

*The*  
MARKET-  
DRIVEN  
CHURCH

The Worldly Influence of Modern Culture  
on the Church in America

UDO W. MIDDELMANN

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*The Market-Driven Church*

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# ATTRACTION AND REPULSION

No other country in the Western world is so openly religious as America. The country has a history of immigrants who sought the free exercise of religion as much as freedom from religious and ideological persecution elsewhere. Even those who looked primarily for more liberal and economic opportunities often left behind a cultural context of tight rules and traditional patterns, which were founded on particular religious worldviews. America's institutions and history, her mission before the world, and her enthusiasm to engage and confront evil around the globe play out before a background of profound specific religious convictions about human life, the rights of individuals, and the rule of law. These were brought into the human consciousness largely through the teaching of the Bible as the fitting explanation of man's origin and destiny.

The Bible's account was and is not limited to personal situations and private faith. The multitude of religious bodies, the differences between denominations, the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of, not from, religion has so far not diminished the memory of a biblical view of all aspects of life in American history and much of the present public life. There is one church for every 850 to 900 citizens in the country,<sup>1</sup> roughly the same ratio as medical doctors to people in Switzerland. Churches reach the mind and calm the soul in the

same ratio as doctors deal with physical problems. We are all well provided for.

References to concepts and realities that only the Bible talks about and has introduced to human life are found in conversations, in speeches, in the lives of citizens. Personal rights, the rule of law to serve justice, a purpose to be expressed through changing individual efforts, and a reality of new beginnings are rooted in a biblical view of man in history. Not counting the use of God's name, etc. in profanity, the whole country expresses some type of religious faith, from "God bless America" to huge crowded parking lots around churches on Sundays. A smaller number still come together several times on other days of the week. Uncounted gatherings continue this religious interest and occupation before the public's eye in the informal settings of private homes for Bible studies, prayer groups, and discussion.

A steady stream of people has come from all over the world in pursuit of freer possibilities than those available in their own countries, including the practice of their Christian or non-Christian or Jewish religious views. These views and experiences are freely entered into public discourse and election campaigns. Present holders of public office and hopeful candidates for future government positions often include their religious convictions in their resumé. They contribute to the market of ideas even outside the church. They are nurtured by a whole industry of Christian book and music publishers, camps and retreats, seminars, conferences, and private parochial schools. What is believed is brought to bear on public life even without an official religious orientation. This affects industry, government, and education. What people believe about the basic building blocks of life has consequences in choices, attitudes, and debates for better and for worse.

Europe has shown her marvelous cathedrals and architectural details in church buildings through the centuries since Christianity spread across the continent. Education touches on Christianity as part of public school curricula, though what is more specifically "Christian" has more often recently been replaced by "religious" his-

tories to include Islam, Buddhism, and other tribal religions. Christian teaching has changed the way people look at life, work, and social realities. Athens and Rome laid many foundations, but Jerusalem gave rise to a practical life of work and art, of lawful rule and the rights of individuals. The teaching of Judaism and Christianity introduced the concept of a purposeful linear history, of moral judgment, and of a hope in life that dismantled the dominant, fatalistic outlook of Greece, Rome, and Germanic paganism. Under Christian teaching the emphasis became life instead of death, law instead of power, and intelligence instead of intellectualism.

At the same time *beginnings*, *invention*, and *discovery* became central perspectives that replaced habit, repetition, and fate. The church gave encouragement, space, and funds to develop an economic, social, and artistic view of this priority of man. It furthered markets and skills, education and a social conscience. Around the teaching of Christianity was continued the emphasis of Jewish thought about the central value of life and resistance against death. The “in the beginning” words of Genesis and of St. John’s Gospel gave birth to a purposeful and linear view of history toward judgment and redemption. Churches and monasteries influenced the land and its people with a unique focus on life. This was pursued through the copying and editing of old manuscripts for the preservation of knowledge. Health concerns for the public drove the search for hygiene through medicinal potions for the stomach such as Cointreau, Chartreuse, and Benedictine. We now know these only as liqueurs.

Europe also had a strong Christian base that was founded on the teaching of the Bible and applied through the choices of persons in the midst of the ups and downs of history. There was never a smooth progress or a distinguishable line of advance of Christianity over paganism. Yet the power of ideas worked a change of heart and mind first. Then hands that held the plow, the chisel, and the sword brought food to the poor and pointed out the biblical view of things in the arts and trades. The mind and the hands laid the foundation for a culture that became specifically different from others. At its core was a differ-

ent view of man, life and death, the mind and rationality, law and rule, and history.

