order to do that?

3. Marsden's cultural critique

There was, however, a final reason for mainline decline that was not apparent until decades later.

Seeming moral consensus. After World War II America had emerged as the world military and economic power. Our population was growing rapidly as were our incomes and bank accounts. Enormous public works—such as the interstate highway system—were undertaken. Huge new suburbs were built filled with shiny new homes. It all seemed to be a triumph of "American values." Those values included beliefs (a) in democracy and self-government by the people, (b) in science as the best way to determine how to promote human flourishing in society, and in (c) traditional moral values such as patriotism, the building of strong families, and

¹¹ Ibid, 120-121.

¹² Ibid, 150-151.

¹³ In fairness to Machen he, unlike Kelley, believed that the church's jettisoning of historic doctrine was not just impractical and institutionally self-defeating, but *wrong*. It was a betrayal and should be opposed for that reason alone.



hard work as the pathway to prosperity. Morality was seen as obvious and a given.

But Marsden chronicles how the seemingly unified and optimistic 1950s contained a strong undercurrent of doubt, that something was profoundly wrong with us.¹⁴ Many believed that the unprecedented prosperity had turned Americans into ‘cogs in an economic machine’, de-personalized beings who did whatever it took to get ahead.¹⁵ Books by Eric Fromm, William Whyte and others countered that the antidote to stultifying conformity was the assertion of individual freedom—to be an authentic, self-determining, and self-fulfilled person.¹⁶ Many of the most popular public intellectuals at the time were not philosophers but psychologists, such as Gordon Allport, Carl Rogers, B.F. Skinner, Erving Goffman, and Rollo May. They shared the basic idea of Freud’s psychoanalytic tradition, namely, that people matured and became healthy as they escaped the irrational guilt, fears, and controls of traditional community and authority. To that they added a deep, particularly American optimism that human beings could and would shape themselves for the better if given complete freedom to do so.¹⁷

The rise of the therapeutic self. However, freedom was increasingly being defined as ‘autonomy’, a word that meant literally to be a law unto oneself. Historically, human fulfillment and meaning was understood to be found not in a quest to find our own singular happiness but seeking the happiness of families and communities, through relationships and roles in which the group’s common good was made more important than one’s individual self-interest. But now by the late 1950s and early 1960s a steady stream of best-selling books, such as David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, called Americans to be more authentic and self-determining, to not allow family or any local ‘subcommunities’ to dictate their values and purposes. We become full persons, it was said, only as we leave the moral prescriptions of others and discover our own.¹⁸ The term “freedom” was becoming an almost wholly ‘negative’ term—a freedom only from. “Once one was free from restrictive traditions or expectations, what was going to replace them as a basis for determining what was good for human flourishing?”¹⁹ If we are not going to let others determine our moral values, what then is the basis for our new moral values apart from our own inner feelings? And if that was the sole basis, how can a unified culture of shared values? ²⁰

¹⁴ This is the burden of chapter 1 of George Marsden, in *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief*, Basic Books, 2014, 1-20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁸ See Marsden, chapter 2, “Freedom in the Lonely Crowd,” 21-42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁰ Classic books on the rise of the modern or therapeutic self are Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (Viking, 1959) and *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (Harper and Row, 1966); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Harvard U Press, 2007) and *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Harvard U Press, 1989); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*, W.W.Norton, 1979.

The loss of cultural unity. This question hardly troubled anyone at the time outside of lonely religious conservatives in the tradition of Machen. (See C.S. Lewis' seminal, *The Abolition of Man*). Virtually the only major cultural figure to sound an alarm in the U.S. was the eminent writer and journalist Walter Lippmann²¹ Lippmann was a non-religious Jew who was at the center of the secular liberal establishment. But in 1955 he wrote his last book, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, which dismayed his peers. "His heresy was to say that his liberal colleagues were trying to build a public consensus based on inherited principle, even after they had dynamited the foundations on which those principles had first been established."²²

He charged that our liberal American values (whether fully executed or not)—equal dignity of all people, freedom of conscience, thought, and speech, government by consent, trust in science and reason—were not the deliverances of science. Originally, these American ideas were based on transcendent moral standards, a higher "universal order" that we could all recognize as the truth. Lippmann was no theist, and so he was speaking more in the tradition of Aristotle, but he insisted that unless a society could recognize an objective moral order, a set of standards that were not merely produced by culture or our private feelings, there was no grounding for a public, shared social order. "If what is good, what is right, what is true, is only what the individual 'chooses' to 'invent,' then we are outside the traditions of civility."²³ By that he meant that no one had ever tried to create a social common life on such a basis. Who is to say that one particular law is just and another unjust? Do we do it by majority vote? Then what do we say to Germany whose majority thought it was right to persecute and even destroy minorities?

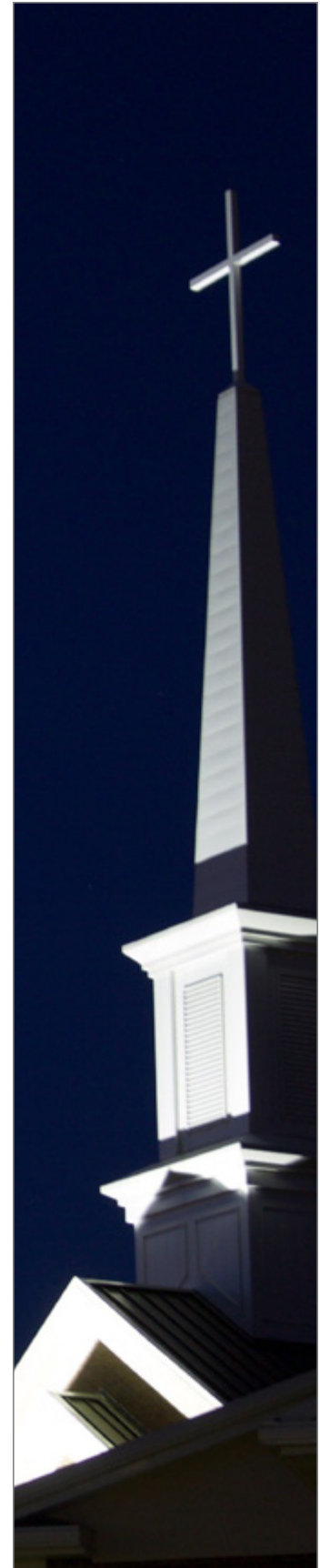
Lippmann was right that our original "American values"—equal dignity of all people, freedom of conscience, thought, and speech, government by consent, trust in science and reason, and so on—originated in an agreement between Christians who believed these were the teachings of the Bible and also of those Enlightenment thinkers who believed as did Aristotle and the ancients in "natural law"—a transcendent, moral order in the universe that was discernible through human reason and reflection. But in 1955 the American modern liberal establishment was aghast at Lippmann. They reviewed his book negatively and pushed back, saying that returning to belief in God or natural law was dangerous and completely unnecessary. Arthur Schlesinger was a good representative of this view. A "nondogmatic, relativistic, pragmatic" way of testing beliefs was the best. Our values are just things "we all know" that will benefit human beings best and will make most people happy. They are not rooted in God or a cosmic order. It is simply obvious to practical human reason and to scientific thought that individual freedom, democracy, the equality of all people, free speech, human rights, and such are just the right way to go.²⁴

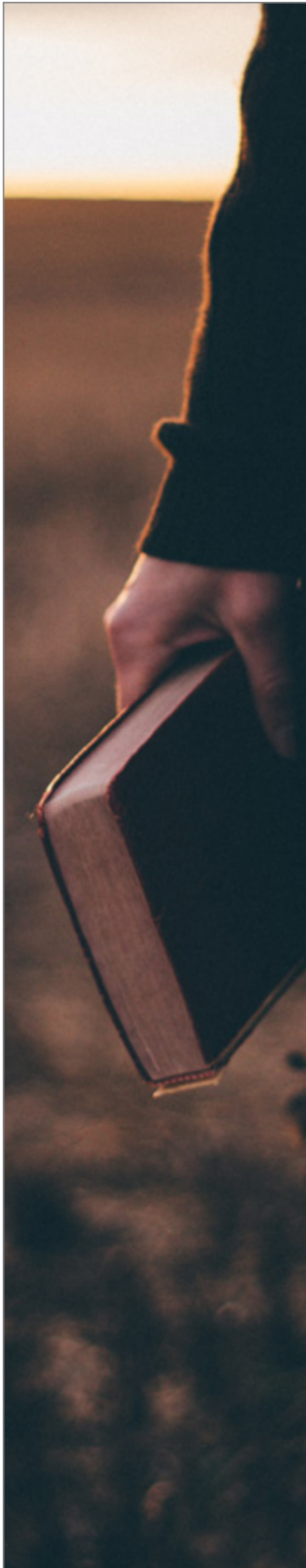
²¹ It is worth noting in this context that Lippmann thought Machen's book *Christianity and Liberalism* was excellent.

²² *Ibid*, 44.

²³ Cited in Marsden, 47.

²⁴ See Marsden, chapter 3, "Enlightenment's End? Building Without Foundations," 43-67.





Interestingly, the leading public intellectual of mainline Christianity, Reinhold Niebuhr, also rejected Lippmann's book.²⁵ Niebuhr, just as Machen had predicted, had adapted the faith to secular science. He wrote that "we" modern Protestant believers "do not believe in the virgin birth and we have difficulty with the physical resurrection of Christ. We do not believe...that revelatory events validate themselves by a divine break-through in the natural order."²⁶ Liberal Protestants, in other words, did not believe the accounts in the Bible of miracles were true, nor that the Bible itself was a supernaturally produced book of authoritative truth. Rather it contained stories that provided the true essence of Christianity—the moral principles of love, justice, and peace. And these 'essential verities' turned out to be exactly the ones that the liberal secular establishment held as well.

The impotence of the mainline. The historian George Marsden, who was a teenager in the 1950s, argues in *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment* that the Protestant mainline had allied itself to a secular moral consensus that was inherently unstable. That consensus was based not on the Bible or on any transcendent, universal norms embedded in the universe (as the Greeks, Romans, and Chinese believed). The consensus of liberal Protestantism was—they said—based on common sense, intuition, and tradition. But when in the 1960s the American consensus own moral values, starting with sexual ethics, began to fragment, liberal Protestantism had no basis for moral truth from which to speak.

Protestant liberalism, by adapting to a more secular modern mindset, had pointed to their shared views ("see, we have the same moral values as you do"), and could thus welcome modern people into their churches without challenging their secular worldview. Even atheists could find a home in Protestantism now, since what mattered was not outdated doctrinal beliefs but one's *ethics*—a commitment to freedom and justice for all.

However, as Marsden points out (and as Machen had argued decades before), what need then was there for the church at all?

The grand irony of that strategy was that, while Niebuhr himself used it effectively as a way to preserve a public role for the Christian heritage, its subjective qualities made the faith wholly optional and dispensable . . . One could simply bypass the theology and adopt the profound insights into human limitation that Niebuhr offered.²⁷

The mainline Protestant moral argument was this: it wasn't that secular society's values were right because they aligned with God's. Rather, the church was right because it aligned with secular reason. But when secular reason and science

²⁵ Ibid, 53.

²⁶ Ibid, 118.

²⁷ Ibid, 119

began to fail to provide American culture with a unifying, moral consensus, the mainline church had nothing to say that secular science could not say. Protestantism had become virtually a mirror of the dominant secular culture and could offer nothing special, nothing that the culture did not offer its members by way of wisdom or insight. So what was its use? This is what Kelley saw in the early 1970s.

D. THE END OF AMERICAN CULTURAL UNITY

Lippmann had been right. Even as a relativistic, secular worldview had taken the place of the Christian/Enlightenment view, the older consensus on moral values was still maintained temporarily because of enormous common enemies—a Great Depression and two World Wars. These crises required self-sacrifice for one's family and community merely to survive and necessarily muted the culture's therapeutic and individualizing underpinnings. There was still great agreement across the political spectrum on what a good, moral life looked like. Love of country, sexual chastity, faithfulness, thrift and generosity, modesty and respect for authority, sacrificial loyalty to one's family and relationships—nearly everyone believed in all of these even if there were plenty of deviations in actual behavior.

But by the late 1960s such survival challenges were just memories, and as people followed the culture's direction to discover truth within themselves, they began to come to radically different conclusions about what was right and wrong. American society began to splinter and has been doing so ever since.

The original Civil Rights Movement led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. had pointed (as Lippmann had counseled) to a higher moral law. "What gave such widely compelling force to King's leadership and oratory was his bedrock conviction that moral law was built into the universe."²⁸ But by the time King was assassinated in 1968, very different forces were already at work. All the coming "rights" movements for women, gays, and other minorities

modeled themselves in some ways (e.g. the protests and activism) on King's movement, but the philosophical framework was completely different. Identity politics grounded claims for justice not in an objective moral order but in their own group's unique perceptions and experience. Individualism eroded traditional values such as love of country, loyalty to family bonds, and respect for authority. And many of these groups, especially those demanding sexual rights, had beliefs about morality at sharp variance with traditional western, Protestant ethics. The country began to break up into warring factions.

Why? No leading cultural figures could point, as Lippmann and MLK did, to a higher law, or to the Bible. The Protestant establishment had given up their ability to do that. Everyone had assumed that secular, pragmatic, common sense reasoning would come to an agreement on social mores. When that failed there was no court of appeal or rationale available in any discussion of moral values. If someone called out injustice by saying: "What you are doing is wrong—because I feel it is wrong" there was no answer for the rejoinder "But I do not feel it is wrong—why then should your feelings about this be privileged over mine? What right do you have to impose your views on me?" Since our society had discarded any shared basis for moral values—religion and natural law—there was nothing left to unite us at all, no basis for a debate. As Lippmann argued, no society had ever sought to do this before, and he doubted it could be done.

And as the country began to break apart, mainline Protestantism began to slide. First it began to lose those who were coming to less straight-line, politically liberal conclusions. It lost political conservatives, but that was just the start. Later it continued to decline because even the children of liberal Christians, as Kelley and Machen had pointed out, failed to see any real usefulness to the Christian church.

Ironically, Niebuhr saw that increasing secularism put the long-time American impulse toward rampant individualism on steroids. As religion declined and

²⁸ Ibid, 65.

secularism grew, selfishness grew apace.²⁹ He spoke of the “self-glorification” encouraged by modern culture which was leading people to use wealth and sexuality not just as good gifts but as ways to create an identity. He spoke of the idolatries of both secular liberalism (that deified human reason) and fascism (that deified the race and soil) and socialism (that deified the state).³⁰ In good Augustinian fashion, he argued that everyone had to have a “god” and rest their hearts in something, and without God in their lives, people inevitably created these destructive ideologies.³¹ But as Marsden adds, Niebuhr’s “chastening words regarding the human condition could be welcomed, but his generalized Christianity offered little to challenge most of the secularizing trends that he himself identified.”³² Mainline Protestantism was no longer about radical conversion, about an encounter with a transcendent God and the reordering of the loves of the heart. It was about ethics and politics, and it had adopted too many of secularism’s assumptions to be any real challenge to it.

E. WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

A fragmented society. All the mid-20th century figures who assured us that pragmatic common sense and scientific reason could bring about a unified moral consensus have been proved terribly wrong. The polarization in our society has become severe and the disagreements are about the most basic ideas of what human nature is and what human flourishing looks like. There is no longer any common set of “American values” or a unifying “American story.” And the decline of mainline Protestantism, once the unofficial but real religion of America, was both a cause of and a result of this breakdown in American society.

And even so, not a pluralistic society. One would think that a fragmented society would be a truly pluralistic society in which all the various voices and groups are having their say. But that is not the case. The official view

of liberal politics in this country was framed by John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*; and *Political Liberalism*) and required that religious views be kept private and out of public discourse. The only valid arguments are those based on (supposedly) neutral, objective, scientific, empirical reasoning. Interestingly, John Rawls was a mainline (Episcopalian) who considered going into the ministry. He was shaped by the mainline perspective before losing his faith during his military service in World War II. Today Left Progressivism holds this view—that public discourse must not include religious viewpoints—even more strongly.

In counterpoint, others argue that *all* accounts of value or justice are non-empirical, based on ‘worldviews’ about human nature and destiny and morality that are ultimately faith-based. The supposedly objective secular viewpoints are based on moral values (such as equal human rights) that are not the deliverances of science but deep beliefs that are not self-evident, not empirically provable, and not shared by all cultures. Therefore there is no qualitative difference between secular points of view and the religious.

In earlier (pre-World War II) times, institutional religion (and largely Mainline Protestantism) was so powerful that it could keep atheist and other non-traditional religious voices silent. But today in the secular society that Mainline Protestantism helped bring about—it is religious voices that are now precluded.

Recognizing the faith-basis of all views should lead to the re-admission of religion to the public square and the establishment of a truly pluralistic society. (See G. Marsden, “Toward a More Inclusive Pluralism” in *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment*; See C. Taylor’s essay, “Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights”; See Wilfred M. McClay, “Two Concepts of Secularism” in *The Wilson Quarterly*, Summer, 2000- available online; Rowan Williams, “Secularism, Faith, and Freedom” available online; R.Audi and N.Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public*

²⁹ A crucial book to read that traces out how religion balanced American individualism for centuries but has now lost its ability to do that – is Robert Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, University of California Press, 2007.

³⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” in Robert McAfee Brown, ed. *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, Yale University Press, 1986.

³¹ *Ibid*, 79.

³² Marsden, xxvi.

Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate, Rowman and Littlefield, 1996.) In particular, McClay and Williams argue:

- that the State should be 'procedurally secular' – that is, it should be a kind of "umpire," keeping the playing field level and open for all points of view, guarding the rights of free and public speech of all, not privileging one religion over others, and allowing the democratically chose public policies—whatever their more worldview basis—to be put into effect.
- that the state should not be 'programmatically' or 'philosophically' secular. That is, it should not be imposing a secular worldview and marginalizing religious ones. It should not speak as if (a) the secular views of expressive individualism and therapeutic identity—therefore of sex and gender, or (b) the secular view that all human evil is produced by social structure, or by evolutionary biology, or (c) the secular views of morality such as utilitarianism—are the only legitimate, 'scientific' views. In short the state should not act as if secularism was NOT one quasi-religious worldview among many. It should not tag anyone who disagrees with the secular 'takes' on these things as 'hate speech'.

Neither the Mainline nor the conservative Protestant churches—nor the secular political establishment—are currently capable of moving forward into a truly pluralistic society. But I will argue (in later articles) that conservative Protestantism and Catholicism have better resources for doing this than either the mainline church or secularism.

CONCLUSION

- In my mind, and in light of the rightful critiques of Kelley, Machen, and Marsden, *I believe that, in general, the progressive mainline Protestantism that is still in existence is no real way forward for the American church.* This is not to dismiss all the good leaders or people still in the mainline—a significant number. There is a great variety of belief and practice in these churches. There are many who would say that the criticisms of Kelley, Machen, and Marsden don't apply to them personally or to their parishes. I'm sure that is often true.
- However, because of the re-assertion of fundamentalism within American evangelicalism, and because of the consequent exodus of many young adults from the churches and church-life of their youth, many are pointing to mainline, progressive/liberal Christianity as the place for them to go. There may indeed be some influx, especially in urban areas, of young 'ex-evangelicals' who are 'deconstructing their faith' into mainline churches. *But the overall project of mainline Protestantism has failed. It over-adapted to western secular culture and, as such, it can't offer our society an alternative or counter-point to what the dominant culture already offers.*
- It also does not appear to be able to grow the way the church has historically grown in every culture—by evangelism and church planting. Can it lead secular people into life-transforming conversion? Progressive Christian theology will not be able to produce the phenomenon so memorably depicted by Charles Wesley who saw tens of thousands of people experiencing the new birth—"My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose went forth and followed thee."

CHAPTER 2

Decline of the Church Evangelicalism

If mainline Protestantism cannot lead the renewal for the American church, do we turn to the other main branch of Protestantism—evangelicalism? The answer is no and yes. (“No”) Conservative Protestantism (often just called evangelicalism) in the U.S. as a set of institutions and as a movement is breaking up, declining, and mired in its own problems, which we will outline below.³³ (“Yes”) However, renewal must come from those who adhere to historical, orthodox Protestant theology, to which American evangelicalism—at least in theory and often in practice—adheres. So many of the leaders for church renewal will come from evangelicalism, yet we cannot move forward into renewal without an analysis of what is wrong with it and why it is in decline.

A generation ago, Mainline Protestantism was the largest religious category and the most culturally dominant, followed by Roman Catholicism and then evangelicalism in third place. But in the last quarter of the 20th century, mainline Protestantism essentially switched places with evangelicalism. After distancing itself from fundamentalism in the 1940s and 1950s, evangelicalism grew. In the early 1970s just 17% of the population was evangelical. But fueled by a host of new institutions and movements after World War II, evangelicalism grew rapidly—largely, I think, by picking up more traditionally minded ex-Mainliners—until it was the largest single religious tradition in 1990 at 29.9% of the population.³⁴ Since 2007, however, evangelicalism has finally begun its own decline. to just under 22% today. So the Christian churches are declining across all denominations and traditions.

Even though evangelicalism is today twice the size of mainline Protestantism and is still greater in size than the evangelical movement of a generation ago, there seems to be consensus evangelicalism is on the cusp of a more steep decline as thousands of younger adults and teens walk away from it.³⁵

Perhaps the most culturally important religious trend in the United States is the rise of the “Nones”—those American adults who say they have “no religious preference.” In 1972 just 5% of Americans claimed to have no religion, but by 2018 that number was just under 24%.³⁶ And while various survey numbers differ, all agree that each younger generation has a greater percentage of Nones. They are not all atheist or agnostic about the existence of God. In general, about 3% of Americans—and no more than 10% of the Nones—are atheist. However, while granting the reality of God and even sometimes calling themselves “spiritual, not religious,” the Nones are more secular. That is, even if they intellectually concede the existence of a God, their happiness, identities, and purposes in life are understood and measured strictly in material, this-world terms. Secularism is growing in western countries and religion is in decline.

All indications are that in the coming years an unprecedented number of younger Americans will be leaving churches and institutional religion of all kinds behind. But why?

The background - the secularization of the elites. A process called ‘secularization’ has been going on in

³³ I am obviously leaving out the Roman Catholic Church in this statement. Is it possible that the Catholic church could lead the way for Christianity on the whole to be renewed and take a more positive role in modern society than it does now? Richard John Neuhaus, I believe at one point in his career, felt that it could. But much has happened in the Catholic church and in the culture since then. I certainly hope that renewal will come to the Catholic church for the overall good of our society and for the sake of the reputation of Christ. But I’m not sanguine about its prospects for renewal very soon. Here I may, as a Protestant, simply be too ignorant of the ‘facts on the ground’ about Catholicism.

³⁴ Ryan Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They are Going*, Fortress, 2021, 17. Burge uses the General Social Survey that has been in use since 1972. See also Ryan Burge, “American Religion in 2030” Oct 19, 2019, *Religion in Public*. See especially the chart mapping out the trends. Found at <https://religioninpublic.blog/2019/10/24/american-religion-in-2030/>

³⁵ Ryan Burge points out there are more people now willing to identify themselves to pollsters as ‘evangelical’ who don’t go to church. Nearly ¼ of all people who identified themselves as evangelicals now say they attend church “seldom or never”—a huge increase over just a decade ago. Also over ¼ of evangelicals now say that religion is *not* ‘very important’ in their lives. All this indicates that people are increasingly choosing their religion on the basis of their politics. If that is true, that could inflate the number of evangelicals and give the false impression that the movement is more resilient and spiritually healthy than it really is. See Ryan Burge, “Think US Evangelicals are Dying Out? Well, define evangelicalism” *The Conversation*, Jan 21, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/think-us-evangelicals-are-dying-out-well-define-evangelicalism-152640>

³⁶ For my statistics on the decline of faith I am using Ryan Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They are Going*, Fortress, 2021. Note 1: Burge uses the General Social Survey that has been in use since 1972. Note 2: Burge and others are sticking with data up until 2018 and 2019. Surveys taken during the pandemic show many irregularities.

western societies for several centuries, mainly among highly educated elites, though it gathered steam among the general population after World War II in Europe and after the 1960s in North America. The bloody European wars of religion in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries led many to search for a basis of a society that did not require a common church or set of religious beliefs.³⁷ The “Enlightenment Project” was an attempt to explain the human situation and arrive at moral values using only neutral, objective human logic and science, not religion. Secularization has two basic features.

- *The enforced privatization of religion.* Science and technology are considered the only ways to understand and solve human problems. Beliefs and values based in religion are never to be invoked in serious public discourse (except in the most general “In God We Trust” references). This has made religion seem irrelevant to society.
- *A radical individualism.* The move from religion to the use of one’s reason was accompanied by a move from communities to individuals as the main building block of society. The West developed a view of the emancipated self that must be free to determine its own moral choices. This automatically makes religious norms look like a threat to selfhood.