Witnesses of Christianity surround the traveler in Europe in every public space. The churches, the old roads, the enclosed towns and older hospitals, even the museums are brought forth from a Christian view of life. But so are rules of politeness, self-discipline, pride in workmanship, and a healthy bit of humility, apart from occasional and tragic temptations to impose a “perfect solution” for society. Even when personal convictions of Christianity diminish or fail as a result of liberal theology and moral uncertainties, the European will still have the silent, powerful witness of history, which serves, with its Christian content, both as a restraint and an encouraging reminder.

The new world depends for restraints and reminders much more on the personal belief and acts of the religious person, whether Christian or believing Jew. Vibrancy and freshness, personal engagement and activities create a fabric of life. But there is a danger that without outside and historic restraints such religious interest is only personal, and therefore private, subject much more to the changing directions of the winds of culture than to a sense of continuity of truth from the beginning. Church and theology, personal faith and its expressions, ministries and their purposes are much more likely to be affected, even diluted, by what a society embraces as current values and imagined futures. When the whole society looks ahead for what it wishes to achieve, it tends to forget the limitations of reality and to pursue imagination, wishful thinking, and utopia.

The Bible starts at the beginning. There the stage is set for us as actors. Our characters are established in the stage notes of the book of Genesis. Man is both glorious and the crown of creation, but he is now also the child of Adam and Eve, broken and in need of moral and physical transformation. We are not free to start with ourselves and then assume that our best ideals should be embraced or can be realized. The Bible talks about the need for good ideas about life but never presents the possibility of achieving the ideal through human action. Failure to recognize this has brought about the tragic and inhuman

idealisms pursued by “new people in a new world” and also by Marxist-Leninism, Fascism, and the idea that the will of the people leads to moral government.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) came to America and looked around for a brief nine months. He shared his views and findings in his book *Democracy in America* (two volumes). What he observed, analyzed, and wrote about was intended for a European public very much caught up in the aftershocks of the French Revolution and the monarchist reaction in the first half of the nineteenth century. The fear over popular sovereignty was enormous on the old continent. A Holy Alliance had formed about the time of the Congress of Vienna among the European monarchies of Prussia, Austria, and Russia to prevent the anticipated disorder of people participating in government. Pressure to grant greater freedoms and more autonomy to the people was building up. It was the period of debates and battles that eventually led to the independence of Belgium, Poland, Greece, and smaller regions in almost each of the European nations.

De Tocqueville is far better known in America, where he is studied and quoted far more often. He is frequently recognized as a remarkably insightful observer. He intertwined admiration for republican freedoms with warnings about the excesses of popular autonomy. He wrote at a time during which the ideas of Jacksonian democracy blossomed. Truth about and responsibility in all of life was now accessible to the common man, who can use his goodwill, reason, and an inner light or voice to give shape to land and society. Truth as concern merely for an educated elite, monarchs, nobility, or church was a thing of the past.

Europe at the time went through major struggles for stability and orientation. The French Revolution of 1789 had changed the physical but even more so the philosophical and cultural landscape of the old continent. Napoleon's wars and imperial aspirations had ended with his defeat at Waterloo and subsequent exile. The Holy Alliance resisted any republican influence that might seep out from France. Decembrists, who wanted more participation and greater freedoms in

Russia, were sentenced to death or exiled to Siberia. In Western Europe the pressure against the old orders resulted in the revolutions of 1830 and 1848.

De Tocqueville is so interesting because he relates not so much any number of anecdotes from a travel log or a cultural study, but rather describes a new world, a new experiment, a world created by men and women who had left the old. The pursuit of change and something new in Europe after 1830 not only gave rise to streams of political and economic emigrants who followed earlier persecuted pilgrims in large numbers to the new world—it also expressed a malaise about the old continent, where the building blocks of life would soon fall into ruin, where old authorities were questioned and traditional structures were weakened by political, cultural, and scientific shocks.

The old continent was then, with some hope, casting one eye to America and another to Russia. Both were largely empty spaces, full of promise and also of risk for people. De Tocqueville went to write about the first, the Marquis de Custine about the second only a few years later (*The Empire of the Czar*, 1839). De Custine leaves us with an excellent description of his areas of interest and his analysis of a historic situation in the West. From it we get a taste of what made it so interesting and necessary to leave for a while the older Europe and to look for alternatives elsewhere. He writes:

All other nations seem to have reached their natural limits, and they have only to maintain their power; but these [Russia and America] are still in the act of growing. . . . The American struggles against the obstacles that nature imposes on him; the adversaries of the Russian are men. The former combats the wilderness and savage life, the latter, civilization with all its arms. The conquests of the American are therefore gained by the plowshare, those of the Russians by the sword. The Anglo-American relies on personal interest to accomplish his ends and gives free scope to the unguided strength and common sense of the people; the Russian centers all authority of society on a single arm. The principal instrument of the former is freedom; of the latter, servitude. Their starting point is different

and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destiny of half a globe.<sup>2</sup>

America was then seen as the expression of the growth of equality and individuality against the background of European resistance against popular participation in government. Russia, by contrast, was looked on as the reminder of the advantage of monarchy and autocracy against the “silliness” of the common people. Yet the detailed experiences in Russia turned de Custine into an ardent advocate of limited government. Both books reveal to us the underlying currents of the two nations’ lives into the future of our own time. They share the insight of outsiders and observe what even to us today seems still very familiar.

Their descriptions are in some ways similar, but with radically opposite findings. De Tocqueville saw in America the working out of a way to irresistibly undo the power of the blood-related leadership by the aristocracy in favor of a more skill-based democracy. He was pleased with the development and effects in practice of the principle of equality, to which all men contribute by their life and work. Yet he also saw that while a republic as a form of government has nobility in its own right, it depends very much on the nobility of the participants to be sustained and to be continued.

He warned on one hand against those who would obstruct in history the move toward greater freedoms. On the other he also saw impending dangers, for such freedoms could create a new tyrant—a possibly uneducated and irresponsible public as a result of an irrational and freely chosen selfishness, which finds expression in a general disinterest in a larger world and in lasting truth of old and in a failure to take on responsibilities of free men and women toward the common good. De Tocqueville spoke of the dangers of listening to self-applause. Here was a door for the weakness and insecurity of the individual, when a majority weighs in with a different position that advances only personal futures. He also saw the danger of overconfidence, when no judge exists apart from us to be a damper on pride,

arrogance, and what we now call self-esteem. De Tocqueville writes, “The nations of our time cannot prevent the condition of men from becoming equal, but it depends upon themselves whether the principle of equality is to lead them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or wretchedness.”<sup>3</sup>

He thus throws a ball back into the court of each single player. Just because we play with freedom and enjoy it does not mean we are free to neglect the “congenital menace of democracy” and forget our own responsibility for truth, reason, and morality by stupidly submitting to the common or the uncommon. De Tocqueville saw, even back then, a danger in the marriage of too much power with too little wisdom. A nation of producers, traders, and consumers runs the risk of measuring most things by their motion, possibilities of the market, and the speed of the transaction and expected future results. What sells must be good. People should be given what they like. Technique and therapy become more important than truth and wholesome teaching. Easy distractions replace earnest discernment. Personal responsibility is transformed by private reveling. Equal opportunity for all opens the door for the use of opportunities to choose between the unequals of good and evil.

For most Europeans, America remains an attractive mystery. Though much is known about the country, its history, its people, its form of government, its public image, its industrial might, and its religious roots, the reality is always more complex and less understood than they expect. America is attractive for its beauty, its freedoms, its imagined and real possibilities, and its youthfulness. To people from an older culture America is a constant reminder of their youth now long gone or never really experienced. Americans find it much easier to express the imagination, the lightness, the daring and childish hopefulness that have been lost in the rough and tumble of a longer history on other continents. Most people there have been exposed to and contained in centuries of a less privileged and more conformist or traditional life.

Visitors are almost always attracted by the kind of things they miss

in other places. Of course, that is a major reason for any travel. One wants to enlarge the horizon of one's world, add experiences, and gauge one's reactions by facing new situations. We go to Italy to experience the sun, wine, and olives, the love of life and children, the beauty of the music, and the art of the Renaissance. We visit Scandinavia to be enthralled by the forests and lakes, the Nordic light, the empty spaces and colorful houses. As the wind sweeps from the sea over the dikes, Holland is a statement of resistance against nature's harsh and uncaring elements. Fatigued from life in our regimented, controlled, and rational modern lives, some might even go to more exotic places and there find a thrill in the native, the primitive, and the other-cultured.

One does not come to the United States on the way to somewhere else. By contrast one might go through Holland on the way to Britain or through Germany on the way to Sweden. One travels to New York or California because one wants to be there and not somewhere else. There is ample literature about the country. It is always in the news. The size of the land, its varied natural beauty, and its economy make it a place to see for itself. One has met interesting Americans abroad. One is attracted by the culture—movies from Hollywood, musicals in New York, architecture in the cities and the museums, which bought whole collections and with them brought samples of the world's various cultures to an audience that otherwise would have little living contact with the world that produced such art in the first place. America is in some way more a culture-displaying country than a culture-producing one. Daniel Boorstin has pointed out the use of such a public space and parade ground as the Washington Mall for a full assortment of museums exhibiting the world's nature and the world's culture. New York has its "Museum Mile" on Fifth Avenue along Central Park.

There are reasons besides mere tourism that make America attractive to the foreigner. Her universities are known for their research programs and institutes. The fibers and threads of public and private interests and funding contribute to all areas of life. The spirit of

inquiry, the freedom to explore many avenues in search of issues and solutions, the self-generating interests, and the private support of such efforts are singular in the modern world. We all admire all this deeply. Any health-conscious potentate from some distant country will, without the slightest hesitation, fly to Minnesota's Mayo Clinic to get attention and find a cure. Once returned home he will probably continue to express his resentment over America and not promote better know-how or a greater openness in the market of ideas, in order to protect his own unpopular power and rule.

And there is the landscape of that new continent, largely empty still, really still a new world. Powerful rivers, destructive natural forces like hurricanes, icy rain and poison ivy, empty forests and exotic rock formations—nature in all her glory, with all her puzzles and with all her cruel power breaks into the best organized human settlement. And man turns around and seeks to control her. The marks of people exercising dominion are everywhere, laughing at nature's face and selling safe access with endless explanations, warnings, and fines for violators of safety rules to anyone on foot or in a wheelchair.

Just as remarkable and surprising, but also often bewildering, is the role of religion in the American human landscape. Scientists who speak about their faith openly, Christian literature about a host of subjects, dollar bills that announce "In God we Trust," at least since Eisenhower's presidency, and National Prayer Breakfasts are all part of a unique and different world. Not one but a dozen churches dot the typical Midwestern town and are found in both the poor and wealthy sections of large cities. Religious broadcasts of every shade of persuasion surface between the country music stations and networks that warn repeatedly against dangers lurking from the religious right. Advertisements for tires, Bibles, a better mustard, and spiritual health at a retreat compete for attention. Driving across the country one is told sometimes to "go to the church of your choice"; or more selectively, "go to church or go to hell." One night people are invited to play bingo in the same church that urges repentance by gamblers the following weekend.

Visitors are, however, not only *attracted* by such delight, such variety, such novelty and playfulness. At times a measure of *repulsion* is also felt and expressed. There is much to grieve over and to reject. The go-getter, booster mentality from the nineteenth century has marked the landscape and left many ruins of past and failed efforts. Rust and ruins line the roads on which people have moved west. Cities went through a long time of being deserted by those whose enterprise gave them shape, character, and an economic base. For too long they were abandoned and rendered almost inhabitable. The enormous freedoms from the beginning have also washed up junk, waste, and selfish greed. The mentality of a flight from the past, of being on the move constantly, of always seeking greener pastures elsewhere and never really settling down creates a focus on the self, the individual, and on change as a habit. The number of Christians who change their church affiliation in search of better fellowship, kinder discipline, or more entertaining programs is larger than those who remain where their parents lie buried and where they grew up.

In consequence of the American historic experience of migration, of people preceding government, of individualistic responsibilities, private interests take preponderance over civic duties. There is considerably less interest in America in the public space, in the life of the community, in the social reality of people being neighbors.

Communities are separated more often into economically distinct neighborhoods, which each produce their own segregation by class. Enormous efforts and money are spent on embellishing the private sphere of the house, yard, or garden and the vehicles on the driveway. There are building fund drives for the church of your choice. School taxes go only to the community school of your children. There is much less interest in caring for the public space. Few seem to see the trash on the way to the train station or airport. Sterile fast-food feeding places cater to the rushed commuter. Private generosity is considered admirable and superior, but social responsibility is mostly seen as a form of dangerous socialism.

Many visitors are for these reasons torn between attraction and

repulsion, both of which are rooted in something more than just being more or less familiar with the new world. Lack of familiarity often does produce a careless response. But most people from outside develop a relationship marked by elements of both fascination and rejection before one even gets into the finer points of discussion or the memories of particular people. A genuine admiration is often matched to a certain regret that what is so attractive cannot easily be brought into one's own life elsewhere. At the same time a sense of historic pride, of local accomplishment, of the preference for other human values prevents a wholesale acceptance of the other's way of life. Room exists for a—for the most part—friendly critique of culture. We are in the same larger family, but we are sure glad to be only cousins, not brothers and sisters.

The feeling is mutual but fundamentally friendly. In any relationship of kin there is this admiration and hesitation between family members. Americans and Europeans remember our common inheritance and as adults now still like to visit each other's homes, but an ocean separates us. The members of the family have moved away from each other and lead their own lives. Burdens from the past confine our lives, and openings into the future invite us to stretch our ideas and experiences.