The foreground - the secularization of the masses. The therapeutic view of the self which now guides our culture creates a transactional, cost-benefit individualism that applies the concepts of the marketplace to all relationships. Yuval Levin says decreasing social distrust not only undermines religion, but all institutions, political leaders, the professions, the military, colleges and universities, and the family itself.³⁸ This in turn has accelerated the erosion of religion through³⁹:

- *The political polarization of culture and church.* People

look for religion substitutes such as politics. The two U.S. political parties have changed into almost uniform Left-wing and Right-wing groupings. The mainline church aligned tightly with the Left and evangelicals with the Right, weakening the church’s credibility in the broader culture. Robert Putnam explains and argues this well.⁴⁰

- *The sexual revolution* comes from the belief that sexual expression is part of an authentic identity. This meant that the Christian sex ethic became successfully branded as unreasonable (an ideal no one can live up to), as well as psychologically unhealthy and oppressive.
- *The growth in higher education and social media.* In 1940, only 4% of the population had a bachelor’s degree; today, it is over 33%. Secularization originated in the intellectual classes, and the academy now exercises greater influence in society.⁴¹

The failure of the Enlightenment project. The result of the individualism of the Enlightenment is the decline of all human communities—institutions, neighborhoods, and families—leading to greater isolation, loneliness, anomie, anxiety, and depression. The ‘cultural capital’ of Christianity continued to provide unity in western culture for centuries, since the vast majority of the population went to church even if the ‘elites’ were largely secular. Even today the main values of western secularism are those derived from Christianity.⁴²

But as the percentage of the population going to church declined, and as the radical individualism of the West became more pervasive, the original Enlightenment vision of a society based on secular human reason alone came largely to pass. But it has not led to unity at all. Western society in general and U.S. society in particular are polarized, fragmented, and ungovernable as everyone adopts their own meaning in life and moral values.

³⁷ For the most comprehensive account of secularization see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard, 2007.

³⁸ Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream*, Basic Books, 2020.

³⁹ The following list relies on Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, Free Press, 2013 as well as some of his more recent on-line lectures.

⁴⁰ In his *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon and Schuster, 2010).

⁴¹ See Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, revised ed. W.W. Norton, 1996.

⁴² See Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, Basic Books, 2019.

In the past few years an enormous amount of attention has been given to the influence of evangelicalism. One reason for this is that it remains the single largest category of religious Americans. Another reason is that 80% or more of white, self-identified evangelicals supported Donald Trump and a new right-wing populism and nationalism. Arguably, they were the main reason for his ascendancy.

Despite some conflicting data readings, most agree that evangelicalism is declining in the U.S.⁴³ Meanwhile, within evangelicalism there are a number of factions seemingly battling to the death over control of the movement, even as academics and social scientists argue about the actual definition of an evangelical.

All this creates confusion. (1) What is evangelicalism? (2) What crises does it actually face? (3) And are there any reasons for hope?

A. WHAT IS EVANGELICALISM?

Every Christian movement or denomination has, as it were, two “addresses”—two ways to locate and distinguish them from others—a theological and a sociological address. What gives a Christian movement a unique ‘personality’ and patterns of ministry, community, discourse, and

relationship to society is not only their doctrinal framework but also their social history.

H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* points out that, as Pentecostalism originated among the poor, it tends to put great emphasis on spiritual power in its leaders and very little on education in the Bible and theology. Meanwhile, the Reformed churches, largely growing out of the emerging middle classes of Europe, put far more emphasis on academic education for ministry than on practical testing of abilities and spiritual gifts. Is it possible that the social locations of each movement tended to make each blind to some factors that it should have emphasized more? Does each tend to use bible passages selectively to justify its more socially-formed than theologically-formed convictions? Yes.⁴⁴ So how do we define evangelicalism?

1. The Theology of Evangelicalism (4 Beliefs)

A theological definition that has gained widespread acceptance is this—a person or group can be classed evangelical if they meet the criteria listed by David Bebbington (now called the Bebbington Four or

⁴³ Ryan Burge points out there are more people now willing to identify themselves to pollsters as ‘evangelical’ who don’t go to church. All this indicates that people are increasingly choosing their religion on the basis of their politics. If that is true, that could inflate the number of evangelicals and give the false impression that the movement is more resilient and spiritually healthy than it really is. See Ryan Burge, “Think US Evangelicals are Dying Out? Well, define evangelicalism” *The Conversation*, Jan 21, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/think-us-evangelicals-are-dying-out-well-define-evangelicalism-152640>

⁴⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, World Publishing Company, 1929. See chapters 2-3 “The Churches of the Disinherited” and chapter 4 – “The Churches of the Middle Class.”



Quadrilateral.)⁴⁵ The four marks of evangelicalism are a belief in (1) the full authority of the Bible as the sole and supreme rule of faith and practice, (2) the necessity of the new birth by the Holy Spirit, (3) reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Christ, not our good works, (4) the responsibility to share the gospel in word and deed. These do distinguish evangelicals from mainline Protestants, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians. Beneath these four marks, however, evangelicals share with all other Christians a belief in the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and other basics of the Apostles and Nicene Creed.

2. The Social History of U.S (White) Evangelicalism (7 Traits)

However, in addition to having these doctrinal or theological convictions, all denominations have a sociological "location" as well, which means they are the product of certain historical events. These events and eras are not shared by evangelicals in other countries holding the identical theology but living in different social contexts. Within the framework of the 4 theological marks, the 7 social marks can be stronger or weaker.

The seven social marks are:

- Moralism vs humility — Self-righteousness. Emphasis on strict conformity to behavioral codes rather than heart character, on secondary doctrines made primary. A spirit of combative condemnation, pompousness, and pride.
- Separatism vs respectful engagement — Everything is either wholly good or evil in a 'Manichean' way, leading either to (a) a withdrawal from society and an unwillingness to engage non-Christian people and thought, or (b) the Manichean impulse can become motivation for taking over a society and expelling non-believers. Sectarianism. No ability to engage opposing views with patience, humility, hope, and tolerance or to serve alongside non-believers with appreciation for their 'common grace'.
- Individualism vs social reform — Belief that we are wholly the result of our personal choices. Little

understanding of how culture forms us, and a rejection of the concept of systemic or institutional evil forces, or of corporate responsibility.

- Dualism vs a vision for all of life — A pitting of biblical beliefs against culture. Either we seek a hostile takeover or we seal off Christian beliefs from our work and life in society. No thought for how faith shapes the way we work in the secular spheres and can serve society.
- Anti-intellectualism vs scholarship — A distrust of experts, a reverse snobbism against education, and of any result of scholarship or research which is not believed as "common sense" to most people. Distrust of scholarship. Skepticism of science. A refusal to show other viewpoints any respect. A shallow "common sense" approach to biblical interpretation that ignores the biblical author's intended meaning in the original context and the scholarship that helps us discern it.
- Anti-institutionalism vs accountability — A distrust of traditional institutions; a use of celebrity-driven, brand-driven platforms and networks which lead to fast growth but low accountability. A tendency to authoritarianism.
- Enculturation vs cultural reflection — A wedding of Christianity to popular, traditional U.S. culture. Two features: (a) Gender exaggeration- due to fundamentalism's tendency to "baptize" American culture, there is a legalistic tendency toward non-biblical gender stereotypes (especially those of the 1950s), a denigration of women, and cover-up of abuse. (b) Nationalism- A "God and Country" ethos that rejects reflection on the dark sides of U.S. history and society and expresses fear of a multi-ethnic future. (c) Racism- Often overt, but at the very least a racial insensitivity and cluelessness.

Social History

Where did these traits come from? The sociological influences on American evangelicalism are somewhat harder to schematize, but in the last two generations

⁴⁵ D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, Routledge, 1989.

good historical work has done so. Here are stages in evangelicalism's history that have instilled social traits.⁴⁶ See the Addendum below from Mark Noll – “How Did We Get Here?”

During **the Great Awakening** of the 18th century evangelicalism grew not through traditional denominations, but through global networks and associations held together by dominant personalities rather than by lasting institutions. It put more stress on individual experience and less emphasis on the church and sacraments.⁴⁷

During the **Second Great Awakening** and the early 19th century, American evangelicals grew enormously, but appealed to the masses by becoming an anti-elite, anti-intellectual, highly populist movement that wedded evangelicalism to nationalism, almost equating the Kingdom of God with the flourishing of the United States.⁴⁸

Leading up to **the Civil War** evangelicals in the southern states built what they thought was an air-tight case that the Bible allowed slavery. They did this through extreme ‘common sense’ interpretation aligned with the American populist democratic ethos. Scholars were ‘out of touch elites’ if they pointed out that (a) Biblical interpretation seeks the author’s intended meaning in the original context before seeking the text’s wider significance,⁴⁹ and that (b) the slavery described in the Bible was not at all the kidnapping-based, race-based, life-long slavery of

African chattel kind that allowed breaking up of families, brutal treatment and the required return of fugitive slaves. Slave-owners were reading the Bible to justify their racist attitudes and the new institution of slavery they had produced.⁵⁰

After the Civil War northern evangelicals, in order to keep connection with southern conservatives who still maintained slavery was Scriptural, muted calls for social reform and focused on individual heart change and personal piety. During the Jim Crow-law era white evangelicals both north and south were silent about violent injustices to black persons.⁵¹ Black and white ‘born again’ believers in the U.S. largely lost contact with one another.

In the **early 20th century** evangelicals defended the authority of the Bible, the Virgin Birth, and the resurrection, but they did so falling back on the common-sense proof-texting approach (that had supported slavery) rather than on serious Bible study. They also developed a way of reading bible prophecies literalistically (a theology called dispensationalism). This led to a view of society in endless moral decline, incapable of being influenced. Emphasis was put on separation from non-belief and behavior—no to drinking, smoking, and most entertainment.⁵²

During **the 1930s to 1950s a ‘neo-evangelical movement’** (led by Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, Billy Graham) sought to bring serious bible scholarship, deeper intellectual

⁴⁶ The eras in evangelical history are not meant to directly correlate with the seven social marks. The various stages often nurtured more than one of the marks.

⁴⁷ Harry S. Stout, “What Made the Great Awakening Great?” in H.Carter and L.Porter. eds., *Turning Points in the History of American Evangelicalism*, Eerdmans, 2017.

⁴⁸ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Yale, 1989. Evangelicals so turned away from intellectual effort that “it exaggerates only slightly to observe that there was little first-order evangelical thinking in philosophy, science, political thought, or economics between Jonathan Edwards and, say, Alvin Plantinga.” By the 19th century they were more interested in “strengthening the Republic than advancing the Kingdom of God (or equated the two.)”(From a handout by Mark Noll “How Did We Get Here? A Short History of American Evangelicalism through Ten Key Moments.”)

⁴⁹ J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, IVF, 1958, 102.

⁵⁰ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, University of North Carolina, 2006.

⁵¹ Luke E. Harlow, “The Civil War and the Making of Conservative American Evangelicalism” in H.Carter and L.Porter. eds., *Turning Points in the History of American Evangelicalism*, Eerdmans, 2017. Harlow argues that northern U.S. Christians were so frustrated with southern evangelicals common-sense biblical defenses of slavery that many abandoned the doctrine of full biblical inspiration. In other words, the biblical controversy over slavery led many abolitionists to move into liberal, later ‘mainline’ Christianity. Mark Noll’s work shows that very sound biblical arguments against slavery could be mounted, and so a loss of confidence in the Bible’s authority was not a necessary conclusion. Harlow’s essay hints (I think) that it was. I agree rather with Noll.

⁵² George Marsden, “The Rise of Fundamentalism” in H.Carter and L.Porter. eds., *Turning Points in the History of American Evangelicalism*, Eerdmans, 2017.

thinking, and social responsibility back to northern white evangelicals.⁵³ New movements enabled evangelicalism to thrive and grow for 40 years. But even these 'neo-evangelical' leaders were wary of the Civil Rights movement and some saw MLK Jr. as "communist."

Southern white evangelicals had largely been Democrats—one reason is that many were not prosperous and they saw the Democrats as championing fairness and benefits for the working family. But southern white evangelicals, never convinced out of their racial views, championed segregation. Thus the **Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s** drove them out of the Democratic into the Republican party.⁵⁴ The Civil Rights movement also created among evangelicals the consensus that the federal government was accruing too much power. This opened them to the smaller government philosophy and alignment with conservative politics in general.

Beginning in **the 1970s**, a number of important figures moved white evangelicals toward closer alignment with conservative Republican politics (the return of Francis Schaeffer to the U.S., the beginning of **the Moral Majority** by Jerry Falwell Sr, the close relationship of Billy Graham and Richard Nixon.)⁵⁵ Thereafter political conservatives worked together with some evangelical leaders to help forge an evangelical social identity that not only included doctrine but sharply conservative politics.⁵⁶

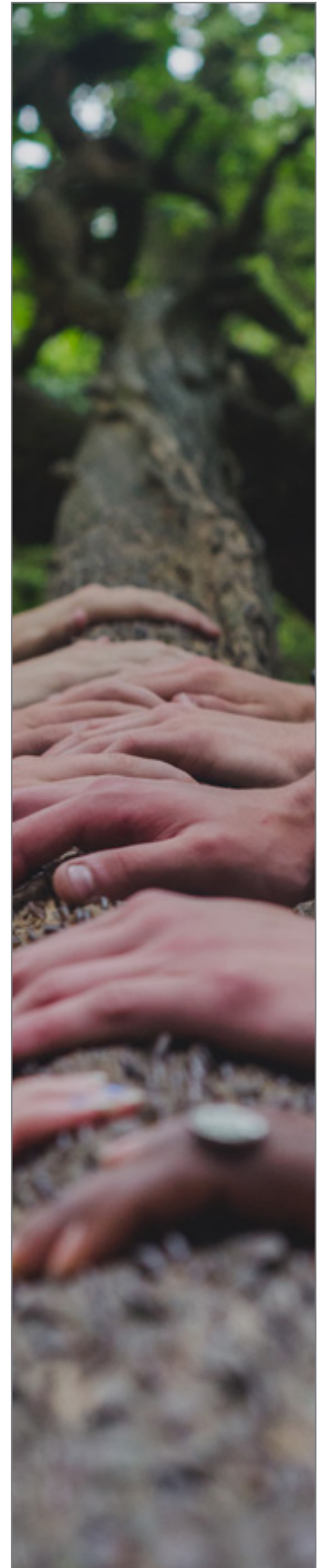
The **Immigration Act of 1965** and the growth of world-wide evangelicalism led to a new influx of non-white, non-western Christians into U.S. churches. But while their impact, and (I would argue) their salutary, 'leavening' influence, is being felt in some American urban centers, it has largely not put a dent in the more dominant white fundamentalist/evangelical culture.

⁵³ See Carl F.H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, Eerdmans, 1947.

⁵⁴ Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, Princeton, 2008.

⁵⁵ My wife Kathy and I were converted to Christianity at the tail end of the neo-Evangelical era (mid 1940s to mid 1970s) when it seemed clear to us young Christians that we were orthodox/conservative Protestants who believed in full authority of the Bible and historical doctrine—and so we were not liberal Christians but we were also not fundamentalist Christians. But by the 1980s we saw a number of the leading evangelical figures (mainly American ones) who in the 60s and 70s had seemed to shed the social traits of fundamentalism only to grow in (or return to) them in their later years.

⁵⁶ See Lydia Bean, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity: Local Churches and Partisan Divides in the United States and Canada*, Princeton University Press, 2014. Bean studies two Canadian churches (one Baptist, one Pentecostal) and two U.S. churches (one Baptist, one Pentecostal) with identical doctrinal/theological beliefs, and only miles away from each other (across the border of Canada and New York State) but who had significantly different political orientations, namely, the U.S. churches were much more overtly and consciously aligned with conservative politics and the Republican party. The key question: do you feel closer to a non-Christian with your same political views or to a Christian with identical doctrinal views but who is sharply different politically? Over the past generation U.S. white evangelicals have been nurtured in the former, more political social identity.



ADDENDUM: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

A Short History of American Evangelicalism through Ten Key Moments

—Mark A. Noll

Here = Vital, Spirit-filled evangelical and evangelical-like movements burgeoning around the globe plus a full spectrum of Gospel-honoring evangelism, disciplining, and service in the U.S. plus a lot of demonizing opponents, over-reliance on popular media, some white nationalism, much conspiracy thinking (*opta principii*⁵⁷), fixation on the apocalypse, culture war mentalities, susceptibility to fake news, and Christian-American nationalism.

A simplified generalization: Almost every positive advance in evangelical history has been accompanied by unfortunate side effects or collateral damage.

(1) **Martin Luther** proclaimed enduring evangelical principles (God's free grace, justification by faith, the supremacy of Scripture). He also relied heavily on his prince to promote reform in Saxony's churches and so remained committed to organizing all society, if necessary by force, according to God's will. This commitment was even stronger in the nations (England, Scotland, and the Netherlands) that founded the American colonies.

(2) The **Great Awakening** of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards (1740s) inspired personal belief, church renewal, and significant outreach to Native Americans and enslaved Africans. But it also turned evangelicals into activists focused on immediate conversions and personal sanctification, and away from first-level foundational intellectual effort (it exaggerates only slightly to observe that there was little first-order evangelical thinking in philosophy, science, political thought, or economics between Jonathan Edwards and, say, Alvin Plantinga).

(3) Many evangelical leaders supported the **American Revolution** (1776) as a struggle of God versus Satan, Moses versus Pharaoh, and liberty/truth/righteousness versus tyranny/lies/corruption. In this struggle, Loyalists to Great Britain who did not recognize the nascent United States as "God's New Israel" were called "infidels." English evangelicals (John Wesley) and a few in America wondered why patriots were so excited about "enslavement by Parliament" (a 2-penny tax on tea) when they supported the chattel enslavement of Africans.

(4) During the **Second Great Awakening** (1795-1840) evangelicals accomplished marvels in evangelism (mostly the Methodists), education (Congregationalists and Presbyterians in the lead), missions (Baptists and Disciples joining in), Bible distribution, and support of social morality—and all through voluntary organizations.

⁵⁷ *Opta Principii* is the tendency to view "first steps" leading inevitably to disastrous consequences; it is a habit of mind given to conspiratorial thinking.



Some, however, began to treat these activities as more important for strengthening the Republic than advancing the Kingdom of God (or equated the two).

(5) Controversy over **slavery** before and during the **Civil War** (1830-1865) witnessed serious Christian reliance on Scripture to attack the institution (abolitionists black and white), defend the institution (white southerners, some white northerners), and regret its abuses like prohibiting slaves to read and rampant white-on-black sexual predation, while hoping for slavery's elimination, but not considering the system itself as sinful (the majority white northern view). Because the theological question was solved by armies and not agreement on biblical teaching, public reliance on biblical teaching suffered a major blow.

(6) Congress and President Hayes removed Union armies from the South in **1876-77**, in effect allowing lynching and enforced segregation to prevail. White evangelicals were almost completely silent. New initiatives of spiritual renewal did appear (D. L. Moody, holiness movements, soon Pentecostalism). But because of the earlier evangelical inability to unite on scriptural values concerning slavery, very few evangelicals tried to bring scriptural values to bear on the great moral crises of this later era—Jim Crow segregation and the new industrial order (some good for many, lots of harm for others).

(7) In the **fundamentalist-modernist** controversies (1915-1935) fundamentalists defended crucial Christian teachings (the authority of Scripture, the atonement, the Virgin Birth, the resurrection of Christ). But they often took their lead from pulpiteers deploying slogans instead of careful reasoning, proof-texting instead of serious Bible study, anti-intellectual sensationalism about biblical criticism and science instead of discerning investigation.

(8) In the **1930s and 1940s**, neo-evangelicals (E. J. Carnell, Carl Henry) tried to bring more serious Bible study, deeper thinking, and more social responsibility back to northern white fundamentalists. Billy Graham gave the movement an attractive public face. Other conservative Protestant groups also moved in similar directions. But leaders also often promoted a rabid anti-communism that amalgamated proclamation of the gospel with defense of the United States. They also usually denounced Catholicism as a deadly foe of genuine Christianity.

(9) The **Civil Rights** legislation of the 1960s for the first time made white evangelicals into a cohesive political force. Southern white evangelicals had defended segregation and were Democrats. Northern white evangelicals accepted some measure of integration and were Republicans. When Democrat Lyndon Johnson passed Civil Rights legislation, southern white evangelicals became Republicans (after briefly supporting Jimmy Carter in 1976). Many white

evangelicals, North and South, worried about the expansion of federal power that was required to overcome segregation, even as white southern evangelicals eventually accepted integration. Expanded government authority and Supreme Court decisions affecting faith question (abortion, prayer and Bible reading in the public schools) confirmed white evangelicals in their fear of Big Government. By contrast, African American evangelicals almost all voted Democratic thereafter.

(10) The **Immigration Act** (1965) and the **Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization** (1974) opened American evangelicals to renewal of churches by Hispanic, Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese, and other ethnic contributors—and to worldwide evangelical movements not particularly worried about American problems. Yet this world evangelical awareness has only begun to catch on more generally with “evangelicals” as identified by the popular media.

We are here, in other words, as a product of an exceptional history—for good and for ill.

This outline summarizes material taken mostly from *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Eerdmans, 1998; second edition, 2019); *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford University Press, 2002); *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

C. EVANGELICALISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

[1] Historically, there has been a distinction between fundamentalism and evangelicalism. George Marsden has written important volumes on this history. During the 1930s-50s a ‘neo-evangelical movement’ (led by Carl Henry, Billy Graham) sought to bring serious Bible scholarship, deeper intellectual thinking, and social responsibility back to northern white evangelicals.⁵⁸ They sought to establish a movement that was true to historic, orthodox Protestant beliefs, but that shed fundamentalist social traits—the anti-intellectualism, the marriage to American culture, the sectarianism, the legalism and emphasis on secondary and tertiary doctrines, and the pietism and individualism that rejected the need for social reform or cultural engagement. Unfortunately, the early neo-evangelicals especially brought with them more of the traits of fundamentalism than they could acknowledge. Many were distrustful of the Civil Rights movement and were so deeply anti-communist that they could not critique the capitalistic system at all. There was no uniformity on these issues between younger evangelicals who wrote

⁵⁸ See Carl F.H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, Eerdmans, 1947. Many historians have pointed out that despite Henry’s call for a critique of both capitalism and socialism in his volume, the early proponents of ‘neo-evangelicalism’ were still largely skeptical of the Civil Rights movement and reticent about criticizing American society.

the “Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Action” in 1973 and older leaders (though Carl F.H. Henry, a founder of neo-Evangelicalism, signed the declaration).

[2] Fundamentalism is not identical with all conservative Protestantism. There are many churches and believers who are solidly orthodox in the Bebbington theological marks, even in somewhat more conservative versions of the marks (e.g. penal substitutionary atonement; forensic justification by faith), and yet who largely lack the social marks of moralism, anti-intellectualism, individualism, and so on. Distinctions need to be made here that are not being made in the media or public consciousness. [a] There are many churches that deliberately work to escape the gravitational pull of the history and social traits we have outlined. Some are led by evangelical leaders simply opposed to the obscurantism, harsh rhetoric, individualism, legalism, and separatism of fundamentalism. [b] There are other historically confessional churches such as Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian who are conservative in theology but not at all fundamentalist in traits and many of which would eschew the term “evangelical”—feeling more connection to their historic confessional ancestors around the world than to other American evangelicals. [c] As we will see below, the black church largely fits into conservative Protestantism but also has generally not identified with evangelicalism because of the dominance of white leadership in the world of ‘evangelicalism’ and also to the residual racism that was evident in many white evangelical circles.

[3] Bringing back the word ‘fundamentalism’ may clarify differences in conservative Protestantism. The emphasis on the ‘Bebbington Four’ theological marks and a reluctance to use the pejorative word ‘fundamentalist’ has served to muddy the waters. It has led to a loss of distinction between conservative Protestants who are not fundamentalist and those who are.

Stressing the “Bebbington Four” as *the* exclusive way to define evangelicalism tends to flatten and hide significant differences. Kristen Kobes du Mez rightly argues that American evangelicals always prefer to define themselves by their doctrine, ignoring the sociological marks and history. When they do so evangelicalism looks very large—it “manifests as a racially diverse and global movement.” But confining ourselves to the theological does not explain why black U.S. Christians, who share the Bebbington marks and have been traditionally theologically conservative, seldom call themselves evangelicals. This is because their social history is different and so they combine the conservative theological marks with considerably less individualism, separatism, and dualism.

Du Mez adds, while white American evangelicals do certainly share their theological marks with other groups, their sociology affects the way these theological marks are emphasized and expressed. Will the Bible’s military metaphors be stressed to the exclusion of those that call for sacrificial service? Are all the turning points of redemptive history—creation, fall, redemption, restoration—equally grasped

and taught?⁵⁹ So an exclusive use of theological markers masks important differences within the movement.