We Europeans are intrigued by Faulkner and others describing life in Mississippi or the Kentucky hills. We enjoyed Hemingway and Twain and have moved on to Updike and others. An almost cultic veneration of Harley-Davidsons there corresponds to what people in Europe think of BMWs. We Europeans fear yet also admire both the arrogance and the childlike innocence and daring enterprise of Americans, who in turn admire the awesome engineering and taste of the European and wonder why they seemingly lack drive in other areas.

Visitors to America are startled by multiple career changes in the life of so many people. Opportunities abound to start again, to pursue something else, and to develop a totally new interest, which sometimes includes a move across the country. The individual is at the cen-

ter of his life, with little sense of roots in land and relationships. We wonder about the seriousness in any career that can so easily be changed, relocated, and retired. Americans, again, understand France's self-confidence in persons and places mostly as rudeness, the British as both quaint, slow, and yet best of friends, since they speak the same language (or almost) and have forgotten about the wasted tea.

Adam Gopnik writes about this so well and with charm in his observations:

Most Americans draw their identities from the things they buy, while the French draw theirs from the job they do. What we think of as "French rudeness" and what they think of as "American arrogance" arise from this difference. For Americans an elevator operator is only a tourist's way of getting to the top of the Eiffel tower. For the French, a tourist is only the elevator operator's opportunity to practice his *métier* in a suitably impressive setting. . . . His work exhibits a professionalism preferably unfettered by customers, while Americans would like to be tourists unfettered by locals. Of course such a place, where laborers are hidden or dressed up as non-humans, where anything can be bought . . . (exists already and) is called Disney World.<sup>4</sup>

There is the puzzle of Italy existing so full of life in spite of confusion, where chaos and making a living are intertwined like the music and the words in an opera, where the church is held in esteem as serving a moral, social, and museum function, even while neighbors chat about worldly matters in the back during the mass.

And how could you be German? Sure, their workmanship has quality, but are all their people rough, tough, and gruff? There are castles on the Rhine, romantic hotels, and cathedrals in medieval towns; but the music of Bach and Beethoven are scarred, as from smallpox, by memorials to the Holocaust.

The Scandinavians are so clean, fresh, and natural, seemingly unblemished by the mess that has characterized central Europe so often in the past. (That picture assumes a certain ignorance of the bat-

ties between Nordic people through the centuries—for example, the Swedish wars against Russia, Norway, Spain, and Austria.) Yet do they not name among themselves both Søren Kierkegaard the Dane and Ingmar Bergman the Swede, people known for their many questions and contributions to make us wake up to the complications, if not darkness, of real life?

The frequent quibbles over ideas and practices between Americans and Europeans are part of a healthy way to discover differences and to think again. It gives rise to feelings of both admiration and bewilderment, of familiarity and critique, of both attraction and repulsion. We are more than tourists to each other. We take in more than anecdotes or picture shoots. We care so much because we are in many ways of the same historic stock. That is the reason these distinctions puzzle and sometimes even worry us. We wish to understand. They arise from memories of a common past, similar cultural patterns, and Christian perspectives. Our closeness easily turns the differences into a hidden criticism, an underlying source of doubt, an expression of envy and admiration.

As father in a family with five children, I am aware how much real people will differ from one another through the years. There is never really a time when one can fully understand a child or another person. My own children always remain somewhat outside me. They are often nice and rich surprises, though grief and burdens occasionally arise as well. Each of them is a real person in his or her own right. They are quite different from each other, though they grew up in the same home and place and school. They are now much different from what we thought we recognized in them further back at various stages of growing up.

That picture of a family describes well the affair between Europe and America. The American offspring looks back to the estranged parents, which they left behind when they fled, or were driven, across the waters. Religious differences, natural disasters, political dictates, and sheer adventuresomeness and new opportunities contributed to that real separation in the past. Europe's foreign aid contribution to

America in the form of educated emigrants taking their skills with them is matched by America's granting much foreign aid to reconstruct a destroyed ancestral home in Europe, which many had left a generation or two before.

Numerous books have been written about this separation and attraction on both sides of the Atlantic. Any generation looks at another with both amusement and bewilderment. In the case between Europe and America, the children have bailed out the parents and provided for them in their old age a couple of times. They came back and resolved the parents' conflicts in the last century's wars and taught them a few things about practical matters, from business to government, when old resentments and tribal habits had taken over and had prevented the parents from learning through the accomplishments of the children abroad.