Another example of the inadequacy of the theological markers alone for definition is the example of the black church in the U.S.

“The black church is not an evangelical tradition in the British or American sense....The black church is evangelical and in many ways it is not... [T]here are theological similarities but they are not derived from the same motivations. For example, substitutionary atonement is not the driving atonement theory in the black church. The black church’s atonement theory is *Christus victor*. It’s rare in a black church sermon that you will not hear a reference to victory of death and the devil, in addition talking about the need for individual repentance.... Bebbington’s categories don’t really apply to the black church in the same way that they do to white evangelicals. The black church is a church whose theology emerged out of oppression and marginalization as non-members of the dominant culture. While the black church contains all of those categories in their tradition, they do not arrive at those from the same biblical theology nor religious lived experience. For example, white evangelicals use the authority of Scripture to tell everyone why they are wrong. In the black church, the authority of Scripture is used to defend the existence of men and women as worthy of dignity and liberation first and foremost. Other issues would be more secondary and would

follow those. Same principles but for totally different reasons.”⁶⁰

Sum: Much of what is called ‘white evangelicalism’ is actually fundamentalism—theological conservatism plus the social traits in heavy measure.

[4] But the word “Fundamentalism” can also be used to mask differences. The word ‘fundamentalism’ has not disappeared from the public discourse, but the popular definition is problematic. It does include the traits of anti-intellectualism and moralistic harshness. But it usually defines fundamentalists as those who interpret the Scriptures ‘literally.’ This is a way that progressive/mainline Christians have used to tag most evangelicals as fundamentalists. J.I. Packer has deftly shown how this definition subtly eliminates the historic evangelical approach to Scripture. ⁶¹ It is true that there is a fundamentalist mindset that interprets even apocalyptic prophetic literature in literal ways, and which ignores efforts to discern historic and cultural context. But to say ‘we don’t take the Bible literally’ allows the speaker to take biblical teaching about the resurrection of Jesus, for example, as merely symbolic, even when it’s clear that the gospel writers intended to teach us that Jesus literally and physically rose from the dead. Packer shows that evangelicals seek the natural sense of a text—what the authors intended to say in their original context. We must not impose a literal meaning OR a symbolic meaning on the text, but seek to listen to the authors of the Scripture itself.

Sum: The word “fundamentalism” can be used to discredit all orthodox, non-mainline liberal Protestants, even those that do not share the social traits.

[5] So making a distinction between fundamentalism and conservative Protestantism is something that neither

⁵⁹ Kristen Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, W.W.Norton, 2021, 5-7. See also the “Roundtable” discussion on the Bebbington definition in M. Noll, D.W.Bebbington, G.M.Marsden, *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been. Are Now. And Could Be*, Eerdmans, 2019. 123-187.

⁶⁰ From Dr Anthony Bradley, in private correspondence. Used by permission.

⁶¹ A good overview of fundamentalism and its distinction from historic evangelicalism is treated in the first two chapters of Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, IVP, 1958. Though Packer’s references to critics of evangelicalism (and proponents) are now dated, the arguments are solid and necessary to grasp today. See especially pages 102ff.

fundamentalists nor progressives want to allow. Both Right and Left have tried to paint the distinction I am making here (between fundamentalists and conservative Protestants) as one between ordinary evangelical believers and “elite” evangelicals. This is, of course, a way of discrediting the “elitists.” However, I personally pastored a blue-collar church—and have seen many working class churches—that are theologically evangelical and doctrinally conservative but not sociologically fundamentalist.

A recent podcast series “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill” traced out the implosion of a major evangelical megachurch. In on-line commentary, conservative listeners complained that the critique was too “liberal,” that the flaws that led to the blow-up were largely failures of leadership. They ignore the social markers of fundamentalism which Mars Hill exhibited and which led to the authoritarianism that destroyed it.

At the other end of the spectrum, progressives looking at the Mars Hill case study argued that *any* church with the theological marks of biblical authority and the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation would *unavoidably* become a cult-like body. But progressives often ignore the fact that the social traits that hurt Mars Hill came from history more than theology. Evangelicals with the same theology in other countries and cultures (and many in the U.S.) do not manifest the same social traits because they had different histories, or because they use the truths of Scripture to help them overcome their social histories.

SUMMARY

— Progressive Christians see the social traits as the normal, necessary result of the theological beliefs and so all conservative Protestants not like Progressives are fundamentalists.

— Fundamentalist Christians see the social traits as the normal, necessary result of the theological beliefs and so all conservative Protestants not like Fundamentalists are Progressives.

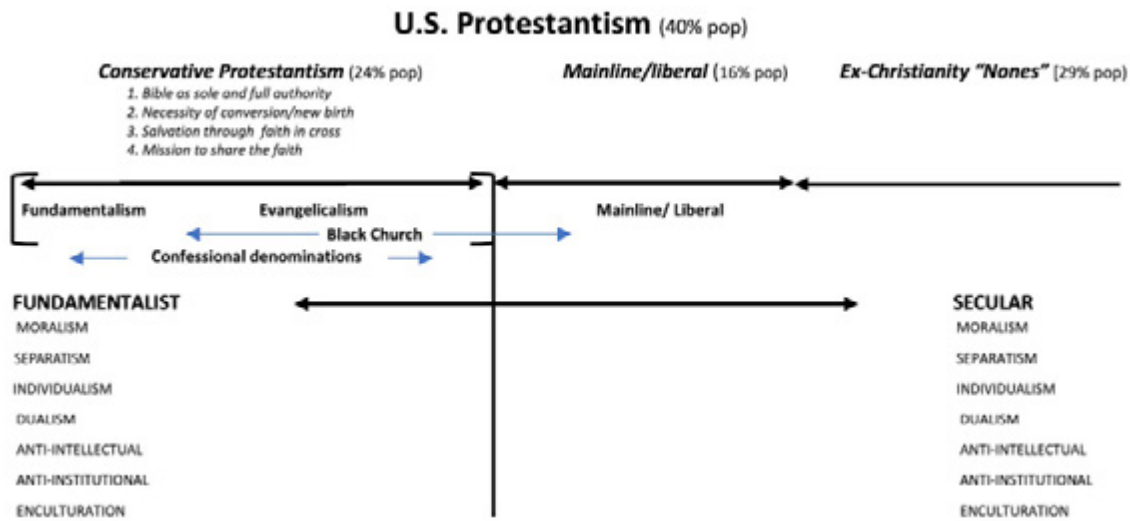
— So while conservatives tend to ignore the social marks, progressives try to merge the theological and social. Either way, the very idea of a conservative Protestantism that is not fundamentalism disappears. We need to demonstrate there is a conservative Protestantism that is not mainline liberal yet which largely avoids the social traits of fundamentalism.

How then shall we speak of this important distinction?

I am not going to propose a whole new set of terms for all to use. But in order to describe these categories in this article, I'll say that the Bebbington Four describes **conservative Protestantism**, and within it are at least these four groups: (1) White dominated **fundamentalism** (mainly Baptist, Pentecostal, and non-denominational that strongly exhibit the social traits), (2) White dominated **evangelicalism** (mainly Baptist and non-denominational that are show more mild forms of the social traits), (3) **Confessional denominations** that don't own the word 'evangelicalism', (4) and the **Black church** that, generally, doesn't own the word either.⁶² Fundamentalists are those in which the social traits are strong, evangelicals (and other conservative Protestants who don't accept that word) are those in which the social traits are weaker.

I recognize that there is no bright line separating these groups. Nevertheless, to understand the condition of the church and its future, the differences are important to bear in mind. I think that the proper way to think about this is to see **the primacy but insufficiency of the theological marks** for defining evangelicalism. I have worked with evangelical Christians around the world, and it is the shared theological marks that enable us to embrace and cooperate as family. They are basic! An experience of grace and conversion, the realization of the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice, the knowledge of the power of the living Word of the Scripture—these all bind us together across the cultural and social differences. And yet, once we begin to seek to work together, we do find that our social-cultural differences are not insignificant, that they often intrude and disrupt our work. Yet we labor to overcome the cultural differences because we perceive them as less basic to who

⁶² See above for a perspective that reminds us that the social history of the black church makes it much more distinct from other American and European denominations and traditions, even when there is doctrinal consensus on the 'Bebbington Four'.



Fundamentalism is an over-combative moralism, seasoned with anti-intellectualism, intense individualism, and an uncritical attitude toward traditional culture. Ironically, the social traits of fundamentalism re-appear in parallel (though not identical) forms on the extreme left progressivism of secularism. The individualism of the left is the 'expressive individualism' of the postmodern self. The anti-intellectualism is the cancelling and control of academic thought that does not follow progressive narratives. The enculturation is to elite, secular culture which is 'invisible' to its followers as a culture. The separatism is the unwillingness to speak civilly, do bi-partisan projects, or refrain from calling opponents 'evil.'

THE DECLINE OF EVANGELICALISM

Now we are in a position to see why white American conservative religion has followed other religious groups into decline. Fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist evangelicalism are so intertwined in social research that it is impossible to know whether primarily fundamentalist churches are declining more or if the decline is across the board of conservative Protestantism. I suspect the second option is the more accurate one, and some of the reasons this is happening are listed below:

The United States is slowly running out of traditionally-minded Americans to convert, and conservative Protestants on the whole are unwilling or unable

to reach the highly secular and culturally different. Traditionally, American cultural institutions produced people who—whether they professed Christianity or not—had beliefs in a personal God, an afterlife, and moral absolutes. Virtually all Christian strategies for evangelism and church growth are geared to people with traditional 'background beliefs.' But such people are fewer and older, and conservative Protestantism, in general, does not know how to evangelize and win secular people.

Furthermore, in both fundamentalism and evangelicalism there have been many churches and leaders guilty of spiritual and sexual abuse. Evangelicals are historically prone to steer toward celebrity-driven platforms and loose networks. The lack of accountability has led to many high-profile evangelical pastor and church melt-downs. Authoritarianism and spiritual abuse are being unmasked. And the #ChurchToo movement has produced revelations of widespread (beyond the mega-church) sexual misconduct by ministers and church leaders against women. Both complementarian and egalitarian church leaders have been guilty.

Notably, conservative church politicization has turned off half the country. In a polarized environment, white evangelicals' strong identification with one party and one presidential candidate has produced deep and hostile reactions from the 50% of the country opposed to this

political platform. And, in general, the 50% that it has alienated is younger and more multi-ethnic. Many fundamentalists consider this a victory, rather than a defeat. My informal perception is that many conservative Protestants voted for Donald Trump but did so with far less enthusiasm or approval than fundamentalist Christians. But in any case, the identification of all conservative religion with the political Right is now very strong in the public mind, and is a turn-off to a large percentage of the populace.

Conservative churches, both fundamentalist and evangelical, continue to have a race problem. Conservative white evangelicals in the past (1) originally supported slavery, (2) were silent during the Jim Crow era, (3) largely rejected the Civil Rights movement of the time, (4) were slowest to integrate their schools and seminaries. Today the majority of white evangelicals and fundamentalists are responding to the excesses of progressivism by largely denying structural injustice or systemic racism, though such concepts are biblical. Progressive overreach helps to justify this, unfortunately.

Fundamentalism is an anti-intellectual movement, and even non-fundamentalist evangelicals tend toward pragmatism. Catholicism is both a popular religion for the masses and yet has nurtured a robust intellectual class. Fundamentalism's largely anti-intellectual stance has only grown among conservative Christians who are alarmed by the progressive excesses of today's universities. However, this leaves conservative Protestantism in general with little ability to reach the college educated and little ability to reflect theologically on our U.S. culture. The cultural 'captivity' of evangelicals—the inability to see the difference between biblical beliefs and American culture—is largely due to a lack of evangelical scholarship.

Conservative churches do not know how to do effective formation. The anti-intellectualism and pragmatism of conservative Protestantism also leads to shallow modes of instructing and forming Christians to be confident in their distinctive beliefs and at the same time able to interact winsomely with a host of alternate worldviews. A high number of evangelical youth jettison their faith as soon as they leave the 'hothouse' of their local church. Other religious traditions are far better at formation and evangelicals must learn to do better as well.

Conservative Protestants lack a model for relating to a secular culture. Evangelicalism has been a prominent part of a "Christendom" culture—one in which Christian beliefs and practice were dominant and assumed. Now that this has changed, evangelicals struggle to find a 'public theology'—one that defines how they relate to the larger society. Many fundamentalists simply want to re-establish Christendom through government action. Others simply want to withdraw from culture altogether and just build up the church. It is this issue that divides evangelicals and other conservative Protestants from fundamentalists today more than any other.

REASONS FOR HOPE GOING FORWARD

It is natural to ask, how much hope is there? The obstacles are formidable. What reasons are there for any confidence that it is possible? Briefly the reasons to have hope for renewal are:

1. The limits of secularism. Despite many signs of its strength and the growth in the U.S., as a philosophy secularism has shown severe limitations in its ability to form community and give individuals meaning, identity, contentment, and the ability to face suffering. It may not seem as compelling an alternative to religion in the future as it is now.
2. The strength of global Christianity. Outside of the West, Christianity is growing rapidly and most of it is evangelical and Pentecostal. The future leaders and theologians of Christianity will be multi-ethnic, and this will give the faith more credence with secular people who in the past had thought of evangelicalism as mainly a white phenomenon.

3. The demographics of religion. In general, the more religious people are the more children they have and this social fact holds across the cultures and the classes. This is why some social scientists say the world's secular population will 'top out' sometime in the mid-21st century and begin to shrink.

4. The subversive fulfillment of chosen religion. Mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, and other religions are inherited—you are literally 'born into' them and adhere to them because your family does. These churches decline more rapidly in modernity because young people do not want to follow a path that they have not chosen for themselves. Evangelical faith is better adapted to modern culture because it is indeed a chosen religion—one that requires conversion. Yet it pushes back on the individualism of culture too. When we freely choose to follow Christ, we also choose to give up living according to our own wisdom—bowing instead to his glad and wise authority.

5. The translatability of faith. Christianity, unlike orthodox Islam and Judaism, has no book of Leviticus in the New Testament. Detailed regulations for food and dress and other daily activities are not prescribed—allowing Christians to be fully integrated into the surrounding society. "Cultural diversity was built into the Christian faith...in Acts 15, which declared that the new gentile Christians didn't have to enter Jewish culture....The converts had to work out...a Hellenistic way of being a Christian ...[So] no one owns the Christian faith. There is no 'Christian culture' the way there is an 'Islamic culture' which you can recognize from Pakistan to Tunisia to Morocco...."⁶³ In short, Christianity is highly 'translatable' into new cultures and new situations and has the resources to remain a significant force in a fast-changing world.⁶⁴

6. The promise of Jesus. In G.K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* there is a chapter on "The Five Deaths of the Faith." He does a brief overview of times in which

orthodox Christianity was challenged profoundly—the Arian controversy over the divinity of Christ in the 3rd century, Voltaire and the rise of skepticism in Europe during the Enlightenment, Darwin and the rise of scientism, and so on—but in each case emerged strong and growing. With a typical Chesterton twist, he concludes: "At least five times...the Faith has to all appearance gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died."⁶⁵

7. Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). That is a promise—and there's no reason to believe this promise has an expiration date.

⁶³ Andrew F. Wall, "The Expansion of Christianity: An interview with Andrew Walls" *Christian Century*, August 2-9, 2000, 792.

⁶⁴ See especially Sanneh's chapter, "Translatability in Islam and Christianity, with Special Reference to Africa," in *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis, 1987), 211ff.

⁶⁵ G.K.Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*. Canon Press, 2021, 279.

The Cultural Moment

A. THE NEED FOR A “MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER”⁶⁶

The original call for a missionary encounter with western secular culture was made by Lesslie Newbigin, who recognized that the West, once considered a Christian society, had become secular and was now the first post-Christian society. To have a ‘missionary encounter’ means to neither escape nor to merely combat the culture. It means the church engages and communicates so as to win many people to Christ and grow and flourish in that society.

Newbigin rightly argued that all churches in the West were habituated to ministering to people within “Christendom”—societies that (1) conferred great social benefit on church-going, (2) regarded Christianity and the church as a great good and the norm, and (3) instilled in most people basic beliefs such as respect for the Bible, a personal God, moral absolutes, the need for forgiveness, an afterlife of heaven and hell. Now that Christendom had faded, every church would have to re-learn ministry in a radically new environment. And one of the main reasons (but not the only one) for the decline of all Christian churches in western is their failure to have a missionary encounter in the new West. Here is one summary of the elements in such an encounter:

1. Christian high theory. There is a Biblical Critical Theory—that is, the Bible gives us the tools to critique the deep structures of any culture. As Augustine did in *The City of God*, where he provided a withering critique of pagan culture’s social theory and its metaphysical belief-underpinnings, so Christians must develop a trenchant critique of modern western culture that exposes the foundational causes for its ever-more evident weaknesses.

1. A truly post-Christendom evangelistic dynamic. “Christendom” was a culture in which the main institutions **(a)** put social pressure on people to go

church, and **(b)** inculcated basic moral and religious beliefs on which to build a gospel presentation. These included at least [1] Belief in a personal God [2] a moral standard outside of ourselves that it was the purpose of life to obey (e.g. “the meaning of life is to be a good person”) [3] a sense of guilt and sin, that we fail to live up to the moral standard, and [4] an afterlife, heaven and hell. In that situation, churches could expect most or many people to show up and then evangelism was a process of connecting already existing beliefs and concepts into a gospel presentation. *Virtually all churches and ministries today still assume these two things which are increasingly going away* (esp. among the young, in urban areas.) Needed: new ways of **(a)** motivating and mobilizing lay Christians for mission in their networks and neighborhoods (lay evangelism dynamic), and **(b)** giving them tools and ways to talk of faith in post-Christian culture.

2. A category defying social project. This includes at least the following five aspects of Christian community that we also see in the earliest church: **(a)** A multi-ethnic community with emphasis on racial equality and justice, **(b)** a deep concern for the weak and poor and for economic justice, **(c)** a spirit of bridge-building, peace-making, forgiveness and non-retaliation, **(d)** a pro-life and pro-family commitment, **(e)** a sexual counter-culture in which sexual intimacy mirrors our union with Christ, and so is only for within heterosexual marriage.

3. Counter-catechesis. Technology conveys the narratives and beliefs of secular modernity—regarding identity, freedom, happiness, and relativism. It does so far more immersively than television or movies ever could. While young people might have watched 2 hrs of television a day (on the upper end of the spectrum) young adults today spend 4-8 hours a day on social media. Not only that—in place of two or three TV networks and a single local newspaper now there are thousands of ‘bubbles’ of information that redundantly

⁶⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, “Can the West Be Converted?” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January 1987; *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, Eerdmans, 1987; *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Eerdmans 1989; Michael Goheen, “Chapter 8: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture,” *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues*, IVP, 2014, 296-330.

and intensely send you only stories and arguments that you are already prone to believe. Technology also changes the way we form beliefs. We are deeply conditioned to move quickly from short idea and clip to image to image. Beliefs become very thin, chosen only if they fit in with how we want to see ourselves, and easily discarded when they do not. It undermines the ability to see anything outside (truth-claims, community duties) as more real than what is inside one's head and feelings. Needed: new ways of (a) doing 'counter-catechesis', making the narratives ("catechesis") of the secular culture very visible and deconstructing them with Christian teaching [You Heard It Said], (b) creating rich, thick, formative Christian community [James Hunter's "moral ecology;" James K. A. Smith liturgical worship, art and story]. We need to learn again to do 'counter-catechesis'. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "You heard it said" before he said, "I say unto you." Our instruction and formation needs to take our biblical doctrine and use it to both deconstruct the beliefs of the culture, and also to answer the questions of the human heart that the culture's narratives cannot.

4. Faithful presence in cultural economies. A stance toward culture in which believers are 'salt and light' by (a) identifying as Christians, (b) integrating their faith with their vocation and working out of a distinctively Christian worldview, and (c) doing so humbly, with a stance of service and an eye for the common good. This means Christians seek to be faithfully present within the culture's dominant cultural economy (the academy, the arts, the corporate world, the media, etc.) as well as to form an alternate cultural economy.

5. Grace to the point. Keeping the gospel sharply in focus, constantly applying the means of gospel renewal to individuals and to the church. This includes: avoiding legalism and antinomianism; repentance as a way of life; extraordinary prayer; innovation and creativity; remembering corporate renewal dynamics (models of the church).

As a supplement to this, see the 18 white papers named "DNA 3.0" being developed by Redeemer City to City. They



give more detail and elaboration to all six elements above plus others.

B. THE REALITY OF THE GREAT DECLINE

Newbigin died in 1998. But true to his predictions, virtually every branch of the Christian church in the West has been in some form of decline. The mainline Protestant church has been diminishing for generations, but finally both the Catholic and evangelical churches are in decline as well. Over the last three years the Southern Baptist Convention lost over 1 million members.⁶⁷

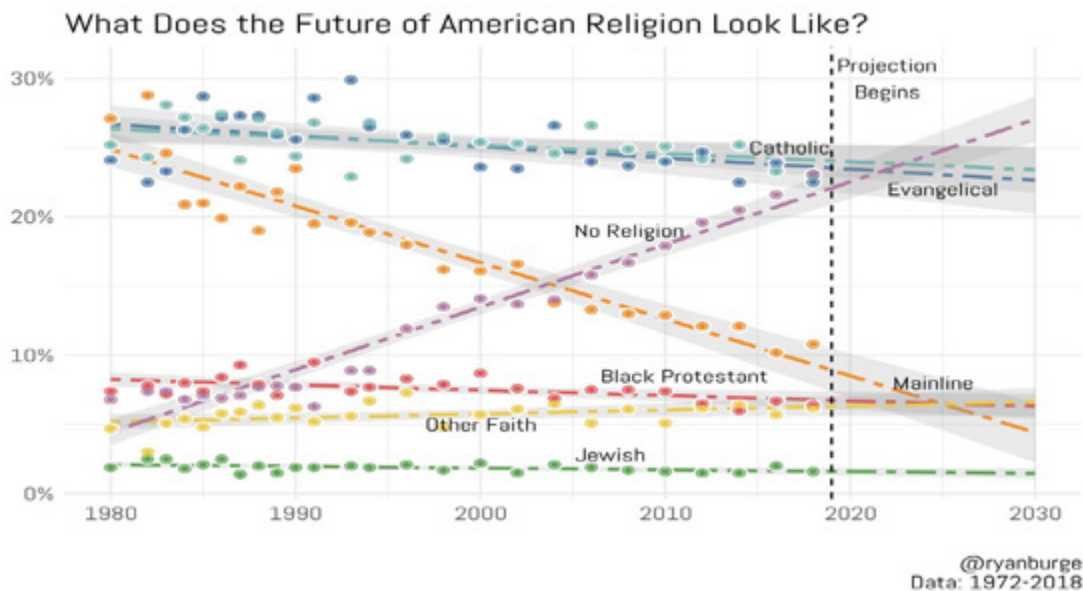
In the U.S.—the last part of Western culture in which the church seemed to be strong—the number of people who say they have 'no religious preference' has gone from under 5% (1980) to about 10% (1990) to over 25% by 2018. By the end of 2021 nearly 30% of U.S. adults were religiously unaffiliated, and only 63% identified with Christianity, down from 75% in just a decade.⁶⁸

Most importantly, "Gen Z," those in their early twenties and under, will be even more secular. While their 'no religious preference' numbers are 33%—about the same as Millennials—a higher percentage of them say they are atheist and agnostic, about 21%, while in the past atheists and agnostics were never more than 5-7% of the population.

All this is unprecedented in U.S. history—it is "the Great Decline" of religion and Christianity in America.

⁶⁷ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/may/southern-baptist-membership-decline-covid-pandemic-baptisms.html>

⁶⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>



Before the pandemic it was widely agreed that at least 2/3 of all U.S. churches are in decline, with another 15% plateaued and only about 15% growing. (These figures were based on LifeWay’s study of S. Baptist churches.) The pandemic, however, has only exacerbated the decline. There is informal agreement that most churches are now drawing only 60-80% of the attendance they had before the lockdowns. The people who went to church out of social obligation will likely never return. Churches overall appear permanently smaller than they were before the pandemic.

And one of the facts of church life today is the Great Walk-Away going on among the young. (Some have called it ‘Deconstruction’.) Today less than 25% of adults aged 18-34 go to church regularly, and that number seems to be plummeting. One study, “The Great Opportunity”⁶⁹ estimates that over the next 30 years—if current trends continue—a best case scenario is that 35 million youths currently raised in the church will walk away from faith, and a worst case scenario is 42 million.

C. THE FACTORS BEHIND THE DECLINE

What factors have led to the decline? To use a gardening metaphor—what would cause a garden that in the past has been productive to sharply decline in its production of fruit and vegetables? There are three kinds of possible factors. First, it may be that the skills of the gardeners have declined. Second, it may be that environmental conditions have declined—perhaps the weather has been terrible this year. Or perhaps the climate itself is changing slowly. Third—it may

⁶⁹ Available at <https://www.greatopportunity.org/> The report “The Great Opportunity” (2017) recognized that we are in a “pivotal moment” in the life of the American church, and that if we faithfully and missionally respond to the trends and currents of our time, that over the next 30 years we could capitalize on the greatest mission opportunity in U.S. history. The report explains that this Great Opportunity rests on the occasion of a predicted massive decline in the number of young adults—both ‘Gen Zs’ and ‘Millennials’—who will be willing to identify as Christians over the next generation. Many indicators are that tens of millions of younger adults will move to “no religious affiliation” and leave the church over coming decades, a shift and decline sharper than ever seen in U.S. history. “The Great Opportunity’s” research indicated that 1/3 of young people who leave the church do so because they have adopted positions on social and moral issues that are at variance with Christian teaching (e.g. sexuality and homosexuality) but 2/3 leave the church simply because it is ‘irrelevant’ and doesn’t address their concerns or the questions they are asking. Studies show 50% retention or lower—much less than in previous generations. The Great Opportunity, as the report sees it, is that this crisis could move the church to introduce a series of interventions that will not only stem that tide and retain younger adults now within the church, but will at the same time be able to win others who are outside of it. On page 21 it speaks of a ‘Better Case Scenario’ in which 15 million youth will remain in or enter the church, 26 million will disaffiliate, and the unaffiliated/non-religious percent of the population will level off by 2050 or 2060 at 24%. The interventions listed aim at this scenario *or better*.

be that *both* environmental factors have changed *and* the gardening skills have not been sufficient to keep the garden fruitful in the new situation.

In the case of the declining U.S. church, the third category of answers is the right one.

1. (Gardening) The lack of a missionary encounter.

Returning to Newbigin, we agree that the western church's decline is in great part due to our inability to adapt to a post-Christendom situation and have a "missionary encounter" with secular people and culture.

Certainly it is true that the church has not adapted to its new environment nor engaged in a 'missionary encounter'—but another question is what has led to the post-Christendom situation to begin with? Why did Christianity decline so sharply in Western culture even as it is growing dramatically in so many other parts of the world? To use a metaphor—cultural change comes from both deeper, longer-incubating shifts analogous to climate change, as well from more obvious immediate events and processes that are analogous to weather conditions.

2. (Climate Change) Long-term cultural secularization.

1500-2000. As we see in Charles Taylor's work⁷⁰, the move away from the assumptions of Christianity to the assumption of a materialistic, God-less universe came through a long 500 year 'genealogy'. Taylor says that in 1500 virtually no one in the West could imagine a world

without God—how would you explain where things came from? How would you justify any moral values? How would you be able to find meaning in life? How would you face suffering and death? But by the year 2000 there were many places in the West—such as the academy and the arts and many European countries where people can hardly imagine a world *with* God. How this happened is traced out by Taylor (and others) along several themes which are linked.

a. The most fundamental was the gradual belief in an increasingly thick and closed 'immanent frame'—the view that the material world of time and space was all that exists and that therefore everything that exists has a material/historical cause and all happiness and meaning must be found primarily within this world in material goods and prosperity. Out of this gradually growing idea came:

b. A wholly new understanding of human reason as sufficient (without divine revelation or tradition or, originally, any subjectivity) to understand the world;

c. The "inward turn" that finds all truth within ourselves—and so a new view of identity, radical individualism, the development of the 'modern self', the first self-authenticating person;

d. A new view of freedom as the priority of individual independence over obligation to group, community,

⁷⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Belknap, 2007.



nation, God—real freedom is ‘negative freedom’—freedom from even the givenness of nature;

e. A relativization of morality, seeing it as based either in evolutionary biology or in cultural construction;

f. A new view of society that does not need to be united by any shared moral values or common beliefs about ‘the good, true, and beautiful’, but only by one shared commitment—the freedom of people to live as they choose as long as they don’t infringe on others’ freedom.

Taylor shows how each of these ideas and views developed very slowly because each of them, now seen as obvious or common sense, were originally barely conceivable. The changes took centuries.

3. (Weather change) Recent social trends. 1950-2022. Ross Douthat⁷¹ observes how strong Catholicism and Protestantism was in the U.S. after World War II. But he speaks of changes in society since 1950 for the decline.

a. First, he points to **the political polarization between Left and Right that drew many churches into it.** Mainline Protestants were pulled into line with the political positions of liberalism. In the late 60s and 70s this alienated many, as the churches seemed to be nothing more than a political bloc rather than a spiritual community. Their decline began while evangelical churches surged during the same time. But soon the evangelical churches became increasingly targets of conservative political operatives. Since the 1990s, evangelicals have become even more visibly aligned with and thus seen as just a wing of the Republican party rather than a spiritual community. As Robert Putnam has demonstrated in *American Grace*, this has greatly weakened the credibility of Christianity in the culture. This has all given rise to a broadly held perception that religion is really not about God and the Bible but about politics. This trend, begun in the latter part of the 20th century, has intensified over the last four years (see below “The Weather Vane”).

b. Second, he points to **the sexual revolution and view of identity that lies behind it.** This is, as we saw above, part of the slower “climate” change regarding identity that we mentioned above. Yet since the 1960s, the culture has been swept by the idea that we discover our own authentic self by looking inward and affirming what we see—and that expressing sexual desires is a crucial part of being authentic. Every other culture, more realistically, teaches that no one can just ‘look inside and discover yourself’. Inside your heart are all sorts of contradictory impulses and habits and loves and patterns. Everyone needs a moral grid or set of values by which we determine which parts of your heart are to be affirmed and which ones are to be resisted or changed. That moral grid must come from somewhere—either your culture or from the Bible. So *someone* or *some* culture is shaping who you are. The idea that you simply discover and express yourself is an illusion. Nevertheless, this view has swept society and is seen as common sense. The triumph of the modern self and of the sexual revolution for the loss of Christianity’s credibility can’t be over-estimated. The Christian sex ethic is seen now as unrealistic and perverse. This is massively discrediting and makes Biblical faith implausible to hundreds of millions both inside and outside the church.

c. Third, he points to the **loss of the elites and the academic and cultural institutions they control.** The “climate change” chronicled by Taylor took special hold in the academy. But after World War II in North America a far larger percentage of adults began attending college than had in the past. This magnified secularization because this far-larger university-educated class today effectively controls the media, newspapers, and networks, the academy, publishing, the arts, the most powerful and rich foundations, and much of the government and business world.

d. Fourth, religion has been undermined by the continuing revelations of **corruption in the lives of many Christian leaders and institutions.** This

⁷¹ Ross Douthat’s *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, The Free Press, 2012.

includes the extensive practices of sexual abuse of minors carried out in the Catholic church. This includes the many high-profile 'melt-downs' of celebrity evangelical pastors. This includes the #ChurchToo revelations of widespread sexual misconduct by ministers and church leaders, most recently in the Southern Baptist Convention.

D. THE PROBLEM OF THE WEATHER VANE

When I was a new Christian on my college campus, I heard a joke that the evangelicals would tell about the chapel. Architecturally it looked like a church, but it was not the home of a Christian congregation, it was a multi-faith space. It was a meeting place for all kinds of religious groups with all sorts of beliefs. Because of that, at the top of the steeple there was no cross—instead there was a weathervane. And so the jokesters would say, “See the weather vane? It’s because the people who meet in the chapel are blown about by every wind of human doctrine.” (Eph. 4:14)

The irony of such a joke is that perhaps the most warranted and telling critique one can make of American evangelicalism is that *it* is so tied to and reflective of U.S. culture that it is rootless and constantly changing with the culture. That explains why evangelicalism is being torn apart today. As our society is deeply polarized between a new Progressivism and the backlash of populist conservatism, so evangelicalism is being divided between a remade 'ex' or 'progressive' evangelicalism and a politically far right fundamentalism. And this is not only a reason for evangelicalism’s decline but it explains why it is not in a position to lead a renewal.

1. The wedding of evangelicalism to American culture. Above I noted that one of the main characteristics of evangelicalism is its over-wedding of Christianity popular American culture. A good recent history of this chameleon-like nature of evangelicalism names three versions—“Evangelicalism A,” “Evangelicalism B,” and “Evangelicalism C.”⁷²

Evangelicalism A – (The first half of the 20th century) was well-embodied in Billy Graham and Bill Bright of Campus Crusade. It stressed **a)** lowest common denominator Christianity, playing down the differences of historic denominations and theological traditions and **b)** large organizations and national ministries, playing down local congregational life, **c)** well designed evangelistic methods, private devotional habits, and home Bible studies assuming no church oversight. All this was done to promote a modernized, simplified, individualistic Christianity. The creedal minimalism that de-emphasized church and denominations created a far bigger market for the massive ministries (often called 'para-church') and organizations that could now appeal to those who shared this larger identity.

This, Sanders and others argue, was because evangelicalism reflected the

⁷² Kirsten Sanders, “The Evangelical Question” in *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer, 2022. As in all such schemas, this one is over-simplified but it is generally fair and illustrative for our purposes here.

“corporate age” of big business and huge new companies that provided secure life-long jobs such as General Motors, Exxon Mobil, U.S. Steel, General Electric, DuPont. Rather than challenging the spirit of the age, it grew by adopting the spirit of the age.⁷³

Evangelicalism B – (From the 1970s to the present) was well-embodied by Rick Warren and Jerry Falwell. Older notions of personal responsibility and loyalty to community were giving way to counter cultural values of individual choice and liberation from conformity. During this phase there were two new developments. The first was the megachurch. Megachurches attracted people through marketing techniques and usually did not have membership with the doctrinal requirements and behavioral standards and commitments that were associated with traditional churches. The emphasis was **(a)** on the practical and experiential rather than the doctrinal, **(b)** on the contemporary with no ties to the past, the historical, or the traditional, and **(c)** on the choosing individual subject who attended only as long as it met needs on a profitable cost-benefit basis. And the second development was the development of the Moral Majority (circa 1979) and the rise of the Christian Right. Just as the megachurch played down theology for practice, the Christian Right played down theology in favor of politics. It sought to turn evangelicals into a voting bloc by minimizing specific doctrinal commitments while maximizing specific political ones.

The theological shallowness and historical rootlessness of generic evangelicalism meant that people were not so much being called to repentance and conversion of life as being offered a set of goods and services that fit the times—inner peace, authenticity, and spirituality. To paraphrase one writer, we want God to hold our hand but not tell us how to live.⁷⁴ Again, rather than challenging the spirit of the age, evangelicalism grew by adopting the spirit of the age. Along with American rugged individualism came exaggerated versions of masculinity and femininity, negative attitudes toward immigrants, people of color, and the poor. Evangelicalism B simply adopted them in its effort to grow.⁷⁵

Evangelicalism C – (2007 to the present) has been embodied by Jen Hatmaker and Rachel Held Evans in its popular form and Kristen Kobes du Mez in its more scholarly form. Sanders sees Evangelicalism C as beginning with the rise of social media. It is highly critical of older evangelicalism which it sees as misogynist, racist, and homophobic. It often calls itself ‘progressive’ or ‘ex-evangelical’ and encourages people raised in conservative evangelicalism to ‘deconstruct’ their faith, which leads the rejection of historic doctrines of Biblical

⁷³ Sanders, *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer, 2022, 61-62.

⁷⁴ Molly Worthen, “400 Years Ago They Would Be Witches. Today They Can Be Your Coach,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2022. The full quote: “Neither total submission to a traditional religious institution nor atheistic materialism feels right [to most Americans]. We kind of do want the universe to hold our hand — without bossing us around too much.”

⁷⁵ Sanders, *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer, 2022, 62.

infallibility, the doctrine of hell, the substitutionary atonement and, above all, to the rejection of traditional Christian sex ethics. Du Mez's best-seller, *Jesus and John Wayne*⁷⁶, is a penetrating critique of Evangelicalism B and of how so many of its leaders and figures adopted American views of hyper-masculinity, patriarchy, militarism, racism and xenophobia. She exposes the politicization of evangelicalism and its willingness to compromise morality for power.

But Sanders argues convincingly that du Mez and other critics of Evangelicalism B are now representing just another phase of over-identification with, and adoption of, the spirit of the age. They are criticizing Evangelicalism B and the dominant American culture of the mid-20th century but they are doing it less from the Bible and more from the *new* dominant American culture—progressivism. Acceptance of homosexuality depends heavily on a view of the self that is profoundly secular and modern (see above). While Evangelicalism A's main vehicle as the parachurch and Evangelicalism B's was the megachurch, Evangelicalism C operates almost completely outside of either churches or institutions. Its vehicles are internet influencers like Jen Hatmaker who create a constituency through social media platforms, websites, books, and conferences.

While often rejecting the word 'evangelical' and essentially mirroring the beliefs of liberal mainline Protestantism, the leaders of Evangelicalism C "bear an uncanny, if unintended, resemblance to their evangelical predecessors [They] market their religious beliefs to whoever will buy them. The best way to do this is to adopt the preferences, values, and strategies of the surrounding culture."⁷⁷

As the cultural winds have shifted, the evangelicalism "weather vane" has shifted as well. But culture doesn't change in a neat, organized way. The progressivism and identity politics of the academy and the media has captured the high places of the culture, the professional class, the young, in cities and on the coasts. It is however being strongly countered by the populist Right with strongholds in the rural areas, blue-collar classes, and in southern, mid-western, and western states. Not surprisingly, Evangelicalism B now inhabits the parts of the country and circles that are strongholds of the Right while Evangelicalism C is growing among the young and in parts of the country most influenced by the dominant progressive culture and its views of identity and power. And so just as the two parts of American culture are at war, so these "Evangelicalisms" are at war with each other, each pushing the other more into a fundamentalism or a mainline-type progressivism respectively. Ironically, just as we saw (above) that mainline Protestantism became irrelevant by putting politics and culture over historical and theological orthodoxy, the Evangelicalisms are now making the same mistake.

⁷⁶ Kristin Kobes du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, W.W. Norton. 2020.

⁷⁷ Sanders, *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer, 2022, 64



2. The reasons behind the 'Weather Vane.' We spoke about the historical reasons for U.S. evangelicalism's tendency toward fundamentalism. But besides the historical, there are other reasons that American evangelicalism tends toward fundamentalism OR toward progressivism because of an over-identification with American culture.

a. The sociological. "Democratization." As chronicled in this classic work,⁷⁸ Nathan O. Hatch shows how evangelicals in the early 19th century—particularly on the opening Western frontier—opted away from the traditional Protestant emphasis on historic confessions, formative liturgy and catechetical practices, and strong ecclesial connectedness. It opted instead for brief 'statements of faith' rather than confessions, for an emphasis on experience rather than doctrine, for loose associations rather than strongly covenantal communities, and for lay ministry rather than theological training, scholarship and expertise. As a result, U.S. evangelicalism has a "crisis of authority."⁷⁹ There are no commonly recognized ecclesiastical authorities, as there are in Catholicism or in Eastern Orthodoxy—authorities that can declare the boundaries of sound doctrine and practice versus heresy. Because all the emphasis in evangelicalism is on practical outcomes rather

than doctrine and tradition, it is "free to adapt and change" in the way more historically rooted churches are not but as a result "it remains always a deeply cultural phenomenon,"⁸⁰ virtually a creation of the culture.

"Secularization." Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy*⁸¹ was one of the first volumes to argue that in a non-secular society, religious adherence was a given and unbelief was unthinkable. One was almost literally 'born into' one's religion. Your religion was a necessary part of being a member of your family, community, and nation. But in a secular society all religion is a personal, individual choice. This creates an enormous temptation for churches, namely, not to challenge the dominant, majority cultural beliefs of a society but to adopt them as a way to recruit people as members. As we have seen, the mainline church began doing that in the 1920s, but by the 1970s it became clear that it had been a disastrous move. In the 1980s "Evangelicalism B" began to do that, and more recently Evangelicalism C has begun to do it. We cannot expect any better outcomes.

b. The theological. Moralism and enculturation – It is a great mistake to think that the cultural captivity and fundamentalism of so much conservative

⁷⁸ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Yale, 1989.

⁷⁹ Sanders, 58, citing Molly Worthen's *Apostles of Reason* (2016).

⁸⁰ Sanders, 58.

⁸¹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Anchor, 1990) First published in 1967.

religion in the U.S. is strictly the result of sociological factors. In *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Richard Lovelace argues that the majority of Christians have a theoretical-only understanding that they are saved by grace and not by their own righteousness. Functionally and practically, most Christians —

“in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for their justification... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience.”⁸²

Lovelace says that people —

“who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons... Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce defensive assertion of their own righteousness and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger. They cling desperately to legal, pharisaical righteousness, but envy, jealousy and other branches on the tree of sin grow out of their fundamental insecurity....⁸³ [They] fix upon their race, their membership in a party... and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straitjacket which cleaves

to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ.”⁸⁴

“Enculturation,” then, is a normal tendency for a church that is not experiencing gospel renewal. Our race and culture becomes a way to bolster our sense that we are ‘good people’, not like “those people” over there. That makes our cultural preferences—which are no more than that, preferences—into moral absolutes and badges of honor. We secretly (or not so secretly) despise people of races and cultures (or politics!) different from our own as a way to patch up a righteousness of our own.

This is why Lovelace says that “disenculturation” is the mark of a church that has begun to move out of ordinary, spiritually deadening moralism and into the joy of grace. “One of the first effects of spiritual decline among the people of God is destructive enculturation... with the...culture of the surrounding world as we saw in Judges 2:11-13.”⁸⁵ “Disenculturation,” he writes, “is possible only when we rely fully on Christ” for our salvation. “It is necessary if we are to be released from the marriage of religion and culture which prevents us from reaching all nations...”⁸⁶

Liturgy and confession – James K. A. Smith produced a series called “Cultural Liturgies” consisting of three volumes over 8 years plus a summary volume.⁸⁷ Smith’s main critique is that evangelicalism has a theory of personal change that is too intellectualistic or rationalistic. It believes that adopting the right doctrine or ‘worldview’—defined by sets of propositions—will lead to life-change. But Smith draws heavily on Augustine to show that we are primarily changed not by changing what we think, but by what we love. These must not be pitted against one another in the

⁸² Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, IVP Academic, 2020, 101.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 211-212.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 198.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 184.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 146.

⁸⁷ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Baker Academic, 2009 and *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Baker Academic, 2013 and *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*, Baker Academic, 2017. A summary volume of sorts is Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, Brazos, 2016.

slightest, but Smith's point is that corporate worship, liturgical practices, music, narrative, and art, and deep community are the vehicles that bring the doctrines of the Scripture into contact with the affections, commitments, and loves of the heart so they can be changed. Christian education or instruction (what evangelicals like to call 'discipleship') is not then primarily a matter of information transfer. It emerges from a formative community that has rich worship and thick, covenantal (rather than consumer) relationships. In the last book in the series, *Awaiting the King*, he argues that it is the worshipping community that can produce Christians who are able to be "salt and light" in the world—in the world for service but not of the world, not assimilated to its idols.

Smith wrote his books over nearly a decade and they are not completely consistent with each other. Nevertheless, his major contribution is to critique evangelicalism's lack of emphasis on the local church. As we saw in *Sanders*, all the main 'carriers' of evangelicalism—the para-church, the platform, and even the Mega-church—are not ordinary local churches. He argues that evangelicals, because they are impoverished in their worship and church life, are being co-opted by the culture.

CONCLUSION

Since becoming the ascendant religion in the Western world (a process completed almost 1,000 years ago), the Christian church has not faced the challenges it is facing now. Though there remain 'Bible belts' of traditional conservatism in various parts of society where the Christian church still commands significant forms of influence—these places are increasingly both cultural and geographic shrinking 'islands' in the larger society. There seem to be times of 'backlash' when political conservatism does better in elections against liberals or progressives, but increasingly these conservatives are themselves adopting secular approaches to the self, or embracing the secular ideologies of individualism or racial identitarianism (focusing on Anglo-white identity rather than multiculturalism). In other words, the Christian worldview continues to retreat and the Christian church continues to decline and weaken even when political conservatism does better.

We need revival and a major renewal of the Christian church.

CHAPTER 4

45

The Renewal of the Church

WHAT WE SEEK
(THE ENDS)

A. THE NEED (THE CASE FOR RENEWAL)

The renewal of the American church is an enormous undertaking. It will take many entire lives dedicated to it and will require enormous energy and resources. But the need for it is so great it makes any effort warranted and worth it all.

1. The Church needs it

The most obvious reason why we must renew the American church is that it is in an unprecedented free-fall. (See above.) In summary, the mainline-liberal church has been in a precipitous decline for 50 years and only its historically accumulated assets of endowments and real estate have kept it from disappearing altogether. Now the conservative-evangelical church is also in decline and faces an enormous exodus especially of its young people. The black church is facing many highly complex generational, theological, and institutional challenges.

Not since the mid-18th century, before the First Great Awakening, has the church been weaker, nor has the American population been more disconnected from religion.⁸⁸ Never have all the various branches of U.S. Christendom been so weak all at once. Even the Catholic church is facing crises of shrinking parishes and shrinking numbers of clergy. No branch of the Christian church appears capable of or near a turnaround.

As we have seen, we need not merely a church that goes back to older traditions and practices—though in large degree that is what must be done. But we must be a new kind of church that can thrive in a post-Christian culture—one that can escape the gravitational pull of the secular culture to assimilate to it.

Conclusion: An intervention is necessary.

2. The country needs it

While many secular voices see this unprecedented deterioration of the church as an unmixed blessing, a number of analysts and social theorists point out that religions bring things into a society that cannot be supplied from other sources: consensus of moral intuitions, strong community ties, meaning in life beyond material circumstances, and a powerful hope for the future.

a) The problem of individualism. To name only one such thinker, consider the thesis of Robert Bellah in his classic, *Habits of the Heart*.⁸⁹ Bellah shows that the social history of America makes it perhaps the most individualistic culture in the world. No culture more than the American elevates the interests of the individual over those of family, community, and nation. No culture more than the American attributes one's character, identity, and life conditions strictly to individual decisions and choices. In other words: if you are poor or marginalized it's always your fault—you could have avoided that if you made better choices and took more initiative. Yet for two centuries the religious nature of the American population counter-balanced this individualism with denunciations of selfish self-centeredness and demands for loving the neighbor. The church demanded charity and compassion for the needy; it encouraged spouses to stick to their vows, and to confine sexual expression to only inside marriage. Now, as religion declines, the "guard-rails" are gone and we see more social breakdown. Bellah makes the case that American individualism, now largely freed from the resistance of religion, leads to social fragmentation, economic inequality, family breakdown, and many other dysfunctions.⁹⁰

For one specific example, Professor Carolyn Chen of Berkeley, in the *New York Times* article "When Your Job Fills in for your Faith, That's a Problem"⁹¹ shows that when religion recedes, people look for a God or faith-substitute,

⁸⁸ See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: 1776-2005*, Rutgers University Press, 2005, chapter 2. Thanks to Josh Crossman for this reference.

⁸⁹ Robert Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart, With a New Preface: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, University of California Press, 2007.

⁹⁰ Bellah's original work was published in 1985, then was re-issued with a new preface in 1996, and finally re-issued with another new preface in 2007. It is helpful to read all three prefaces to see how Bellah saw continued social deterioration in the decades after his initial study. See also Robert Bellah, et al, *The Good Society*, Knopf, 1991.

⁹¹ Carolyn Chen, "When Your Job Fills in for your Faith, That's a Problem," *New York Times*, May 24, 2022.

essentially deifying something else. When people find their significance, security, and meaning in life in their work, it leads not only to workaholism and anxiety, but also to ethical compromises, to a lack of community and civic engagement, and to a more dog-eat-dog inhumane economy. And when making money becomes all-important as a way of personal validation it leads to greater economic inequality. Her conclusion is that when religion recedes and we make career and work into a new religion, we all suffer. She found that very religious people were able to avoid these problems. In this article we see an individual case study of what Bellah saw writ large across the face of our fracturing culture.