It is in many ways characteristic of the European always to look backwards to Rome and Athens, to Charlemagne and Charles de Gaulle, to chivalry and the church. They are very much aware of the tenuousness of life in the recognition that the living barely survived until today, and many others before them and around them perished. They know what effort it takes to create a culture and to protect it from disintegration. They also remember how fragile civilization is at all times, for the seeds of disruption, chaos, and conflict also circulate through the human heart.

Such seeds have brought forth great problems in the fertile soil of history. We have seen how prone to disappointment any attempt is to solve all problems along the lines of nationalism, idealism, or other programs for final solutions. We Europeans tend to be less idealistic now and have become more hesitant to offer moral and global solutions, because idealism, dreams, and ideology in the recent past have brought about horrible catastrophes for human beings through Marxism and Fascism.

By contrast the American is young and forward-looking. He supposedly escaped the slavery of class and heritage in Europe and came across the waters to arrive in a land in which he could create a new

world for himself and his children. As the land was new and without inherited customs for him, his way of governing and of making a living—his way of life itself—would be more the result of personal choice extending into the future than of traditions from the past. The crossing of the water to get to the new creates the picture of cleansing from the old. Migrants also applied the events of the biblical exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea to the Promised Land to their own situation. New people would create a new world.

A glance at history confronts us with obvious failures; the new world would be born from dreams and ideals in pursuit of boundless opportunities. “The only thing to fear is fear itself” is part of the pursuit of the American dream. But while this meant in the early days the pursuit of what was understood to be a life, defined by Christianity, of educated, moral, compassionate, and reasonable people under law, it gradually changed to include the pursuit of selfishness, the creation of a dreamworld, the embrace of irrationality, and often groundless self-esteem.

Not only would people be able to fly, but opportunities would abound, and a person would be valued almost exclusively for what he could do, sell, and promise. Separated from both reason and law in an age of private religion, the right of the pursuit of happiness would become a constant supporter of an almost limitless optimism, of boundless pleasure and unreflected, even irrational personal rights. A life understood to be *under God* with inalienable rights as a person over against the powers that be was gradually replaced in the popular mind with a life *as god* with unlimited rights over against the God of the Bible and anyone else.

Discoveries about each other and self-examination are a constant stimulus for growth. We learn from the experiences and personalities of others. I am deeply marked by many exposures to the open generosity, the easy access to and genuine interest by many Americans. But my most startling and surprising experiences go back to my first exposure to Christianity in an American context. From prior study I knew about the vastness of the land, the natural wonders made widely

accessible and safe for tourists, the generous welcome extended often to total strangers, and the dynamic life of give and take, of buying and selling, of so many opportunities for anyone to be rewarded and to learn from disappointments.

But I was not prepared for the importance of religion to the average person. Everywhere Christianity in one form or another was visibly present in the lives of people. The life of the church was supported and sustained by private persons and their readiness to talk about their religious beliefs. The church invites the public to its services on miniature billboards. It participates in public life with competing schools up to the level of universities, complete with social services and media.

We Europeans have churches and other signs and symbols of Christianity as well. We recognize and affirm them. We know about the artworks found in them, their architectural purposes and their history. We benefit from them when we arrive for rites of passage—baptisms, weddings, and funerals. But most people make little room for other occasions in between. We know that the church has had a say and has strongly influenced what we know of as European thought and culture. Without an understanding of the basic teaching of Christianity, it is in fact impossible to understand the museums, the literature, the legal framework, the architecture, the social concerns and institutions, and even the attempts of empires in Europe's history.

But the familiarity with which Americans talk about their church, how often they go there, how readily they invite guests to attend with them, how much it is a part of their lives is unmatched in most European settings. It is startling to hear members readily speak of God in their life in friendly terms as a personal insight, personal experience, and social habit. They speak more personally about meaning, direction, and discipleship, but each for himself, quite democratically and as if considering various suppliers in an open market. Politicians even present their faith, or lack of it, as a further qualification in their appeal to the voters.

For the European the church presents the past extending into the

present, a powerful weight from history, a pride of earlier accomplishments and a source of public usefulness, orientation, and comfort. Its teaching is rarely now of specific informative value or direction, even though that teaching still casts a shadow over all of life. It is present in a deep sense of giving order, purpose, and meaning culturally to human existence from the past. For a long time it has shaped our view of things. It reminds us of a call to civility. We talk about calling, destiny, and a Christian view of the person that reaches into politics, economics, and social responsibilities in the form of a healthy humanism. Consequently we behave perhaps more Christianly in public manners, respect, and personal discipline, where restraint, politeness, and service are inherited attitudes, for it is more a community than an individual perspective.