(b) The problem of morality. During the 19th and 20th centuries modern secular philosophies failed to provide U.S. society with a unifying set of moral values for social solidarity and community. Secularism taught that there are no moral absolutes, and therefore every individual is free to determine morality for him or herself, as long as he doesn't harm others. This means, however, that there are no longer any common truths or values that bind us together. Alasdair MacIntyre writes:

“It is precisely because there is in our society no established way of deciding between these claims that moral argument appears to be necessarily interminable. From our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises; but when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion.”⁹²

The implications of this are enormous. The Enlightenment project is indeed dead. The liberal promise that a society can unite around a common source of moral values democratically, without religion has failed. It is becoming

increasingly clear that the only alternatives to a moral order rooted in transcendence is either the increasing fragmentation of western societies or the totalitarianism of countries like China.⁹³

Christian's Smith's insightful book *Atheist Overreach: What Atheism Can't Deliver* (Yale, 2019) argues that a secular society offers: [1] *No rational moral obligation*. While secularism can offer explanations of moral feelings (evolution or culture) it has no basis for moral *obligation*. We have moral intuitions, but on what basis can you say: “You ought not to do X, even if you feel it is okay”? Why should your inward feelings about X overrule theirs? The only way to get from feelings to obligation is to appeal to some moral source or norm of right and wrong outside of both of us that validates or revises our competing internal moral feelings. Every culture until ours has had a belief in the “sacred” or “transcendent”—an unquestionable moral authority—a way to appeal to people to live as they ought. Every culture until ours had a moral source outside the self. But our society does not. So in moral debates, all we can do is shout at each other.⁹⁴ A secular society also offers: [2] *No sufficient moral motivation*. To care about the poor, for example, takes sacrifice—what motivates us to do it? One motivation is to base our moral self-worth on being more liberal in our values than others.⁹⁵ But if we do good in order to bolster our sense of worth, our benevolence is selfish and easily gives up when faced with disappointments. Another secular motivation for benevolence is simply contempt for the oppressors. This of course leads to new injustices.⁹⁶ So in conclusion, in a secular society there is [3] *No moral unity*. When moral convictions are held without any grounding in the sacred, there can be no social consensus on what is right and wrong. It leads to fracture and polarization.

(c) The problem of fragmentation. In a relativistic culture, the only way that groups have now to claim a moral high ground is to build their identity on their being harmed and excluded, and they extend their influence by stoking fear

⁹² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edition, Notre Dame, 2007, 8.

⁹³ Thanks to Josh Crossman for this insight.

⁹⁴ Taylor *The Malaise of Modernity*, p.18.

⁹⁵ Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, Bellknapp Press, 2014, p.182.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p.185.

and anger in their constituents. But that only makes our society more divided, because no group wants to find any common ground with others. And so the nation is locked in a spiral of conflict and division that has no remedy.

Our culture is therefore fragmenting. It has become a competitive and deeply contentious culture rather than a cooperative one. Our communities—neighborhoods, institutions, families—are all in decline, leaving individuals both lonely and isolated. And this lack of unity is seen especially in our political polarization. The old social order has broken down. It consisted of a mildly liberal, religiously neutral state, with a religious population that still called people to unselfishness, to work for the common good, thrift and self-denial, love of family and country. But this order has broken down. Now the political Right and Left have violently opposed visions for what society should be.

3. The love of God requires it

The decline of the church in the U.S. should concern everyone. But Christians should seek spiritual renewal of the church *not* mainly because they see religion as having social utility, *nor* mainly because they just want to shore up their own institutions.

Rather, we believe Christianity is relevant to society because it is true—it is not true because it is relevant. Christians do not believe in and promote the faith because it brings so much hope (though it does), or because it fills you with joy (though it will), or because it creates deep and strong community (though it can), or because it can heal our society of many ills (though it might). Rather, Christians seek renewal of the church as a way to love and serve the One who saved us. Jesus told us to ‘Go and make disciples of all nations... baptizing them...and teaching them.’ (Matthew 28:19-20) America is one of the nations—there are no exceptions. We know church renewal is what Jesus wants, because he said “I will build my church,” and we have this confidence, that “the gates of hell will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18) Christians seek the renewal of the church for the love of God as well as for the love of their neighbor. Therefore it is an absolute imperative.

The Bible is filled with laments by believers over a country in which God and God’s Word is not honored. “It is time

for you to act, Lord,” says the Psalmist, “your law is being broken” (Ps 119:126). “My eyes shed streams of tears because your law is not obeyed.” (Ps 119:136). Anyone who prays “Hallowed be thy name” with understanding wants to see God’s name lifted up and honored, and his Word obeyed, by growing numbers of people. We should weep until we see that happening again.

Conclusion: There is therefore a great need for a *new Christian church movement* that practices love and justice, that equips its members to do enormous good in society, YET at the same time resists the forces seeking to make it a political instrument; that speaks to and answers the great questions of the human heart and of the human race—of purpose, meaning, hope, happiness, guilt and forgiveness, identity—questions to which the secular culture cannot speak as powerfully.

B. THE VISION (THE FUTURE THAT CHURCH RENEWAL CAN BRING)

Introduction: Our vision for a renewed church cannot be simply for a restoration of Christian institutions to former states of strength. The church exists not for its own glory but for the glory of God (Eph 1:12), not for mere organizational health but for the growth of its members into Christ-likeness (Eph 4:11-13), not to accrue power but to love God and love our neighbors in faithful service.

So the vision for a renewed church can’t begin with goals like size and finances and numbers. That is to mistake means for ends. Our vision should be that the astonishing biblical possibilities for the church as the community of the Spirit would be realized in U.S. society in ways it never has before. The church has been given divine power to radiate the infinite glory and goodness of God in our lives and relationships (2 Peter 1:3-8) renewing us in the

image of Christ (Rom 8:29). It has the capacity to be a “new humanity”—a community of surpassing beauty (Eph 2:14-18; 4:15-16).

In turn, under the leadership of Christ’s Spirit these churches have the ability to make their surrounding communities places far better places to live (Matt 5:13-16; Luke 10:25-37; Gal 6:10) so that many are drawn to God’s beautiful glory (1 Pet 2:11-12; cf. Deut 4:5-8).

We envision a day when –

1. Cities are filled with flourishing neighborhoods that point to the churches within them as a crucial source of their life and strength.

2. Every U.S. community is honeycombed with home fellowship groups and house churches that build up the Christians within them, welcome non-believers, and serve their neighbors.

3. New churches are being planted twice as fast as churches are closing, and 2/3 of the people in the new churches are formerly unchurched and non-believers.

4. Large percentages of Christians become able to speak about their faith in their daily relationships in ways that are not perceived by most of the recipients as offensive or even awkward, but instead are received as helpful and positive.

5. The movement of the young out of the churches is completely reversed. Children and youth in the church are equipped to see not only the beauty of the historic faith, but the deeply inadequate alternative identities, narratives, and answers provided by the culture.

6. Christians are famous for being the ones who show up in force first to help victims whenever there is any disaster.

7. Christian churches would be known as the most racially and culturally diverse institutions in society. The ‘face’ of the renewed Christian church toward society—its leading voices—are highly diverse ethnically, and the American church is tightly connected to the global church.

8. The church becomes publicly recognized as a refuge for sufferers, known for its ability to help people through grief, pain, and loss.

9. An increasing number of Christian artists—working out both the realism of the Christian worldview about sin and the confident expectation of restorative grace—produce high quality stories, music, visual art all with the results that **(a)** more people see the beauty and intuitive plausibility of Christianity and at the same time, **(b)** people in general across our society will increase in hope.

10. There is a robust, respected, and growing community of intellectuals and scholars that hold unashamedly to historic Christian doctrine who are **(a)** active in every academic field of inquiry, producing scholarship that contributes to and alters the field, **(b)** a growing presence in universities, and **(c)** inaugurating an entire alternate intellectual economy of study centers, think tanks, academies, periodicals, and publishing.

11. The church becomes a visible, respected (though still a minority) ‘sexual counter-culture’—

a. It is a community in which sexuality is not a consumer good conducted on a selfish, cost-benefit basis, but a means for self-donation inside a covenant.

b. It is a community in which the health and durability of marriages and families is obvious.

c. It is a community for singles, and especially for women, of far greater emotional safety and clearer expectations in romantic relationships.

d. It is a place that is known to reject modern superficiality in spouse-seeking—i.e., far less emphasis on looks and money.

e. It is a community in which Christian men and women who describe themselves as attracted to the same sex, but who wish to live according to the biblical vision and ethic for sex are nurtured and respected, and their wisdom relied upon. (For more on this—see below under ‘Counter-Catechesis’ in Missions Projects.)

12. Christians are known for their just use of power, so that:

a. In business, Christians are known to be less selfish and ruthless and more generous to peers, employees, and customers.

b. In social entrepreneurship, Christians are known to be fueling an explosion of creative and effective non-profits that target every main social problem, leading to a measurable decrease in the poverty rate and change in other statistics of social well-being. Christians would be famous for being those most given to charitable giving and volunteering their time for those in need.

c. In politics and government, Christians are known for seeking the common good rather than their own electoral interests, and for being cognizant of the importance of government policies for a just society.

d. A growth in church planting and church renewal among the poor, supported non-paternalistically by the broader church and led by the poor themselves, would also be seen by society and credited with a change in social indicators.

All of these changes would lead to a more just distribution of money and power, and people in general would have more control over their neighborhoods and

their lives.

13. Christians are known for their uncompromising stand for truth and their critique of false beliefs and narratives, and at the same time they are known for their civility and for their commitment to creating a truly pluralistic society in which all are free to voice and practice their worldviews and faith.

a. Christians lead the way to a growing civility in society, based on an attitude of mutual respect, welcome, and kindness toward those who deeply disagree in moral convictions and beliefs.

b. Christians are known for being the strongest promoters of warm dialogue and intelligent debate, of defense of freedom of speech and conscience.

14. The Protestant gospel of salvation by grace and faith alone is lifted up prominently and beautifully across many denominations, escaping the creeping moralism so endemic to the church over the ages, yet is done so in a way that encourages deep life change into Christ-like holiness.

15. The Protestant church which holds to the historic, orthodox faith, is growing faster than the U.S. population; many denominations and traditions are flourishing, each grateful and confident in its distinctiveness, and yet highly cooperative and collaborative across denominational lines, without doctrinal dilution or compromise.

We envision a public gospel message –

Which gains widespread traction with people because it is neither highly rationalistic (e.g. proofs of God) nor does it assume listeners already believe in God, moral absolutes, and an afterlife. Rather, it shows that Christianity does a better job of uniting head and heart, of accounting for

and explaining the world we see and the aspirations we all have—than the alternative religions and philosophies of life.⁹⁷

We envision a time when this evangelistic message is so well-communicated and articulated that the average person knows the following basic offers of Christianity:

1. Christianity offers **an identity not based on your performance or efforts**—not constantly ebbing and flowing based on your accomplishment and conduct—but based on the unchanging love of God.
2. Christianity offers **a resolution to guilt, shame, and self-laceration** that avoids both the minimizing of your own failures or allowing other people to define you and determine your status.
3. Christianity offers **a kind of freedom** (embracing the right restrictions) that, unlike the secular definition (the absence of restrictions), does not undermine love relationships.
4. Christianity offers a **contentment and joy** not based on changing circumstances. Our bad things will turn out for good, our good things can't be taken from us, and the best things are yet to come.
5. Christianity **offers a meaning and purpose in life that suffering not only cannot take away** from you, but can only enhance. Suffering can only drive you more into the love of God that can enable you to face even death without any fear.
6. Christianity offers **a basis for morality and justice** that avoids the twin dangers of relativism and oppression. (Though we freely admit that many Christians veer toward relativism or oppression.)

7. Christianity offers **a unique view of power**. The incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus shows us power both voluntarily relinquished and yet deployed for service to others. (Though we freely admit that many Christians have abused power.)

8. Christianity **offers a unique account of truth**. Not subjectivism that says no one can know any truth or scientism that sees only the empirically provable to be true. Rather, a view that truth can be known and certainty attained through both reason *and* faith.

9. Christianity offers a **unique hope for the world**—not eventual nothingness (secularism) and not even mere spiritual paradise (other religions). It promises a renewed, perfect physical world—a new heavens and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.

10. Christianity offers a **unique approach to repairing relationships**. It neither privileges the forgiven (so that justice is not done) nor privileges the forgiver (so forgiveness is withheld). Without both we can't maintain human social relationships.

Specific goals

(possible examples that movement leaders may establish)

To devise a full set of measurable goals for a U.S. church renewal movement in a high-level document is unwise and frankly impossible. Yet some examples and illustrations are in order. Goals for the movement might include:

1. *To slow and then reverse the movement of younger Americans out of the church.*
 - a. The non-fundamentalist evangelical church grows from current estimate of 10% to 20% of pop (80M) from 2025 to 2050. [See my chapter 2 for a general

⁹⁷ For a short but intellectually penetrating description of this approach see Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, Crossway, 2019. Bavinck's robust understanding of general revelation taught that there are many things the Bible teaches that will resonate deeply in a non-believers' hearts, even if their 'heads' (their false worldviews) tell them these things can't be true. The Christian communicator then builds on these resonances and shows them that Christianity accounts for them in ways that their own worldview cannot. See also the popular book *Plugged In: Connecting your faith with what you watch, read, and play*, (The Good Book Company, 2019) Dan Strange presents a communication strategy based on the strategy of J.H. Bavinck. Because non-believers have aspirations and intuitions that are at the very least 'echoes' of the knowledge of God, the evangelist can build on them and both subvert (critique) and yet fulfill them by re-directing them toward Christ. Dan Strange calls the approach "subversive fulfillment."

definition of 'fundamentalist' and 'evangelical'.]

b. Religion begins to grow overall in the U.S. by 2050, with a top number of 45% of population non-religious after which the non-religious percentage begins to decline.⁹⁸

2. To double the number of new churches planted in the U.S. from the current 3-4,000 (this figure needs to be adjusted in light of the pandemic) to 6-8,000 annually.⁹⁹

a. A way is developed to plant evangelistically-oriented new churches, with a 90% success rate, that contain 2/3 new believers or formerly unchurched, for less than 1/2 the current cost of the average church plant.

b. A way is developed to deliver high quality theological education and ministry training to church planters at 1/2 the current cost and within a five year time-frame.¹⁰⁰

3. To enhance both the focus and the volume of Christian philanthropy so as to fund the initiatives and projects of the Church Renewal Movement.

C. THE REVIVAL AND MOVEMENT

Introduction: Historically, times of "revival" were seasons in which the ordinary works of the Holy Spirit (convicting of sin, converting, sanctifying, filling with assurance and power)

are greatly enhanced. Movements (often called 'social movements') are sustained, organic communities of men and women united by a common vision for change. Well-stewarded revivals have often led to great movements. Church renewal in the U.S. in the 21st century will need elements of both revival and movement.

Revival

1. What are revivals? Revivals are periods of great spiritual awakening and growth. In revivals 'sleepy' and lukewarm Christians wake up, nominal Christians get converted, and many skeptical non-believers are drawn to faith. In Europe and North America there were significant revivals in the 1740s, the 1830s, and the late 1850s. The 1857 revival began in lower New York City and is often called 'the Fulton Street Revival.' By one account, during a period of about 2 years, about 10% of the population of Manhattan was converted and joined the city's churches. In the Welsh revival of 1904, it is estimated that 150,000 people, or 7.5% of the nation's population, were converted and came into Protestant churches.¹⁰¹ Looking back further for revivals historians point to the monastic movements that transformed Europe, and the Lutheran Pietist and Moravian movements. More recently there have also been major revivals in East Africa, Korea, as well as many more localized revivals.

The purpose of a revival is always, supremely, to please, enjoy, honor, and glorify God. It is to become the church he wants us to be. And when that happens even to a small

⁹⁸ This scenario is not so unrealistic. Demographics (fertility, birth-rate, immigration, etc.) should slow the growth of secularism under any circumstances. These providential forces set in motion by God could enhance the effect of a revival and spiritual renewal of the U.S. church. On the demographics, see V.Skirbekk, E. Kaufmann, A. Goujon, "Secularism, Fundamentalism, or Catholicism? The Religious Composition of the United States to 2043" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2010) 49(2):293-310; also see Eric Kaufmann's "Why is Secularization Likely to Stall in the America by 2050? A Response to Laurie DeRose." See also *The Great Opportunity*, p.51ff. Chapter 3 "Mission to Youth", at <https://www.greatopportunity.org> and <https://ifstudies.org/blog/why-is-secularization-likely-to-stall-in-america-by-2050-a-response-to-laurie-derose>; see also L.Schnabel and S.Bock, "The Continuing Persistence of Intense Religion in the United States: A Rejoinder" in *Sociological Science*, November 15, 2018.

⁹⁹ See *The Great Opportunity*, p.36, at <https://www.greatopportunity.org/> This report devised a model that charts new church development against church closures/deaths and comes up with a good target goal for church planting. However, as said above, this work was done pre-pandemic.

¹⁰⁰ See *The Great Opportunity*, pp.38-40.

¹⁰¹ See Kathryn Teresa Long, *The Revival of 1857-58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening*, Oxford University Press, 1998, and J.Edwin Orr, *The Flaming Tongue: The Impact of 20th Century Revivals*, Moody, 1973.

degree, there is always an impact on non-believers and society. William Blair was an American missionary in Korea in the early years of the 20th century. He was present at the great revival that broke out at the Bible conference meeting in Pyongyang in January, 1907. He describes the aftermath:

“The Christians returned to their homes, taking the Pentecostal fire with them. It spread to practically every church. Schools canceled classes for days while students wept out their wrong doings together. We had our hearts torn again and again by the return of little articles and money that had been taken from us over the years. All through the city people were going from house to house, confessing wrongs, returning stolen property, not only to Christians but to non-believers. A Chinese merchant was astounded to have a Christian walk in and pay him a large sum of money he had obtained unjustly years before. The whole city was stirred. The cry went out over the city....”¹⁰²

2. How revivals happen. Great church movements start with spiritual revival, but what can we do to bring it about? Many say “nothing—it’s up to God,” and they have a point. Only God can send revival. Psalms 80, 85, and 126—well known prayers for revival—recognize that the power for spiritual renewal resides wholly in God. This perspective says that human beings have little to do to bring about revivals. It is all God. However, there are those who have fallen into the opposite error, who have taught that revivals can and will happen whenever the church performs its ministry in prescribed, proper ways.

D.M. Lloyd-Jones and others take a balanced view. The revival prayers of the psalms themselves exhibit heart attitudes and practices on the part of believers that invite and invoke God’s invigorating power. Lloyd-Jones, a very

strong Calvinist, in his lectures on revival said this:

“The way to revival is not just to say, ‘Let’s pray about it’. Of course we must pray, and I hope to emphasize that...strongly. But there are preliminary conditions attached...”¹⁰³

Christians must recognize that they *do* have things to do to prepare for renewal, but that ultimately it is God’s wise sovereignty that will determine whether and how the church is renewed. Many see a metaphor for this concept of renewal in Elijah’s confrontation with the priests of Baal on Mt Carmel in 1 Kings 18. The prophet builds an altar, but it is only God whose fire can ignite it. Christians looking for revival, then, are “building the altar,” praying that God will use their efforts to bring the fire of revival with a movement of his Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the ultimate cause of revivals, but there are three instrumental means (or secondary causes) that the Spirit ordinarily uses.

a. There is always a recovery of the gospel—and a rejection of the moralisms of the day: Left, Right, and Center, as well as the soft relativism that often accompanies pietism. The default mode of the human heart is self-salvation and works righteousness, whether of a conservative or a liberal variety. Christians theoretically believe that “Jesus accepts me, therefore I want to live a good life,” but their hearts reverse that and in practice function on the principle “I live a good life, therefore Jesus will accept me.” The results of this reversal include pride, defensiveness, a critical spirit, racial prejudice and cultural ethnocentricity, an allergy to change, and other forms of spiritual deadness. Revival always proceeds around a rediscovery of the wonder of grace, the radical nature of Christ’s accomplishment of salvation on our behalf, which leads to a joyful repentance, a sense of being so loved that we can

¹⁰² William Blair and Bruce Hunt, *The Korean Pentecost and the Sufferings Which Followed*, Banner of Truth, 1977, 87-88.

¹⁰³ D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Revival*, Crossway, 1987, 43.

finally admit the flaws and sins that we have denied or hidden.

b. There is always corporate prayer—extraordinary, kingdom-centered, prevailing prayer. Prayer not merely for our individual needs but for the power and gospel of God to be manifest (Acts 4:24-31). This is prayer beyond the normal daily devotions and worship services and, as much as possible, should be united prayer, bringing together people who do not usually pray together. Prayer that accompanies renewal has both a more outward *and* a more inward focus. (a) **Inward:** asking for grace to confess sins and humble ourselves and to know God, to see his face, to see his glory, to experience his love and high assurance. (b) **Outward:** asking for compassion and zeal to reach the lost, so see the church flourish and grow with new converts. See prayer for revival and what it led to in Acts 4, Exodus 33, and Nehemiah 1.

c. There is always repentance. Real revivals are not triumphalistic but exercises in spiritual humility, in repentance to God and to one another.

d. However, there is always creativity. No revival is just like the last one. For example, the Wesleyan revivals were based on the innovation of itinerant preaching, including open air meetings. The 1857 revival, however, was based on lay-led prayer meetings. In each generation, some new methods arise for lifting up the gospel that fit the cultural moment. There is, then, not simple methodology that can be used to trigger a revival. God may use evangelistic venues, or small groups, or some individuals, or a kind of preaching or all of the above, or none.

3. The need for revival today. There are a lot of ‘nuts and bolts’ to an effective movement. It takes a great deal of clear thinking, wisdom, vision casting, recruitment, and strategic action. But the great danger, especially for pragmatic Americans, is that the nuts and bolts become the main thing, the only thing. The most effective and long-lasting Christian movements are those that have arisen out of spiritual awakenings, and that is as necessary today as ever. Churches today are dividing over politics because

people are finding themselves far more passionate and moved by political and social issues than they are by the truths of our faith, and especially the centrality of the gospel of Christ. *They become most exercised and emotional not in worship, but over flashpoint political and cultural issues. That is a sign of a spiritual vacuum in Christians’ lives, an emptiness. Only spiritual awakening can change this.*

Spiritual renewal brings an extraordinary sense of God’s presence, of increased communion with God (1 John 1:3), of “joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8). Building on the intellectual assent to the idea that God loves us—now comes the Spirit of God strengthening our “inner being with power” in order to “grasp” how “wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.” This is not to simply know *about* God’s love but *know it* (Eph 3:16-19). An intuitive assurance we are God’s loved children is granted (Rom 8:15-16). Spiritual experience can be strong as a tidal wave (Acts 4:31). Other times it is like a gentle rain softening and loosening our fear. But a renewed Christian relates to God as Father rather than merely as a boss or tyrant or distant power. In times of renewal all a Christian’s relationships are changed—to God, herself, to others in her community, to other human communities, and to nature itself.

God is sovereign because he is a God of grace. You can’t cause or merit a revival any more than you can merit your salvation. Yet I have seen over the years that when we earnestly seek God for his own sake (not for our reputation or success,) and seek to be mini-cases of personal revival ourselves, positive spiritual dynamics begin to work in the church around us. God has many more revivals in his plan for the world, before the final, Ultimate Revival, the Ultimate Spring after Winter, when even the trees of wood will sing for joy (Ps 96:12).

Movement

1. How movements happen. We have looked at how revivals happen—but how do movements happen? Basically, a movement is a community united by a common vision above all else. More specifically, a new Christian movement thrives and grows—

a) When the need for it is acute and clear, **b)** when a specific, compelling vision is cast for a better future, **c)** when there are overlapping networks of people with different abilities, assets, and resources, working sacrificially for common purpose and with common values, **c)** when the changes and goals achieved first naturally trigger and empower other changes and the accomplishment of new goals, **d)** when new institutions are begun that can sustain the movement for longer periods of time, **e)** when the movement responds to opposition wisely and lovingly, not letting others define it, but not stoking fears or demonizing others to define itself, **f)** when it maintains and fosters its roots in spiritual renewal through constant application of the gospel to the heart.

2. Movements and revivals. Looking back in history, we see how revivals provided the spiritual momentum on which movements were built. Monasticism was originally a path for individuals to spiritual renewal in the midst of a church becoming increasingly nominal after Christianity became officially recognized by the Roman empire. However, it developed into a genuine missionary movement—propagating monasteries all over northern Europe and winning it for Christ. The Wesleyan revivals of the early 18th century led to many social reform movements of the late 18th and 19th centuries as well as to major new foreign missions efforts and a major new world denomination—Methodism as well as the creation of a “low church” or evangelical wing to the Anglican church. The social reforms included the passing of laws against child labor by Lord Shaftesbury and the abolitionist movement led by William Wilberforce. (See below under “Leadership” for more.)

3. The marks of a movement. There is a great deal of debate about how a ‘movement’ differs from an ‘institution’ or organization. In general, an institution is a complex, integrated set of norms and practices that govern cooperative human behavior within an organization—for the *preservation* of certain societal values and purposes. In other words, institutions are geared both for (a) relative permanence and stability, and for (b) transcending individual intentions and interests for a greater corporate good. Movements, by contrast, are non-formal or informal bodies of people assembled around a common goal and vision, usually highly fluid, flexible, and open to change, often revolving around dynamic individuals, and working not for major change and disruption rather than preservation. If you draw a line between two poles—the diverse characteristics would look something like this.

Movement	↔	Institution
United by vision	↔	United by rules
Grass-roots, with new ideas from all over	↔	Top-down, with new ideas from above
Open to quick change and innovation	↔	Resistant to fast change; many hurdles
Overlapping work, many egalitarian teams	↔	Clear boundaries and lines of authority
Emphasis on sacrifice rather than benefits	↔	Emphasis on pay and benefits

A healthy society will have both movements *and* strong institutions. As Yuval Levin shows in his crucial book,¹⁰⁴ institutions are declining in our culture along with the social stability they bring. And any movement that lasts will have some organizational and institutional structure—and it will also *produce* new institutions that can preserve the changes that the movement is bringing about. Nevertheless, institutions can become mere bureaucracies that lose sight of their actual social purpose and exist only for the benefit of those within it. Movements therefore need some institutional

¹⁰⁴ Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream*, Basic Books, 2020.

structure and institutions need to be periodically renewed with movement dynamics.

4. How do movements begin? And particularly Christian movements? Movements start with pace-setting individuals. They may become leaders in the movement. There are things they can do which I will outline in the last section of his paper, but ultimately no one can control whether the embryonic initiatives will capture imaginations and attract people naturally and organically and become an organic, significant movement. And so we see once again the close connection between revival and especially prayer and Christian movements.

CONCLUSION

It is best to conclude this section with one of the great prayers for revival and renewal in the Bible in the book of Isaiah, together with God's response.

Isaiah 64:1-4, 7-9

“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down that the mountains would tremble before you!

As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!

For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins.

Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord; do not remember our sins forever.

Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.”

Isaiah 65:1

“I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me;

I was found by those who did not seek me.

To a nation that did not call on my name,

I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’”

The prayer for revival is filled with longing and repentance. Make this prayer your prayer. But look carefully at God's response. In the end, God will hear us but it will be all due to his sheer grace. No prayer can merit or earn a revival. When he renews our hearts we will look back and realize that even our repentance was filled with sin, yet God came to us because of his faithful love. We must not neglect so great a salvation!

CHAPTER 5

57

The Renewal of the Church

**HOW TO GET THERE
(THE MEANS: LAYING THE FOUNDATION)**

A. THE LEADERSHIP

1. Where will the leaders come from? I believe the leadership for a new movement will come from the evangelical church, the black church, many conservative confessional bodies (Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Methodist, Anabaptist) and the wonderful, dizzyingly diverse body of newer ethnic and immigrant churches. And there will come those who do not hail from any of the expected places but share the fundamental theology and future vision of the movement. (My guess is that they mainly will be found in the 'zones' of 2-3. See the below diagram on "Zones.")

Note: The crucial initial assembling. The way the initial leaders of a new movement find one another and assemble is always informal. Looking back on the strongest Christian movements, it is easy to see God bringing people together in an enormous variety of organic, natural ways. And yet, the first leaders cannot be passive or uncircumspect about their first gatherings. Great care must be taken as to who is invited into the first meetings. It will not do, for example, for a few older white men to initially plan things and then invite in younger, multi-ethnic leaders and women. That allows the initiators to have and maintain the greatest power. Another point to remember is that it is very hard and awkward to "un-invite" someone who was in from the beginning but begins to look out of step with the others, who begins to exhibit immaturity and character flaws. So take care in who meets at the origins of the movement.

2. Who they are. The key to any effective movement is leadership. They should have the following qualities:

- a.** Multi-ethnic. As said before, the renewed church must from the beginning be multi-ethnic. The initial assembly is crucial. It will not do, for example, for a few older white men to initially plan things and then invite in younger, multi-ethnic leaders. That allows the initiators to have and maintain the greatest power.
- b.** Multi-traditional. This must include leaders across

denominations and traditions. If dominated too much by one tradition, it will lose credibility and be seen as "mainly a Baptist thing" or "mainly a Presbyterian thing." There are a number of groups—Lutherans, Pentecostals, and the traditional Black church—that will not be involved without patient listening and effort.

c. Multi-"nodal." A 'node' is a point of intersection in a network. Christian leaders not only live in formal denominations, but in many informal though often powerful networks of individuals, churches, and ministries that are themselves movements. The renewal leaders should be well-networked.

Varied in—

1. Spiritual gifts, aptitudes, talents, and outlooks.

No broad, deep, and lasting movement can be led by a single dominant figure or even by those who all are of the same prophetic or artistic or managerial or scholarly temperament. Even in thinking out the variety of the leaders, the ways of categorizing the leaders should vary! (These lists below overlap, however.)

- a.** One way to think of the variety is Alan Hirsch's "APEST" list based on Ephesians 4. There are apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, shepherding, and teaching gifts and orientations.¹⁰⁵
- b.** Another way to think of the variety of gifts is to look for the four kinds of leaders that are often sought for boards—(1) visionaries or 'idea people' (2) financial people who understand budgets, fund-raising, and business models, (3) strategists who understand how to turn visions into reality, (4) subject matter experts, those who know a great deal about the actual product of the organization.
- c.** A last way to ensure that the gifts are varied is to be sure that the leadership is varied in its vocational make-up. Obviously, ministers and theologians are

¹⁰⁵ See Alan Hirsch, *5Q: Reactivating the Original Intelligence and Capacity of the Body of Christ*, 100 movements, 2017. In great detail Alan lays out the characteristics of each kind of leader and strongly emphasizes that they need each other, they need to lead together.

crucial for a Christian renewal movement, but to be clergy dominated will only lead to tunnel vision. And furthermore, it's not Protestant! The lay leaders need to be scholars, business people, artists, scientists, journalists and media persons, politicians and lawyers—and more.

2. In forms of 'capital'. Capital can have several forms. There is economic capital—wealth, and social capital—relational connections—as well a symbolic and cultural capital and other subdivisions. As James Hunter has written, when leaders of overlapping capital and diverse gifts work together for shared ends, “the world, indeed, changes.”¹⁰⁶ For more on this see the 8th Mission Project below.

But NOT Varied in—

a. Spiritual maturity. An extremely common but deadly mistake made by new movements is that, in order to get all the various forms of capital and connection they need, they elevate to leadership a man or woman who lacks the spiritual maturity for it. Immediately it must be said that among growing, solid Christians there are various levels of maturity and spiritual experience. But it is a tragic mistake to bring into leadership persons who are stuck in repeated patterns of pride and self-centeredness, or of anger and harshness.

Leaders should—

Become a real community. Leaders working for renewal should become genuine friends and form vital Christian community, otherwise their diversity of gifts and capital will only artificially be combined. What we want instead is to have the diverse viewpoints and knowledge of our friends to sink into and enrich us. This will make us wiser, give us a less narrow perspective, and ultimately make us both more creative and trusting of one another.

A classic example of this is the “Clapham Group” of 18th-19th century Great Britain. It was an initial circle of friends with diverse gifts and capital, who became a literal

community, moving to the village of Clapham in suburban London. Their shared purpose was to reform British society with Christian/biblical values, but they focused especially on the abolition of slavery. Out of the Clapham group came the Eclectic Society, a group of clergy who invited others from outside Clapham into an every-other-week discussion group. Out of the Eclectic Society was born the Church Missionary Society and *The Christian Observer*, a crucial evangelical newspaper. For more on Clapham see the Appendix.

Do not move too quickly. The Clapham example illustrates how deep and lasting changes cannot happen fast or all at once. Some successful projects may only be possible if some more foundational projects are accomplished first. Among the earliest are the ‘initiatives’ mentioned in the third chapter in this series. A common theological foundation needs to be forged. Repentance and extraordinary prayer must be done together. A vision for the future and specific goals should be dreamed and brainstormed. And a “Protestant Social Teaching” to guide our social and political work must be developed. All of these are things that can help build a common mind and unity of vision.

Determine specific initiatives and projects to do and recruit new people into leadership teams that can steward each of the projects long term. (See next)

- What will they do? The “Strategic initiatives” are things that the leaders will have to do more directly along with creating new institutions and key alliances with older ones.
- What they cannot do. The “Mission projects” will require much more extensive overlapping networks of capital and networks of networks. They cannot be controlled centrally, but the initial leaders can get balls rolling and monitor the progress. See more below on movement dynamics.

¹⁰⁶ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, Oxford, 2010, 43.

B. THE FOUNDATIONAL INITIATIVES

(A common base for the whole movement)

1. Unite around historic Protestant theology

The body of core theological truths that define and defend an orthodox understanding of the gospel includes

First those expressed in the ecumenical creeds: The Apostles' Creed, The Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. They establish

- the doctrine of the Triune God, that there is one God who exists eternally in three equal persons who know and love one another,
- the doctrine of creation, that God is the sole Creator and sustainer of all things, and the physical creation, and our bodies, are both real and good,
- the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, united in one person forever

Second, the common core of the various Protestant confessions and catechisms consists of the 'Five Solas' ('Alones')—that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, according to the scripture alone, through the work of Christ alone, for the glory of God alone.¹⁰⁷ So the Protestant confessional statements¹⁰⁸ establish

- the necessity, sufficiency, clarity, authority, and infallibility of the Bible,
- the doctrine of sin, that human beings are wholly unable to will or achieve their salvation without the free grace and intervention of God

- the doctrine of atonement, that Christ received the penalty we deserved, in our place.
- the necessity of the new birth through the Holy Spirit, the blessings of justification, union with Christ, adoption, and sanctification,
- the indispensability of the church, its ministry of the Word, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, for the formation of Christians into disciples of Jesus.
- and the personal return of Jesus Christ to earth to judge the world and establish a new heavens and new earth.

Finally, the mere slogan '*sola Scriptura*' will not be enough. While the Reformers all agreed that the Bible is the supreme authority, the movement will have to spell out more on what they agree is the nature of that authority, since the doctrine of Scripture is one of the most contested doctrines of our day.

2. Seek revival/gospel renewal dynamics

See above on revival. The initial leaders, even if they are at first a temporary Christian community that unites only episodically, should seek renewal dynamics in their own midst through gospel preaching, extraordinary prayer, mutual exhortation, repentance, and worship together.

3. Begin a new movement

See above on the character of movements. But the initial leaders of a church renewal movement today will likely need to focus attention on these issues:

- 1. Divide but with tears and grace.** Something like the evangelical-fundamentalist split of the 1940s may need

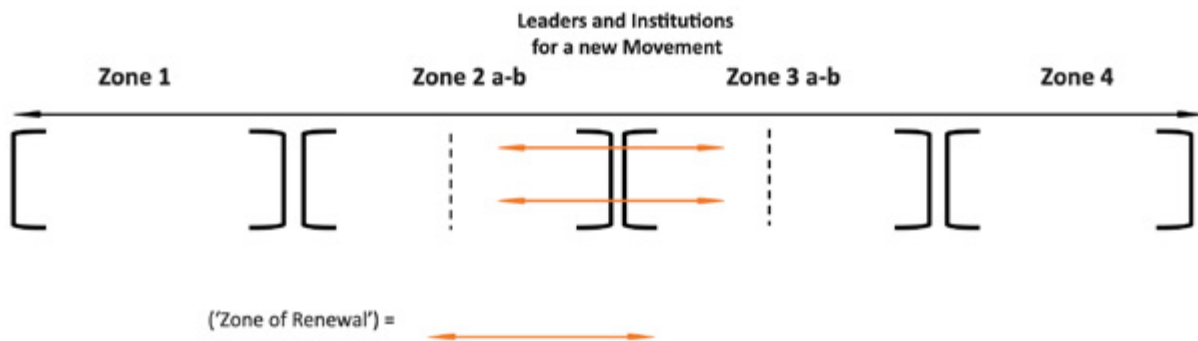
¹⁰⁷ There are interesting correlations between David Bebbington's four marks of evangelicalism and the "Solas." Bebbington lists (a) The full authority of the Bible – (*sola Scriptura*) (b) the necessity of conversion, the new birth – (*sola gratia* and *sola fidei*) (c) salvation by the blood atonement of Jesus, now works – (*sola Christus*) and (d) the necessity of mission, of evangelizing the world – (*sola Deo Gloria*).

¹⁰⁸ Examples of these include: The Augsburg Confession (1530), The Belgic Confession (1561), The Helvetic Confession (1562), The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (1571), The Heidelberg Catechism (1576), The Canons of Dort (1619) The Westminster Confession, and Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1647), The Savoy Declaration (1658), The Baptist Confession of Faith (1689). They find more modern-day expressions in The Lausanne Covenant, and in statements of faith such as that of the World Evangelical Alliance. These confessions serve Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Baptist, and Congregational communions and therefore differ in significant ways. Yet we believe that they contain the core of Protestant orthodoxy.

to happen (or is happening) again.¹⁰⁹ At that point men like Billy Graham, Carl Henry, Harold Ockenga, and J. Howard Pew divided from fundamentalism, created a number of new institutions, and took the new name “evangelicals” to make the differences clear. Figures and groups that had shared the same platform and written books together and endorsed one another’s ministries divided. For example, Carl McIntire and Harold Ockenga were both in the first graduating class at the new Westminster Seminary in 1929, where they sat together at the feet of Machen. But by the 1940s they were opponents.

For us, it will mean that, again, some denominations and institutions will divide. Some organizations will divide. Evangelicalism has fragmented into at least four zones. (As the following chart shows, that could be broken into six or more.) Some older institutions will have to decide which zone to ally with. The new institutions, new alliances, and leaders for a new renewal movement will mostly come from Zones 2 and 3—and especially Zones 2b and 3a. However—see below—the renewal will be different enough that it would be best to call it not some ‘Zone Straddler’ but a new “Zone 5.”¹¹⁰

The Evangelical “Crack-Up”¹⁰⁵



¹⁰⁹ George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Eerdmans, 1987). Within a span of one generation, from the 1890s to the 1930s, the influence and prominence of conservative, orthodox Protestantism among elite society—the universities, mainline Protestant denominations, the federal government, and other major cultural institutions—collapsed. Both biblical ‘higher criticism’ and Darwin’s theory of evolution ascended first at European universities and then spread to the U.S. Many of the newer universities were founded with a deliberate anti-religious, secular foundation. (See Christian Smith, ed. *The Secular Revolution: Power, Influence, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, University of California, 2003). Then many leading figures in the mainline denominations argued that traditional Christian doctrine had to be changed in light of modern science and sensibilities. The conservative vs liberal battles occurred first in the Northern (later American) Baptist Convention and the northern Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. but in others as well. The conservatives lost those battles and by the late 1920s “few respected educational institutions of any sort in the northern United States would even tolerate fundamentalist teaching.” (Marsden, 4) When conservative Protestantism was ejected from elite cultural institutions, especially in the North, between 1890 and 1930, what was called “fundamentalism” set up shop in thousands of new organizations, networks, radio ministries, summer camps, schools and institutes, and innumerable other associations. George Marsden and Nathan O. Hatch (Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Yale, 1989) have shown, American evangelicalism in its early history had seeds sown in it—“tendencies” to separatism, radical individualism, anti-intellectualism, and political extremism. (Marsden, 10). These tendencies had been muted when evangelicalism was more ascendent in society, but now fundamentalists retreated into their own trans-denominational organizations. The older more intellectual fundamentalist leaders like J. Gresham Machen died off, and in their new, embattled stance, these “tendencies” of fundamentalism strengthened greatly.

¹¹⁰ This schema is indebted to two articles: Michael Graham, “The Six-Way Fracturing of Evangelicalism” June 7, 2021, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/six-way-fracturing-evangelicalism/> Daniel K. Williams, “Five Emerging Factions in Evangelical Higher Education” April 5, 2022, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2022/04/the-five-emerging-factions-in-evangelical-higher-education/>

Zone 1 – Fundamentalism. (Corresponding to G.Packer’s “Real America” – Far Right Populism)

- Anti- any talk of social justice. Militant. Super-complementarian, rigid gender roles. Trump, anti-vax. This is not only demographically large, but Republican operatives and the pandemic and excesses of the Left over the last couple of years has swelled the numbers here. This group rejects any strong emphasis on social justice as ‘liberal’ or ‘Marxist’ and denies the reality of structural injustice. Highly individualistic in its social theory.

Zone 2 – Conservative evangelicalism. (Corresponding to G.Packer’s “Free America” – Center Right Liberalism)

- **2a** - Complementarian, but more flexible and less rigid about gender roles. Strict doctrinally—biblical inerrancy, penal substitution atonement. Will talk of social justice but in a guarded, muted way, and it is addressed only through individual and private charity. Much more stress on traditional family and sexuality than on race and justice. Sees the mission of the church as strictly evangelism. Trump-leaning without wanting to endorse Trump himself. They basically see the Woke Left as a far bigger threat.
- **2b** - Also complementarian and conservative by believing in systemic racism and structural injustice. More willing to address injustice with structural measures than just private charity. More willing to work with egalitarians without rancor. Sees the mission of the church as equipping people for integrating faith and work and for justice, even if the institutional church should concentrate on the Word and evangelism.

Zone 3 - Egalitarian evangelicalism. (Corresponding to G.Packer’s “Smart America” – Center Left Liberalism)

- **3a** - Mainstream evangelicals. Not nearly as doctrinally oriented. Shies away from using the term ‘inerrancy’. Less willing to say there is an exact biblical position on everything. More pragmatic operationally. More willing to create alliances across races and denominations. Puts far more emphasis on social justice than on traditional family and sexuality. Mainly egalitarian in the church but (a) grounding views in the Bible rather than saying Paul was wrong or we must get beyond him (b) often willing to affirm husband’s leadership in the family and non-interchangeable gender roles in the family, (c) cooperative with complementarians and more open to their views. Not at all open and affirming to gay/homosexual marriage and ordination.
- **3b** - As above, but more consistently and insistently egalitarian, not willing to make common cause with complementarians because of a conviction their view is inherently misogynist/unjust, and willing to say the Bible’s teaching on women is now outdated. Still affirming traditional church prohibition of homosexual acts, but much more willing to affirm and work with celibate gay Christians.

Zone 4 – Ex- or Post-Evangelicalism. (Corresponding to G.Packer’s “Just America” – Far Left Progressivism)

- Progressive Christian/post or ex-evangelical. Like the older mainline, quite willing to see Scripture as flawed and regressive in many ways. Open and affirming to all LGBT. Egalitarian obviously. Unlike the older mainline, they do not just dismiss or ignore evangelicalism/fundamentalism, but think that it is destroying the country, that even Zone 3 forms are abusive and bad for people. Some have with fairness said that this group is as militant and inflexible as the fundamentalists they so fear.

Sum: Generally speaking—the way forward is to (a) divide from Zones 1 and 4 in different ways, and (b) bring both individuals, and leaders and some older institutions most likely from the ‘right half’ of Zone 2 and the ‘left half’ of Zone

3 into a new Zone 5. (c) Then: do the strategic initiatives, launch the mission projects, and start new institutions.

2. A New Movement Name? It isn't clear how this will unfold and what or whether there will be new names given to the 'sides.' I'm using terms "fundamentalist" and "conservative evangelical" and "evangelical" but for most of the public, there is no real difference between any of these words. So I leave it up to others to propose new terms, names, and descriptors.¹¹¹

3. A New Movement Attitude. In any case, I believe the "side" that responds to this division with truth, tears, and grace will be the one more reflective of the Savior and more likely to be effective in winning non-believers and sanctifying believers. The side that behaves the most graciously will flourish the most in the aftermath.

a. We should forgive if we have been wronged.

Forgiveness was so crucial to Jesus that he died forgiving his enemies (Luke 23:34). When he was insulted and scorned he never responded in kind (1 Peter 2:23). How much more, then, should we be gracious and forgiving to other brothers and sisters in Christ that oppose us?

b. We should call out error publicly but be personally open to opponents.

The temptation on both sides will be to question if the others are "real" Christians, but love gives the benefit of the doubt to people who profess belief in the biblical gospel. Jesus publicly denounced beliefs and practices of the religious leaders of the day. Yet he was open to personal fellowship with individual Pharisees (Luke 7 and John 3). He cut no one off. Stay in touch with those in the other camp who still want talk personally and not just spar publicly online. Do this face to face or in email and phone as often as possible. Do this not only with those "to your Right" but to those "to your Left."

c. We should evangelize and edify far more than

we engage in polemics. The divisions in our culture and in our churches are fueled by those on the Left and the Right. Both sides want to co-opt as much of the church as possible for their political agenda. Both sides insist they have the moral high ground and are fighting on the side of truth and justice. Each side produces enormous numbers of attack videos, memes, and articles targeting church leaders and others who are not aligning with them. Polemics are sometimes necessary—but they are medicine, not food. You can't live on medicine. In the long run constant polemics are exhausting and they don't build us up spiritually. The movement will succeed that becomes the most famous for preaching and writing and teaching and pastoring that is astonishingly good and that spiritually nourishes and changes the readers or listeners right in their seats.

4. A New Use of Power. There is no way to form a growing new movement in a particular social sphere except through competition with other groups, organizations, and individuals for money and donors, numbers of adherents, public attention, audiences, and influence over the broader culture. To understand this competition we need to—

a. Understand capital. There are different forms of 'capital'. The most obvious form is *economic capital*—money. But there is also *social capital*—the power that comes to you if you have personal relationships with people who can open doors for you. Finally there is *symbolic capital* and this can come in many varieties. Some institutions and credentials have more symbolic capital, so a person with a degree from MIT has more than someone with a degree from a local community college. A culturally appropriate manner, language, tone, expression, and emotions—conveys more symbolic capital with people of that particular culture than someone ignorant of all those things. Physical things—beautiful clothes and bodies and art—have symbolic capital and attraction power. The more capital in any

¹¹¹ It's noteworthy that no one less than Carl Henry himself had mixed feelings about the term "evangelical" which was taken up and used in the 1940s to identify the new movement. He said, "nobody wanted the term 'evangelical'" because the word sounded to many people like 19th century Christianity and, therefore, "passe." Marsden, 10.

form, the more power. These kinds of capital can exist apart from one another—but over time one tends to lead to the other.

b. Understand competitive fields. A social sphere or field—(e.g. religious, artistic, business, the professions, the academic fields)—are places where individuals, groups, and organizations compete for influence, that is for all forms of capital. All fields are basically hierarchical, with some who have more capital and become gatekeepers of the field and others who are more marginal. Newcomers are never welcome—all other groups will seek to paint them as illegitimate and will seek to define them in ways that will make it difficult for them to acquire influence (capital).¹¹²

We should not be blinded by inspirational terms like “being a new movement” and promoting “spiritual renewal.” The moment we begin, we will unavoidably be in a competition for power. We will ‘leverage our social capital’ to reach a wider audience. [1] We will present ourselves as being more able to address the church’s problems than other ‘zones’ and church movements. [2] We will present ourselves as being more able to address culture’s questions and objections than other religious communities. [3] We will present ourselves as offering a model of cultural engagement that avoids the dangers of assimilation, withdrawal, or domination. [4] We will make strong efforts to define ourselves and not let others “name” us, but that means describing ourselves in contrast to—and over against—other groups. Frankly, others will have to decrease if we are to increase. There is no use in protesting that we will be above competition. We should not be naïve here. We will inevitably enter a competitive social field in which the rules of the

game are quite opposed to these words of Jesus:

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.” (Mark 10:42-44)

The real question is—*how* will we do this? Will we “compete” through our use of the Bible, through making decisive, compelling arguments based on exegesis? Will we represent the views of opponents in ways they recognize and affirm, or—will we put up caricatures that are easy to knock down? Will we seek to accrue capital through stoking fear and anger? Will we engage in *ad hominem* arguments, imputing motives and charging all opponents with bad character? Will we just shame, antagonize, or “own” opponents rather than trying to persuade them? The answer to all these questions must be a resounding “no.”

4. A working model for thriving churches and ministry in a hostile culture. Sociologist Brad Vermurlen explains specifically how a social movement in the religious field can succeed. Christian Smith has a model for thriving churches in a secular pluralistic society. It incorporates most of the other proposed models.¹¹³

- a. “Sheltered enclave” [Ben-Op];
- b. “Strict church” [Dean Kelley];
- c. “Status discontent” [secular critics];

¹¹² For an excellent account of how religious communities can thrive through ‘collective strategic action in a social field’ see Brad Vermurlen, *Reformed Resurgence: The New Calvinist Movement and the Battle over American Evangelicalism*, Oxford, 2021.

¹¹³ In *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, author Christian Smith proposes a ‘Subcultural Identity Theory of Religious Strength’—an explanation of why some religious communities thrive in a pluralistic environment better than others. To (over) generalize, Smith argues that the religious community best thrives that “chooses its battles” well. If it chooses to oppose the general culture at too many points, or at too few, it will not thrive. Smith believes that, in general, evangelicalism will do a better job than fundamentalism (which fights too many unnecessary battles) and liberal Protestantism (which fights too few or none.) Smith’s ideas are fascinating and highly relevant for any renewal movement in the American church. We can’t open up the implications here, but we should note that ‘battles’—criticism and opposition—is necessary. We should not be naïve about that. The question is how will we conduct our ‘battles’.