Until recently the church, both a body of belief and a building, has served as an anchor to resist the tidal forces of both secular materialism and personalized religion. It spoke of an objective truth, a real and metaphysical vision of things in past history, against the notion that each person can create a god in his own image, start his own denomination, and rub in his personal faith experiences, much like snake oil sellers did in American history. The church spoke of truth, of conquest of hearts and minds. Her teaching laid the foundation for law, encouraged efforts to pacify the landscape in rough times, and established an order and ethic for human life through the thinking and workings of believers. Their worldview gave a particular shape to the world of man. As a result we now view the world in a rational and biblical perspective, even where a majority of people in their religion are still prone to be irrational, blindly enslaved, and brute in human relationships without an educated personal conscience.

There are then close links between the European Christian tradition and her daughters around the world. What is left at home has been battered by internal and external efforts to weaken her certainties and bleach her colors. Too often she has followed cultural trends rather than shaping each generation with the certainties of biblical truth. In many ways the church has contributed to her own demise

rather than taking in the fresh air of continuing intellectual and spiritual understanding of revelation.

The first poison ingested was the Kantian assertion that revelation was dead, since no meaningful statement could be made about a God who is totally other than anything man could know. A God defined as too high resulted in man falling very low. When there is no more God who can be known, whatever is in the image of God becomes also unknowable. The second poison was the attempt to see nature and man as divine, part of a progressive and natural movement in history. The pseudo-Trinity of the nineteenth century kidnapped that view and made wide use of it. Darwin's theory of evolutionary adaptation of the fit, Freud's description of sexual drives, and Marx's teaching of the class struggle in pursuit of greater justice each expressed ways to show that *Kampf* and conflict were part of the divine way to shape the future of mankind. When large parts of the church thus had undermined its moral basis to resist social, political, and moral evil, the church had not much left to resist the inhumanity of the twentieth century. It became the century in which God was either absent or had died. Intellectually and culturally people would turn elsewhere to search for meaning—in work, travel, other religions, and many causes in an effort to escape the meaninglessness of a world without God and the image of God.

The light of the Son had gone out in the church. The night sky has only the reflected light from the moon.

American churches express in far more personal terms a religious conviction that is always very important to the individual. For him God is not dead, since he talked to God this morning. European culture relates to Christian content in a more historical, social, cultural, and external manner, often without realizing the Christian roots of thought forms, behavior, and human values that are still affirmed. The American bursts with all kinds of religious convictions. The European travels through the remains of Christianity, studies it, but then looks to other forms and content for his personal direction and interests. And yet, like de Tocqueville almost two centuries ago, we are fasci-

nated and sometimes scared by both the expression of religion in the life of Americans and the lightness of its contribution. We deeply admire such faith and yet have little intellectual reason to understand, much less to learn from it. We are attracted to the pull of a meaningful life and repelled by its frequent and casual superficiality. The pursuit of human freedom and the conviction of moral absolutes are so attractive; yet they are expressed so often in hideous individualism and arrogant power.

That confusing picture forces us to look closer for greater clarity of what is Christian and what is merely a personal religion, a further expression of talking tall in a free market of ideas.

# NOTES

1. *Religious Congregations and Membership in the U.S.*, The Glenmary Research Center, 2000, gives one church, synagogue, or temple for every 1,049 Americans. Our figure is a rough estimate, since many ethnic and evangelical churches have been left out of the Center's calculations.
2. Marquis de Custine, *The Empire of the Czar, a Journey Through Eternal Russia*, foreword Daniel J. Boorstin, introduction George F. Kennan (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1989).
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1 (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 522.
4. Adam Gopnik, *Paris to the Moon* (New York: Random House, 2000), pp. 124-125.
5. See, among other places, the long discussion of how the "great obstacle [to discovery is] not ignorance, but the illusion of knowledge," in Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 86ff. Further on he points out how the lack of knowledge (in geography, for instance, an orphan in the world of learning for a thousand years) was made up by a rich resource of ancient fantasies (p. 109). Often Christians would embroider a sacred world through doctrines and ignore the real one. This is no recent phenomenon, for in past generations Christians would often relish theological speculations and practice scientific and scholarly amnesia. They would approve pagan myths and Greek speculations but be contemptuous of pagan science (pp. 109-110).
6. David Gress, *From Plato to NATO* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).
7. Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar (contributor), David K. Cohen (contributor), *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).
8. Kaye Ashe, *The Feminization of the Church* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 1998). See also Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 1999).
9. "The Emasculation of Sports," *New York Times Magazine*, April 2, 1995.
10. Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern, 1815-1830* (New York: Harper, 1999), p. 704ff.
11. David Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 52.
12. "Faith in the Flesh: An Essay on Secular Society's Preoccupation with Life [Somewhat] Eternal," *Lynn Magazine*, October 1985, p. 18.