- d. “Religious economy” [Finke and Stark] models).
- e. “Sub-Cultural Identity” Theory of Religious Strength (C.Smith)

In *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* Smith argues churches thrive if they are not too much like the dominant culture OR too totally cut off from or hostile to the dominant culture. Zone 4 is too much like the culture to produce growing churches. Zone 1 churches are also basically going into (or going to go into) decline. They will not be able to attract or convert younger people or, by and large, non-white people—and those groups are, rather obviously, the future. Smith warns however, that while evangelicals still have the ‘model’ most likely to thrive as a subculture (over liberal and fundamentalist religion)—it has a fatal flaw—‘voluntary absolutism’—that makes it unable to influence the broader culture.¹¹⁴

The church renewal movement seeks to change this—to form an orthodox Protestant church that understands corporate, systemic social dynamics as part of what forms us.

Apply this basic model to the movement. How will we thrive as a movement in a hostile environment? We must accrue economic, symbolic, and social capital in competition with other groups and movements in the religious field. But we should do so in these ways:

See structural opportunities—socially situate the movement in the culture:

- Identify problems in society and the church you are addressing and make the case for why you can do so
- Combine the things you are for in counter-intuitive ways, inhabiting ‘interstitial space’ that somewhat escapes the incumbent gatekeepers of the field (See article “Neo-Calvinism and Pastoral Ministry”

Name yourself and resist allowing others to name you

- Draw boundaries that define you and winsomely

critique those over the boundaries.

Name things that you are against, that you oppose

- Name things that you are for, that you are supporting
- Be aware of opposing forces and threats and be sure not to unnecessarily give the critics ammunition or easy targets
- Above all, present your distinctives in connection with baseline cultural narratives (e.g. biblical sexuality as ‘super-consensual’, etc.)

Give high publicity and attention to:

- the most effective ministries using the models being developed and promoted by the movement (e.g. church planting, evangelism, justice, catechesis, etc.
- the leaders that embody the future of the movement, who are highly credible to the culture, and who can attract others as well.

Leverage media and the internet

4. Articulate the non-negotiable values for the movement. Any effective movement must be able to paint a picture of the future it aims to bring about. This can in some part be from the various practical outcomes of the ministry projects. But beyond that, there must be a portrait of the kind of church we are called to be. We are committed to:

- a. A Protestant doctrinal orthodoxy yet in a broad tent of denominations. We will each love our own denominations and traditions but respect and appreciate the others. For more on what Protestant doctrinal orthodoxy is—see first Foundational Initiative above.

Question to address: How and who defines this?

The way forward: (1) Assemble a body of Protestant leaders and theologians who are highly respected,

¹¹⁴ Writers such as Rod Dreher (see his best-selling *The Benedict Option*, Sentinel, 2017) look to the Benedictine monastic renewal of the 6th century for guidance today. There is much wisdom there, but others such as Hughes Old and Josh Crossman point to the Franciscan and Dominican renewals of the 13th century. These orders saw that preaching had essentially atrophied in the church and both created bands of itinerant preachers who renewed evangelism and saw church growth. See Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, Volume 3 – *The Medieval Church*, Eerdmans, 1999, pp.341ff.

deeply appreciative of non-Protestantism, and from every major Protestant tradition, (2) probably define Protestantism along lines of the 'Solus'.

b. Orthodoxy which is fully contemporary. Fully engaged with the world with appreciation and respect, but without compromise.

Questions to address: What do these two terms mean? Why is this a value? Way forward: This could also be put "uncompromisingly orthodox and yet contextual to the times." Liberalism abandons orthodoxy and much conservatism enshrines older contextualized forms of orthodoxy and refuses to adapt.

c. Salvation by free justification and grace yet unto holiness. We will avoid the typical and twin pitfalls of moralism and relativism.

Question to address: Issues over the understanding of justification which have emerged among conservative Protestants. Way forward: a respected team of scholars producing an up-to-date consensus paper. Also see 'theological retrieval' below.¹¹⁵

d. A unity with the global and non-western church. We will find ways as a movement of listening to and staying in close touch with non-western Christian leaders.

Question to address: How will this unity be actually practiced and enhanced? Way forward: Create an organized, habitual way for the U.S. churches to listen to non-western Christian leaders.

e. A Biblically complex understanding of society as individual, cultural, and structural. Change the American evangelical belief in extreme and exclusive individualism.

Question to address: The individualism of U.S. evangelicals is so pervasive and exclusive that most cannot conceive of any other way to understand human outcomes.¹¹⁶ What can be done? Way forward: Protestant Social Teaching (below) and a robust biblically/exegetically grounded social ethic. Also the justice network and the faith-work network (see below) and the institutions that may come out of them.

f. A multi-ethnic American church and leadership. We will be a movement led by a multi-ethnic team that truly empowers non-white leaders throughout the church.

Question to address: While the American church is multi-ethnic, its leadership is largely segregated and not listening to one another nor speaking to society in any unified way. What can be done? Way forward: New structures or venues must be established for both communication and the sharing of power.

g. The integration of word and deed ministry. We will unite evangelism and teaching with doing justice and mercy. God's grace heals from all the results of sin.

Question to address: This integration is already present in the black church and many working class churches—to the point that the terms 'word' and 'deed' are not used. How does the rest of the U.S. church get this integration? Way forward: The justice network (see below under Projects) and Protestant social teaching.

h. Spiritual revival yet building institutions. We will neglect neither individual spiritual experience nor the importance of the local church or of new institutions.

Question to address: The fact is that seeking spiritual renewal usually gets squeezed out by

¹¹⁵ For an important step in the 'dogmatic retrieval' yet re-discovery of justification by faith see Michael Horton, *Justification: Two Volume Set* (New Studies in Dogmatics), Zondervan Academic, 2018.

¹¹⁶ See C. Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, University of Chicago, 1998; Michael Emerson, Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Oxford, 2001. In the former book, Christian Smith calls this Evangelicals' "Voluntary Absolutism."

organizational and institutional tasks. What can be done? Way forward: See treatment above.

i. A Protestant social teaching that resists secular versions of Left or Right politics. Analogous to Catholic Social Teaching (and overlapping).

Question to address: There are enormous differences within Protestantism over this. Is consensus possible? Way forward: Strategic initiative (See immediately below.)

j. Apostolic yet servant leadership. We will both encourage dynamic, entrepreneurial “apostolic” leaders yet require that such leaders work in a stance of servanthood.

Question to address: What is the definition of these terms? Way forward: As with the salvation by grace point above—a consensus paper on this to help us move forward as a movement with the right balances here.

k. Worldview yet common grace. We stress the anti-thesis between the fundamental beliefs of Christianity and other worldviews, yet recognize wisdom and truth in non-believers.

Question to address: How are evangelicals going to agree on what qualifies as antithesis and what's common for common grace? Who gets to tell evangelicals how to think about these things? Forward: As above- (1) Assemble a body of Protestant leaders and theologians who are highly respected, deeply appreciative of non-Protestantism, and from every major Protestant tradition, (2) Theology and public life initiative.

l. The original Christian ‘social project’. We will be committee to a) multi-ethnicity, (b) concern for the poor, (c) forgiveness and reconciliation, (d) the ‘pro-life’ cause, and (e) practicing sexuality only within marriage between the two genders.

Question to address: This seems an enormous ‘heavy lift’ in light of the polarization of our politics

and culture. What can be done? Way forward: Instill this in the ‘DNA’ of all the new churches, regardless of denomination and tradition. Also—see theological renewal.

m. Theological retrieval and the production of new studies in dogmatics. We will be both true to the orthodoxy of the past yet work to relate orthodoxy to modern issues.

Question to address: ‘Dogmatics’ is the re-statement of confessional theology in a new time and place. Dogmatics is impossible with a general, thin, evangelical-consensus statement of faith. It must be done by Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans, Methodists, etc. Way forward: Encourage orthodox by confessionally diverse dogmatics. Some new ‘centers’ or institutions?

n. To extraordinary prayer. We will be people of prayer.

o. Question to address: How will this be any more than an empty slogan? How does this get practically operationalized? Way forward: Brainstorm! Some new organizations and institutions?

5. Develop a ‘Protestant Social Teaching’ especially on injustice, sexuality, and politics .

The Catholic church developed Catholic Social Teaching or “CST,” an account of how historic Christian beliefs can be applied to modern social issues. CST criticizes capitalism and fascism on the right, socialism and communism on the left, as well as secular liberalism in the middle. It also critiques modern feminism and the deconstruction of gender. It is pro-life and supportive of the traditional, heterosexual, child-bearing marriage. It advocates for laboring people against exploitation by the rich, and makes helping the economically weakest and most marginalized a high priority. On the State, it charts a course between the individualism that sees the State as an enemy of freedom and the collectivism that sees a powerful State as a savior.

CST has helped Catholics think through and respond to social questions and political issues of our time. In contrast, mainline Protestants developed their understanding of social issues only after abandoning many historic Christian

doctrines. And U.S. Evangelicals have veered back and forth between the opposite errors of a pietism that avoids all 'worldly' political involvement, or the embrace of existing political ideologies (often extreme ones) in the name of Christ.

- **What is it?** No Christian can engage in society as a citizen without a working theory of how Biblical doctrine and ethical principles relate to social issues. How does Biblical teaching about Sabbath laws, profit-taking (the "gleaning laws"), the care of the poor, the image of God, human rights, and love of neighbor—apply to us today? Some evangelicals write off the entire Old Testament legislation as obsolete and inapplicable, while others have applied it woodenly, seeking to recreate the Old Testament theocracy in the modern world. The Westminster Confession of Faith shows that both approaches are reductionistic, un-nuanced, and wrong. On the one hand it says that the Old Testament laws were given to Israel when it was a theocratic nation-state and so they are "not obliging... now" and yet, it adds, "further than the general equity thereof may require." (WCF 19.4) With wonderful balance it calls Christians to see the general principles of "equity"—of justice—behind the specific regulations, and apply them to the modern day.

That is the Old Testament. In the New Testament, what does it mean to be "salt and light" in the world (Mt 5:13-16)? What are the social implications of "rendering" respective duties to Caesar and to God (Mk 12:17)? Of the positive view of human government in Romans 13 and the negative view in the book of Revelation? Of Jesus' extensive teaching of wealth and poverty in the Gospel of Luke? Of the book of Philemon in how it addresses slavery? Of the teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians about sexuality and gender?

What things that the Bible says are sins should Christians write into law, and which ones would be wrong to treat that way? The sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not murder," is an obvious one to see

enshrined in law, and one that most people agree is an evil, based on God's general revelation to their consciences. But what about the first and second commandments—"have no other gods before me" and "make for yourself no graven image"? Should American Christians enshrine those in law, making it illegal for people to worship other than the Biblical God? Very few Christians would argue that is a good idea.

So it takes a great deal of thought, theological insight, careful, extensive biblical exegesis, and a full knowledge of the deep structures of modern culture and society in order to provide a biblically grounded "social thought." Catholics have been working on it for over a century and doubtless Protestants would be able to learn from much of it, since we share so many common doctrines. And yet Protestants hold many beliefs and views that are different and can yield new (and sometimes differing) insights. Protestants' law/gospel distinction, dynamic understanding of the kingdom of God, and more chastened understanding of the effects of human sin and therefore of role of natural law and general revelation, view of the individual's relationship to community—should all yield additional understandings.

- **What will be included in it?** Besides providing direct answers to a set of contemporary social and political issues, Protestant Social Thought will need—
- **To offer a kind of Christian 'high theory'** that critiques modern secular culture in general, exposing its deep structures and its various failures. In general, Catholics have done much more work in this area than Protestants (e.g. Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor). Some ways forward may be:
 - a. Reformed epistemology rather than common sense rationalism (N. Wolterstorff, H. Bavinck)¹¹⁷
 - b. Mutual racial accountability rather than color blindness or antiracism (G. Yancey, A. Bradley);

¹¹⁷ N. Wolterstorff, *Religion in the University*, Yale, 2019; H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics (Vol 1): Prolegomena*, Baker, 2003.

analytical vs ontological critical race theory (J.D. Hunter)¹¹⁸

c. Augustinian view of the self and heart rather than the Therapeutic Self or various post-structuralist or Marxist accounts of the social self (C. Trueman; C.Taylor; C. Lasch; R.Bellah)¹¹⁹

d. Theology of the body rather than repression or fluidity (S. Allberry, N. Pearcey)¹²⁰

e. A critique of the sexual revolution and the presentation of a sexual counter-culture.¹²¹

f. Political involvement rather than partisanship (D. Koyzis)¹²²

g. World-view development and subversive fulfillment rather than culture wars (J.H. Bavinck)¹²³

h. Theologically-rich spiritual experience rather than doctrinalism or mysticism (J. Owen, J. Edwards)¹²⁴

- **To give guidance on ‘cultural engagement’ in general**, addressing the divisions over the “Christ and

Culture” models¹²⁵ and the corresponding models of the church.¹²⁶ It must, like CST, be willing to critique all the models and political ideologies.

a. The transforming danger. This is the approach that sees the culture as in terrible decline and seeks political power to rectify it. Its danger: Taking power (even with the best of motives) rather than transforming it as Jesus the servant did, and therefore becoming conformed too much to the world.

b. The assimilating danger. This is the approach that sees the culture more positively, as ‘history moving toward more justice and inclusion’ and wants the church to join in with liberationist movements. Its danger: Being conformed too much to the world, though to the liberal rather than the conservative world.

c. The withdrawing danger. This approach is as negative as the ‘transforming’ approach but it believes that by retreating into sheltered communities it can avoid pollution. Its danger: a blindness to how much the culture has already

¹¹⁸ George Yancey, *Beyond Racial Division: A Unifying Alternative to Colorblindness and Antiracism*, IVP, 2022; G. Yancey and Michael O. Emerson, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Toward a Mutual Obligations Approach*, Oxford, 2011; A. Bradley, ed. *Black Scholars in White Spaces: New Vistas in African American Studies from the Christian Academy*, Pickwick, 2015; A. Bradley, ed. *Why Black Lives Matter: African-American Thriving for the 21st Century*, Cascade, 2020; A. Bradley, *Ending Overcriminalization and Mass Incarceration: Hope from Civil Society*, Cambridge, 2018. Note: The James D. Hunter paper referred to is unpublished at this writing.

¹¹⁹ Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution*, Crossway, 2020; C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard, 1989; C. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (paperback edition) Harvard, 2018; Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in a Culture of Diminished Expectations*, (Reissue) Norton, 2018; Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, Norton, 1991; Robert Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart with a New Preface: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 1st edition with a new preface, University of California, 2007.

¹²⁰ Sam Allberry, *What God Has to Say About Our Bodies: How the Gospel is Good News for Our Physical Selves*, Crossway, 2021; Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality*, Baker, 2019; O. Carter Snead, *What It Means To Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics*, Harvard, 2020.

¹²¹ Louise Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, Polity, 2022; Christine Emba, *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation* (Sentinel, 2022). These women are arguing that the sexual revolution has been brutal for women. This is one important avenue for Christians to make a case to the secular world for a biblical sex ethic by appealing to common grace.

¹²² David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 2nd ed, IVP, 2019.

¹²³ J.H. Bavinck, *Worldview and Personality*, James Eglinton, editor and translator, Crossway, 2023- forthcoming.

¹²⁴ John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, K.Kapic, J.Taylor, eds, Crossway, 2007; John Owen, *The Glory of Christ: His Office and Grace*, Christian Focus, 2015; Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits: Living in the Light of God’s Love*, K.Strobel, ed, Crossway, 2012; Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards (Vol 2): Religious Affections*, Paperback edition, Yale, 2009.

¹²⁵ The most famous version of the models is H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Harper and Row, 1951.

¹²⁶ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church: Expanded Edition*, Image, 1991.

influenced them. There is no way to prevent cultural engagement.

d. The ignoring danger This says the world is doing fine and doesn't need the church's cultural engagement. Just build up the church and win people to Jesus. Its peculiar danger: Similar to 'withdrawing'—blind to how much the culture *is* influencing them.

- **To give guidance on political involvement in general.**

St Augustine's *The City of God*, taught Christians live in two 'cities' or social orders at once. They are citizens of the heavenly City of God (Phil 3:20-21). It is a spiritual and social order in which the heart's highest love is God—which keeps it from making idol-absolutes of one's individual interest, or family, or people and country. We also reside in the "City of Man"—social orders based not on love and self-sacrifice ("my life serves yours"), but on power, exploitation, and the protecting of self-interest ("your life serves mine")—not on God's glory but on ours (Gen 11:4). While Christians' main allegiance is the City of God, it can never be fully realized until its revelation at the end of time.

- **To address the key social-political issue of our time—the future of Liberalism.**

See both P. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale, 2019) and M. Rose *A World After Liberalism*. All the current evangelical "Zones" have been co-opted and hijacked into one of the existing corresponding political factions (well-described by George Packer as "Free America" (e.g. Ronald Reagan) "Smart America" (e.g. Bill Clinton) "Just America" (e.g. Bernie Sanders) and "Real America" (e.g. Donald Trump). The old 20th century Liberal-Democratic consensus (embodied in "Free" and "Smart" America as center right and center left respectively) is under an assault from both Just and Real America. Will it survive—or will it survive in altered form? If the renewal movement is to be a true "Zone 5" must not allow itself to be hijacked and follow a secular ideology as the other church Zones have done. It should think biblical-theologically and recommend a new, general way forward, yet without identifying the church and gospel

with a single political platform or party.

- **To address the role of the State.** A number of Catholics (the 'Integralists') and some Protestants want the State to officially support a particular Christian church. Others want a Hungary-like ethno-tribal populism, in which the State privileges Christianity and some traditional Anglo-European Christian values. These are put forward against the traditional John Rawlsian view, which was that religious (what Rawls called "comprehensive") views were to be kept out of public reasoning and discourse, so that the State was to enforce a public square in which freedom of speech and debate did not include religious speech.

None of these three views of the relationship of the State to religion show promise of creating a truly pluralistic society in which all voices—secular (which is not the objective, empirically neutral position it purports to be) and various religious—are free to debate and contend democratically.

As mentioned in the first part of my long-form article, there is another position in which the State does not enforce and privilege secularism over religion nor any particular religion and, while impossible to be fully neutral about moral values, largely remains an 'umpire' between various voices and positions.

This would end the government's mystifying (a) the views of expressive individualism and therapeutic identity—therefore of sex and gender, and (b) the view that all human evil is produced by social structure, or by evolutionary biology, or (c) the secular views of morality such as utilitarianism—are the only legitimate, 'scientific' views. In short the state should not act as if secularism was NOT one quasi-religious worldview among many. It should not tag anyone who disagrees with the secular 'takes' on these things as 'hate speech'. It would abandon its view that these views were objective, universal truths to be recognized by all enlightened human beings in all cultures.

It would be a humbled State that was 'procedurally

secular' but not ideologically, programmatically secular."¹²⁷

ADDENDUM: THE USE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR SOCIAL CRITIQUE—SOME EXAMPLES:

Items below mostly from C. Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, Univ Chicago, 1998, 196n5. See also Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*, Zondervan, 2022.

1. Critique of American individualism and the 'Therapeutic Self'

(Example of biblical-theological resources: (1) Humanity created and saved corporately under federal heads; (2) the communal nature of Biblical civil legislation and Hebrew society; (3) the NT vision of cosmic redemption from all forms of sin—social as well as individual; (4) Christ's call to deny self for others; (5) Paul's teaching of the inter-dependence of spiritual gifts and Christian community; (6) examples in both the OT and NT of corporate responsibility—groups guilty of the sin of individuals (7) Proverbs' teaching that poverty stems not only from individual actions but from structural causes.

2. Critique of attitudinal and structural racism

(Example of biblical-theological resources: (1) The unity of the human race in Adam; (2) The equality—in sin and redemption—of cultures as seen in the miracle of tongues on Pentecost; (3) the God who is 'no respecter of person'; (4) the equal dignity and worth of every

individual because of the image of God; (5) the examples in both the OT and NT of corporate responsibility—groups guilty of the sin of individuals; (6) the value and reality of ethno-cultural differences seen in their enduring into the new heavens and new earth; (7) the Good Samaritan parable; (8) Paul's confrontation of Peter over racial/ ethnic prejudice Gal 2; (9) The gospel's power to overcome racial/ethnic barriers Eph 2; (10) Structural as well as individual biblical laws against racism.

3. Other issues to be critiqued from the Bible

- Critique of the inequities of global market capitalism
- Critique of relational transience of modern mobility
- Critique of consumerism—addiction to goods and experiences
- Critique of violence in our culture
- Critique of the business corporation and model
- Critique of environmental destruction
- Critique of behavioral and systemic discrimination and violence toward women
- Critique of all parts of the criminal justice system
- Critique of secular public education
- Critique of the supposedly secular academy and higher education
- Critique of bureaucracy and technocracy infecting most mainstream institutions
- Critique of the therapeutic self and modern idea of freedom
- Critique of the modern and postmodern understanding of power
- Critique of scientism and secular theories of rationality
- Critique of the sexual and gender revolutions
- Critique of the modern models of marriage and family
- Critique of the 'modern moral order' (utilitarianism, pragmatism, 'harm principle')
- Critique of each of the 4-6 main political ideologies- Left/Right, Center Left/Right, Far Left/Right

¹²⁷ See G. Marsden, "Toward a More Inclusive Pluralism" in *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment*; See C. Taylor's essay, "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights"; See Wilfred M. McClay, "Two Concepts of Secularism" in *The Wilson Quarterly*, Summer, 2000- available online; Rowan Williams, "Secularism, Faith, and Freedom" available online; R.Audi and N.Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate*, Rowman and Littlefield, 1996.) McClay and Williams argue that the State should be 'procedurally secular' – that is, it should be a kind of "umpire," keeping the playing field level and open for all points of view, guarding the rights of free and public speech of all, not privileging one religion over others, and allowing the democratically chose public policies—whatever their more worldview basis—to be put into effect. But that the state should not be 'programmatically' or 'philosophically' secular. That is, it should not be imposing a secular worldview and marginalizing religious ones.

APPENDIX: THE CLAPHAM GROUP

Wilberforce.

In 1787 William Wilberforce was a 28-year-old Member of Parliament when he wrote in his diary: “God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners [morals].” He had only experienced conversion two years earlier. The odds of anyone abolishing the slave trade were remote. Slavery had been a ‘given’ in human history as long as anyone could remember. Public opinion generally accepted it and the economics of the British Empire seemed completely tied to it. When Wilberforce set out to stop slavery, and therefore greatly diminish the long-term income and prosperity of most of his constituents, it looked like political suicide. Ten days before John Wesley’s death the old church leader wrote young Wilberforce: “*Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you who can be against you.*”

To make a long story extremely short, William persisted through opposition including physical assaults before succeeding in having the slave trade abolished in the British empire just three days before his own death 46 years later. (Note: He got the British treasury to remunerate all slave owners for their freed slaves—an enormous sum!) Wilberforce’s success in reforming the cultural standards of morality was also rather remarkable. How did he do it? Despite his obvious talents and character, William’s success was due to the support of the interesting Christian community called the Clapham Fellowship. One writer said, “if Wilberforce was the arrow that pierced the heart of the slave trade, the Clapham Fellowship was the bow that propelled him.” (J. Hart, “Every Arrow Needs a Bow,” *Regeneration*, Fall 99.)¹²⁸

The forming of the Clapham group.

Clapham was a few miles south of London. His Christian friend Henry Thornton, who was a banker and also a member of Parliament, originally suggested that the Thornton and Wilberforce families share a large house there. After this was agreed to, Thornton built two smaller houses on the same estate which were rented by Edward Eliot and Charles Grant. Grant and John Shore, who later became Lord Teignmouth, both had careers in India and later became strong supporters of missions there. Two others who were strong opponents of slavery were Granville Sharp, a scholar and activist became Chairman of the Anti-Slavery Society and was active in the work of Sierra Leone Project and the British and Foreign Bible Society. Zachary Macauley had gone to work as an estate overseer in the West Indies at the age of 16. He returned to England obsessed by the evils of the slave trade and joined the Clapham group. Thomas Gisborne, the Squire of Yoxall in Staffordshire and Prebend of Durham, spent part of every year working with Wilberforce. Hannah More was an educator and writer. The rector of the parish, John Venn, did not involve himself directly in any but directly religious initiatives, but he was an excellent pastor and teacher. He nurtured the entire community spiritually and his counsel was often sought.

John Venn in 1783 formed a fortnightly discussion group with other evangelical Anglican clergy, including John Newton, Charles Simeon, Richard Cecil and many others. Out of the Eclectic Society was formed the Church Missionary Society, which eventually sent over 9,000 men and women overseas in ministry. Eventually the circle of friends also founded an influential evangelical periodical—*The Christian Observer*—in which many members of Clapham published for the next 70 years.

While the Clapham fellowship is was most focused and is most famous for its anti-slavery social reform, it had a breadth

¹²⁸ <https://nhiemstra.wordpress.com/2008/11/30/every-arrow-needs-a-bow-william-wilberforce/>

of interests and of influence.

“Although the abolition campaign was the central Clapham concern and demanded the bulk of their energies, [they] also engaged in a variety of other social and philanthropic concerns. Among the most notable were revision of the penal code, the abolition of the press gang, improvements in the care of the mentally ill, [child labor law reform, especially] the relief of climbing boys [who went into chimneys to clean them], the regulation of factory conditions and the promotion of schools and other educational ventures.”¹²⁹

Lessons

There were several qualities that made Clapham Fellowship so successful in cultural renewal.

1. They were just as committed to spreading personal faith through conversion and missions as they were about social justice in society. Remarkably balanced, they were not just a ‘one-issue’ group. They supported education and literature and a theological journal and church extension as well as their political causes.
2. They were not sectarian. Yes, the core was Anglican, but keep in mind the dominance of that church in the UK at the time. Nevertheless they made common cause with people in other denominations and often with people who did not believe in Christianity at all (particularly with regard to their work against slavery). They stressed the central gospel rather than ‘sectarianism’.

3. They built their work on personal relationships. They were committed to one another, not simply to their own individual careers. They stayed together and connected for lifetimes. They worshipped together, ate together, talked together, lived together.

4. They were not only Christian in the content of their goals but in the manner in which they sought them. The historical-cultural distance between William Wilberforce and us is considerable. But even in that day there was such a thing as political engineering based on image, money, a mobilized constituency, stirring up resentment against the opposition, incendiary rhetoric to “rally the base” and so on. Wilberforce went in another direction. Here was not only politics with a Christian *content* (social justice) but with a gospel *form* (relationship, honesty, integrity, and longevity.)

5. They attracted talented and committed people (because there were such themselves.) Their “*brains could not be denied, even by those who sneered at their religion. They possessed between them an astonishing range of capacities: encyclopedic knowledge, a capacity for research, sparkling wit and literary style, business sagacity, foreign policy expertise, legal ability, oratory and parliamentary skill. No prime minister had such a cabinet as Wilberforce could summon to his assistance,*” (Garth Lean in **God’s Politician**.)¹³⁰

6. Lastly, despite their breadth of concerns, they had clear focus on one primary, concrete, specific, strategic goal—the end of the slave trade. This was a ‘glue’ that held them together.

Clapham was made of humans and sinners and it is not above criticism.¹³¹ But the community of Clapham leaders transformed culture in Christ’s name.

¹²⁹ Nigel Scotland, “The Social Work of the Clapham Sect: An assessment” *Themelios*, Volume 18, Issue 1.

¹³⁰ Garth Lean, *God’s Politician*, Helmers and Howard Publishers, 1987, 135.

¹³¹ For a fair assessment of the social reforms of the Clapham group see the excellent article by John Scotland cited in the previous note and accessed at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-social-work-of-the-clapham-sect-an-assessment/> Scotland points out that, despite often working for the poor rather than with the poor (as was so often the case with the upper classes of Britain) Clapham was nonetheless ahead of its time. It “inspired a whole generation of later, nineteenth-century philanthropists which included figures such as Lord Shaftesbury, William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army and...several hundred evangelical societies.” All of these, it is argued, laid the foundation for the modern state’s provision of aid and support for the poor and marginalized.

CHAPTER 6

The Renewal of the Church

HOW TO GET THERE
(THE MEANS: ACCOMPLISHING THE MISSION PROJECTS)

THE MISSION PROJECTS

James Hunter argues for the effectiveness of “overlapping strategic networks of capital”. That is, when scholars, business people, religious leaders, artists, scientists, journalists, politicians, and so on, unite and direct their symbolic, social, economic, and political capital “toward shared ends, the world, indeed, changes.”¹³² And so our church renewal movement must bring together the kinds of people with resources appropriate for each particular mission project. There should be at least, I believe, these seven, and an eighth ‘meta- project’. I will only briefly describe them and will expand on them in my fourth and last article.

Church planting and renewal¹³³

Current models of church planting need to be changed. They are (a) too under-resourced among poor and working-class populations and (b) done too expensively in the more advantaged populations. Church planters, in general, will need far more coaching and support, far more training and education delivered to them as they minister, and given more institutional support to use evangelistic models that grow the new church through conversion rather than the current popular marketing model that grows through publicity and transfer of Christians out of other churches.

Double the number of new church plants in the U.S. from the current 3-4,000 to 6-8,000 annually. Instill a common DNA into the new churches that includes the original biblical social project—(a) multi-ethnicity (b) care for the poor, (c) civility and reconciliation, (d) ‘pro-life’ (e) Christian sex ethic—as well as many of the other ‘non-negotiable values’ of the movement listed above.

Issues:

1. New alliances and organizations: Doubling the number of new churches will require an alliance with (a) willing, existing church planting networks who are able to ramp up and work together, and (b) some new church planting organizations that specialize in under-resourced and under-reached places and populations.

2. Specialty networks:

a. Urban church planting: Center city, all-city, disadvantaged city. Target especially the most strategic cities with the weaker church life: SF/Bay, Boston, etc.

b. University/academic center church planting.

Churches that will be part of the ‘Christian mind’ leadership pipeline.

c. Blue-collar/small town/rural; church planting.

Hidden need and opportunity: appealing to the youth and young adults in these areas will be a game-changer.

3. Strategic notes: Approximately 20% of new churches can be expected to plant another church on their own. So to plant 8,000 churches will mean funding 6,000. The second biggest problem will be funding, but the first and biggest challenge will be finding sufficient leaders who can plant churches.

‘Counter-Catechesis’ discipleship

Christian education, in general, needs to be massively redone. We must not merely explain Christian doctrine to children, youth, and adults, but use Christian doctrine to subvert the baseline cultural narratives to which believers are exposed in powerful ways every day. We should distribute this material widely to all, flooding society, as it were, with it.

Revolutionize youth and children’s discipleship and catechesis by using Christian doctrine to subvert baseline cultural narratives. Distribute massively, disrupting existing channels, as well as incorporating into local churches.

Issues:

1. Counter-catechesis content. For **(a)** children, **(b)** youth, and **(c)** adults. Christian doctrines are paired with opposing yet popular cultural narratives as a way

¹³² James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, Oxford, 2010, 43.

¹³³ *The Great Opportunity*, chapter 2.

of critiquing the narratives, fulfilling them in Christ and 'vaccinating' students to prevent them adopting the narratives unconsciously

2. Moral ecologies. Hunter and Olsen (*The Content of their Character*)¹³⁴ show that people do not have their character formed in classes but in communities that are cohesive and are based on worldviews and stories and personal models that reinforce and instill its beliefs in members.

3. Strategic notes: The second factor—moral ecologies—is a far, far greater challenge than the first, even though producing content is difficult as well. Hunter and Olsen point out that modern society undermines older sub-communities which could do formation of its members. Social media draws people out of their potentially thick, face-to-face local communities into thinly related affinity online 'communities'. People are more formed by media than local communities, though arguably media cannot really create moral ecologies.

The creation of a visible, credible sexual counter-culture as an apologetic.

- **The need.** It may be that the single greatest barrier for young people when it comes to the church and Christianity has to do with issues surrounding sexuality. The basic reason for this is that our culture is heavily invested in the therapeutic identity which sees sexual expression as crucial to both freedom and authenticity. If those two assumptions are accepted as givens, Christian sex ethics make no sense at all. It is not sufficient to simply declare (or even to train our children) in the biblical prohibitions surrounding sex. Christian sexual teaching makes no sense unless the deeper narratives are challenged too—AND unless a more wholesome and joyful way of being sexual beings is modeled in community.
- **The apologetic.** We must (as I did very briefly above) make visible the deeper logics behind various ethical

views. **(a)** Rather than merely declaring the Christian ethic ("no sex outside marriage"), attack the main foundation of the modern view of sexuality—the illusion of a 'discovered' authentic self within with sexual desires that are part of its authenticity. **(b)** The fact is—no identities are arrived at merely by looking inside and "seeing who you are." There are multiple "selves"—multiple contradictory feelings and impulses and desires in us. There must be a moral grid used to say "that part is *me*" and "that part isn't the *real me*." How do you know what parts are the 'real you'? The answer comes from *some* kind of moral standards or 'grid' by which you are sorting out the real you and the not-you parts of your heart. In short, it is the grid that creates and forms the ID—it is not discovered by you. It comes from somewhere—it is either some culture's definition and standards that are shaping you, and tying your self-worth to some kind of performance which makes you a slave to it—**(c)** or you could turn to the gospel and the Bible. There you get an identity that is based on Christ's performance and God's love for you, not your performance. There, you get an identity that frees you from getting your validation anywhere but in God—who has accepted you in Christ. **(d)** Everyone believes some kinds of sex is 'right' and 'wrong', but that is due to deeper questions like "what is sex for?" etc. We must give people a more accurate understanding of the history of sexual ethics (e.g. K. Harper, T. Holland) because part of the modern narrative is a short-hand history in which the past is all prejudice and darkness. **(e)** Finally, we need to re-articulate the Christian vision for human flourishing and sexuality that is communal rather than radically individualistic—so the sexual prohibitions make sense as liberating rather than as merely restricting.

- **The community.** Hardest of all. The church must be a place **(a)** where marriages flourish, **(b)** where people do not choose marriage partners as consumers (on the basis of looks and income), **(c)** where neither singles nor married couples feel de-valued, **(d)** where there is a general attitude toward sex that is joyful

¹³⁴ James D. Hunter and Ryan S. Olson, *The Content of their Character: Inquiries into the Varieties of Moral Formation*, Finstock and Tew, 2021.

and non-prudish but also shows high respect for it, not trying to display its liberation through sexual humor and obsessiveness with the subject, **(e)** where there is neither pressure to marry nor high barriers and discouragements to it, **(f)** where the relations between the sexes are neither over regulated in a legalistic fashion, adding to the bible, but neither are there seemingly no protocols or proposed guidelines at all, **(g)** where people with same-sex attraction are encouraged and supported. The work in this area and the content and apologetic that emerges will be a crucial part of counter-catechesis theology first and foremost, but an integrated approach is critical to form such a counter-culture.¹³⁵

Post-Christendom Evangelism

The Christian church in the West faces the first post-Christian, deeply secular culture in history. It has not yet developed a way to do evangelism with the secular and the “nones” that really gains traction and sees many people regularly coming to faith. This project is to develop both content and means for such evangelism.

Develop both new content and venues for evangelism—especially evangelism with the secular and the ‘Nones’—then distribute massively, disrupting existing channels, as well as incorporating the material and expertise into local churches.

Issues:

1. Post-Christendom content. Evangelism that **(a)** levels the playing field regarding conditions for belief (that doesn't accept the secular standards for belief in God but challenges their validity), that **(b)** critiques as incoherent the culture's cultural narratives yet subversively fulfills them too, that gives winsome, credible answers to common objections to faith, that **(c)** presents the gospel in ways that are coherent and attractive to secular people because it is compellingly connected to their deepest aspirations and most irresolvable problems. In short this evangelism must be able to present the gospel in a compelling way to people who do not believe in God, an

afterlife, or moral absolutes (beliefs that the church in the West for the last 1,000 years has been able to assume in almost all its non-Christian hearers).

2. Post-Christendom apologetics. I propose Christians use Blaise Pascal's *pensée* 187 as an outline for how they combine apologetics with evangelism. Show skeptical people that Christianity is first *respectable* (worthy of their attention), second *desirable* (making great offers that lead people to wish it were true), and third *believable* (with good reasons to believe it is true.)

3. Post-Christendom modes and methods. The principle is simple—lay people, not experts and speakers, not websites and publications and media (though all of these should be deployed)—lay people speaking to their neighbors and colleagues and friends must be the main bearers of the gospel to the world. This is how it was in the early church and this is how it must be now.

4. Post-Christendom forms, modes, venues.

a. Publishing – new literature of outreach: (a) farm more 1st person narratives of faith, (b) presentations of faith and gospel interacting with cultural narratives.

b. Massive, great support/training lay Christians to engage non-believing neighbors, friends, and colleagues. Basically on-line ways to mobilize 10% of the members of each congregation.

c. Direct digital outreach—but with the goal of drawing inquirers into face to face community.

d. The ‘L’Abri’ inspired Christian Study Center movement, largely confined to college towns, needs to be expanded greatly. Consider “The Sociology of Missional Communities”

Strategic notes: While the kind of content we are speaking about is largely absent, there are quite a number of

¹³⁵ See two works on the complex but effective social movement behind the acceptance cultural acceptance of homosexuality and same sex marriage. M.Kirk and H.Madsen, *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the 90s*, Plume, 1990; Darel Paul, *From Tolerance to Equality: How Elites Brought America to Same Sex Marriage*, Baylor, 2019.

churches and ministries where the modes and venues are well established and effective. They need to be identified and lifted up as models. We are 'third spaces' which are 'interstitial'—neither sacred church space or secular space, where evangelism happens through face-to-face process, where non-believers are 'ratified participants', where 'subversive fulfillment' happens through talks, artistic presentations, dialogues.

A Justice Network

We must create a network—at least one trans-denominational ministry or maybe a network of networks—that organizes Christians and churches in communities to both help various needy populations and also to work for a more just and fair social order at the local level. Only relatively large congregations can mount effective ministries to address social problems. A network will provide any church and every church in a locale multiple ways to be involved in visible-to-the-world ways and means for tackling the most acute and chronic injustices and social issues in a community or region.

Create a network that organizes Christians in cities and communities to both help needy populations and make just structural changes. Purpose: to make the church, nationally and locally, famous for doing justice and caring about the poor.

Issues:

1. Adopt a series of pre-strategic stances. Many of these will emerge from the Protestant Social Teaching initiative. But they may include: (a) Learning from and share power with Christian leaders of color, (b) Coming to consensus on some of the forms of systemic racism/injustice now functioning. (c) Privileging the local over the national and the family, church, and neighborhood association over the large organization (i.e. "subsidiarity").

2. Practical initiatives: (a) Promote and grow more multi-ethnic churches, (b) Form networks or institutions that (1) help churches locally assess the most strategic opportunities for justice and mercy (2) provide seed financial help for such initiatives (3) provide training and coaching for leading such local initiatives (c) Consider some large, national initiative targeting a clear and present injustice.

3. Strategic notes: (a) The 'political theology' we must forge should be neither an anti-democratic right wing nationalism nor the older, failed, value-neutral liberalism, nor the Marxist secular progressivism. (b) Emphasizing justice in this way will be a 'line-drawing' exercise as it was in the older fundamentalist-evangelicalism division post World War II. Many believe almost any emphasis on social justice is 'Marxist' and so the justice network will be one of the boundary factors that distinguishes the new, renewed church from the reactionary conservatism dominating much of evangelicalism.

A Faith-work network

We must create a network (or, again, a network of new and existing ministries) that organizes and equips Christians for 'faithful presence' in their vocations, [19] to help them serve the common good through integrating their faith with their work. The network will help churches disciple people for their public life so Christians neither seal their faith off from their work, nor infiltrate vocational fields for domination.

Create a network that organizes and equips both professional Christians as well as those with less agency in their work to conduct themselves in distinctively Christian ways in their labor, to see their work as divine calling, and to serve others through their callings.

Issues:

1. Content: (a) Proliferation of content that theologically and culturally frames—though in accessible fashion—the rationale for and process of integrating one's Christian faith with one's vocation and work. **(b)** Proliferation *within* professions and work-fields of content that gives thoughtful Christian guidance for believers working there. **(c)** A movement or organization that equips moderate size local churches to disciple all its people in 'faith/work' integration. It should not be necessary for a church to have multiple staff members to disciple people in this way. **(d)** The develop blue-collar faith-work instruction, an undeveloped area of formation. Many Christians are working-poor, people with little sense of agency in their work. Much of the current 'faith-work' movement heavily concentrates on white-collar professionals only. Many working-class or working-poor (Note: these terms leave much to be desired) feel

alienated by the current faith-work organizations. This must change.

2. Vocational networks/guilds The coming together of believers locally and nationally within professions and work vocations for mutual support, mentoring, instructing and public witness. At least these networks—Law/politics; Arts; Academics; Media; Business; Government; Medicine—but there are others and each of these needs to be broken down.

3. Two arenas: We want to multiply believers both in the existing cultural economy (dominant cultural institutions) and also in an alternate cultural economy. In the secular world, especially in the academy, the media, and the arts, but also now in much of the corporate world, Christians are unwelcome or under pressure to conform to cultural narratives. Therefore an alternate ‘economy’ of art galleries, academies, think tanks, small businesses, media companies, etc. etc. should flourish under the leadership of Christians.

4. Ideas: (a) Genius grants each year for believers (*a la* MacArthur Foundation and LGBT networks), **(b)** “Praxis” on steroids—major new funding and expansion, **(c)** Theological education for non-ministers—either re-tool current seminaries or form ‘seminaries’ for professionals that delivers high level intensive and contextual biblical and theological education to them.

The “Christian mind” project¹³⁶

Evangelicalism has a strong anti-intellectual cast to it that must be overcome without losing its appeal to the majority of the population. The goals include increasing the number of Christians on academic faculties, forging a robust intellectual culture for orthodox Protestantism, and increasing the number of Christian public intellectuals. This will not only entail promoting believers into the existing intellectual and cultural economy of basically (a) largely progressive universities and (b) largely conservative think tanks. It will also mean creating some kind of alternate cultural economy for scholarship and intellectual work.¹³⁷

Ignite an expansion of Christian scholarship by forging a robust intellectual culture for orthodox Protestantism/evangelicalism. Goals: to at least triple the number of Christians on the faculties in the academy but also to create a network of Christian study centers and other institutional centers that support Christian scholars and publication.

Issues:

1. A new ‘younger scholars program’. Re-create something like the former and fruitful Pew Younger Christian Scholars program that produced mentoring and grants to help young Christian scholars write their first big book etc. in order to get on to the academic ladder.

2. Greatly enhanced ministries to professional graduate schools. What will it take for Christian movements analogous to the “Federalist Society” among lawyers and jurists to be established among Christians in law, business, arts, tech, sciences

3. Ultimate goals: (a) to have Christian academics be ‘salt and light’ in the academy, keeping it from becoming ideologically closed and irrelevant to the country, **(b)** to produce Christian public intellectuals who can provide a Christian ‘high theory’ critiquing secular culture like Augustine critiqued pagan culture.

4. Ideas: (a) A largely Christian academic think tank or two – that could produce a Christian high theory like the Frankfurt School did with Marxism (or not explicitly Christian—like Hunter’s Institute for Advanced Studies of Culture) **(b)** 50 endowed chairs gifted to the top 25 universities, promoting key academics.

A new leadership pipeline

We must not only renew, re-create, expand, and greatly strengthen youth ministry and campus ministries across the country, but we must link these (more tightly than in the past) with local churches and denominations, ministry/theological training centers, colleges, and seminaries—forming coherent yet highly diverse and flexible pathways

¹³⁶ I’m naming this initiative in honor of Mark Noll’s seminal work, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Eerdmans, 1994.

¹³⁷ See *The Great Opportunity*, chap 6, “Building Long Term Witness,” pp.105ff.

for leadership development (e.g. conversion, then student leadership, then internships, then staff positions and other leadership positions). The purpose is to produce increasing numbers of well-equipped Christian leaders.

Create, expand, and coordinate a new informal system of youth ministry, campus ministry and theological training academies, programs, colleges, seminaries. Purpose: To identify, attract, and form increasing numbers of Christian leaders.

Issues:

1. Re-invigorate both youth and campus ministries. Do a deep dive into how campus ministries are doing now. Do they need more staff than in the past? (Preliminary answer—yes, a lot since it takes much more personal time and face-to-face relationship to both evangelize and to disciple than it did a generation ago). Does it need new tools? Do we need a new business model—the current model privileges white staff.

2. Re-invent ministry training/seminary education. Nearly everyone says that the business model of seminaries is broken, the pipeline of students has dried up, but why? Demographics? Not much to do about that. But has the residential, stand-alone academic institution lost its feasibility? On the other hand, does completely on-line education actually form people for ministry? Probably, usually not. Is current theological education tied enough to understanding culture? Probably, usually not. **Wilder ideas:** Should we start new seminaries? Or fund the re-tooling and major renovation of some older ones?

3. A sub-initiative within this initiative. How can we ensure that the next generation of the most publicly visible church leaders are a highly multi-ethnic group—at least as multi-ethnic as our country is? How do those with platforms and power mentor and open doors for younger leaders, especially non-white ones? How do we insure that they get the best educations and credentials possible?

Christian philanthropy

Behind all these seven projects is an eighth 'meta' project.

Call it “Christian philanthropy.”

We cannot renew the church or be of any help to society without strong financial undergirding. That will require a change in how Christians give and steward their wealth such that it will release far more money for ministry than has been available.

Issues:

1. Theory. James Hunter says that most major cultural changes happen through (usually informal but dense) friendship networks of overlapping capital. That includes of course financial capital. It means organizations and individuals with the ability to make significant financial gifts and grants. But it also means that those with financial capital forge close ties with those that have academic, social, cultural, religious, and other kinds of 'capital'. These different capital-owners need each other. They all have limits in what they can 'see' but together they see wisely and well. Hunter adds that these overlapping networks can be several or one, and they seldom include people what the very heart of elite sectors (e.g. the editor of the *NY Times*) yet are most effective when they include those on the outer rings of the elite sectors, the place of influence. They have some access to the dominant cultural economy and yet they are more open to change than people at the center of the economy.

Two examples: (1) the people Nietzsche's sister brought around him as he was dying and who promoted his virtually ignored philosophy into one of the century's major intellectual influences

(2) those who created the post- WWII evangelical movement- Billy Graham, J. Howard Pew, Carl F.H. Henry, Harold John Ockenga. The WWII evangelical example is powerful because they had clearly defined goals and worked to achieve them. That purposeful gathering does not exist today.

2. Practice. What is healthy philanthropy? In the non-Christian world it seems that often the rich separate themselves from the kind of 'iron-sharpen-iron' relationships and interactions that can help them

see more clearly. But the rich are rightly wary of being humored and manipulated and used only for their wealth. Creating a genuine community (or creating several) of such overlapping capital will be crucial.

Some of the projects will need to be done in fairly close tandem (such as the Christian Mind and the Leadership Pipeline, or like the Evangelism project and Church Planting.) Nevertheless, ultimately all the projects stand or fall together—they mutually support and energize one another. There will be no full achieving of one without achieving them all.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 126

- ¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.
- ² Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.”
- ³ The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.
- ⁴ Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.
- ⁵ Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.
- ⁶ Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Psalm 127

- ¹ Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.
- ² In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat— for he grants sleep to those he loves.
- ³ Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him.
- ⁴ Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one’s youth.
- ⁵ Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court.

Psalm 127 speaks to would-be founders of movements. It tells us that unless the Lord “builds the house” the builders

labor in vain. The psalmist may be speaking of a literal building but the word ‘house’ can also mean a family estate or a dynasty. Certainly, David put in enormous effort to build up the ‘house’ and nation of Israel, but ultimately it is only by the divine wisdom, given by God, that such efforts are successful. “By *me* kings reign” (Proverbs 8:15). The heart desires of the king are in God’s hand (Proverbs 21:1). No wonder the psalmist says to the builders—“In vain you rise early and stay up late” to accomplish all this. If you know that (a) God calls you to work with him as co-laborer (e.g. Phil 2:12-13) (b) but that ultimately the success or failure of the project is in his hand, and his plan is always wise and good (Rom 8:28), then you can sleep: “he grants sleep to those he loves [and who know he loves them].”

Psalm 126 speaks to the subject of revival. “Restore our fortunes, like streams in the Negev”—is a prayer for a major, sudden, intense period of spiritual awakening. He Negev was a desert and its watercourses dry until there were storms in the mountains and then water rushed down into the river beds and flooded the plain in dramatic fashion. Church history tells us of such remarkable revivals that God has sent to the church in many parts of the world over the past centuries.

But while the revival itself may be sudden, the work of prayer—that lays the foundation for revivals—is not. The psalmist is praying- “Restore our fortunes” but he likens prayer to sowing seed, a slow process that never shows immediate fruit. Praying for revival, however, is not to sow literal seed but to sow our tears—tears of repentance, tears of longing, longing for God, for his glory, for his beauty to show itself in the lives of his people. It is such prayers-from-the-heart that function as ‘seeds’ that, the psalmist says, will bear fruit. They will bring joyful renewal.

I leave you with this passage from D.M. Lloyd-Jones’ talks on spiritual renewal and revival:

“I commend to you the reading of biographies of those who have been used by God in the church throughout the centuries, especially in revival. And you will find this same holy boldness, this arguing, this reasoning, this putting the case

to God, pleading his own promises. Oh, that is the whole secret of prayer, I sometimes think. Thomas Goodwin uses a wonderful term. He says, "Sue him for it, sue him for it." Do not leave him alone. Pester him, as it were, with his own promise. Quote the Scripture to him. And, you know, God delights to hear us doing it, as father likes to see this element in his own child who has obviously been listening to what his father has been saying."¹³⁸

¹³⁸ D.M. Lloyd Jones, *Revival*, Crossway, 1987, 209.