## LEMONADE WITH TOO MUCH WATER

For an outsider surprise about the presence of the church in American public life starts at a curious place. The European is familiar with cathedrals and churches against the skylines of towns and villages. He is pleased to find buildings like the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. or St. Patrick's in New York. Even the unfinished cathedral of St. John the Divine on New York's West Side is admired and seen as an enormous undertaking that may take generations to accomplish. They see some continuity with European expectations and experiences.

In a similar way the beautifully columned white churches in the South are a colorful visual delight. They fit in well with the landscape, antebellum history, the deep verandas, the drooping trees, and the Spanish moss. And the heavier stone churches of New England Episcopalians continue Anglicanism from England across the ocean.

Visitors from regions of the world, where other religions are practiced, expect to notice churches in the same way we expect to find temples, shrines, and mosques in their countries. It seems normal to find so many churches in a country that has so publicly stated its Christian roots in the past. *God* as a word and *faith* as personal conviction are part of the American image on the screen of life.

Surprising to the visitor is the vast number of small churches all

over the countryside and on many streets in the cities. Whether the size of a hot dog stand or a large family home, whether in a form recognizable as a church or just a storefront, whether in a residential neighborhood or out of town and in appearance like a hangar or a shopping mall, churches abound everywhere in America. Some of the smaller ones have a one-reverend focus. He or she made history once as a sectarian offspring from something larger and became a kind of personal sheik for a splinter group. That church now offers little more than healing, blessings, and spirit in a separate but faithful community.

Perhaps the greatest surprise comes when travelers see what looks like a giant plant from the outside and then, having parked their car on the lot, are introduced to a church with programs for every age and interest with regard to current needs or marital state of the parishioners. The whole thing is a masterful organization. The billboard or monument along the side of the road announces the sermon title and activities much the same way a company logo in an industrial park indicates what goes on there. In an open society church signs serve to inform, to attract, and to compete. The church takes part in the competition on the market and advertises its expanding services. Where she once focused on right thinking and a moral life in all spheres of society from inside the church, she now competes for the time and dedication of the public with such offerings as schools and gyms, bingo halls and adult education programs. In the past she reached into the community. She has today become an alternative community among many others. Through literature and TV she reaches the shut-ins and the shy, giving experience without obligation, a show without requiring a ticket. Somewhat like a shopping channel, the church offers religion, community, and a better self-image.

The church has made herself available beyond the local parishioner with the ever-changing attractions and appeals to a people that is both historically and religiously on the move. An open, mobile society enjoys the freedom of the market. People need to be attracted to the various religious stalls on the fairground of life. The service indus-

try has cast its shadows also on the church and has become the model. One of the effects is a change in the content of the churches' offering and her participation in life.

When church was part of the normal things in the community, she maintained the immigrants' traditions from the past or embraced the Puritan welcome on the other side of the ocean upon arrival. The church and her teaching influenced for a long time the way people thought and lived. Her word brought together the transcendent knowledge of the Creator's mind and will with the immanent pressures, possibilities, and problems of daily life. The sermon sought to tame the wilderness of the human heart and mind, so that nature's wilderness would be challenged through personal morals and an awareness of the obligation to help others. With the study, exposition, and application of the Creator's word in the text of the Bible, a direction was given for life to take shape against the wiles of evil and the unpredictable ravages of an imperfect nature.

The biblical outlook freed each person from any fatalistic resignation to the status quo of his situation or nature. Living by every word from God, not by bread alone (cf. Deut 8:3-9), explained the need to grow grain, to make ovens, and to bake bread in the first place. Life as a conquest, an expression of moral and intellectual dominion, was the purpose of human beings. For then we follow the commands and purposes given by God to glorify him and enjoy him. The image of God in man liberated him from any temptation to merge with an impersonal nature and to lose himself in resignation. Particularly after the fall of Adam and Eve, the need to put hands to the plow, to seek justice and to help the weak, to further life and to resist death became urgent and finds creative responses to life's cruelty and fundamental absurdity.

This distinctly Jewish and Christian worldview encourages a mind-set of continuously recognizing problems and seeking solutions. There has always been a remarkable generosity among normal Americans toward the stranger, at home and abroad. Curious about other people, desiring to express a created abundance and a Christian

witness, Americans gave and gave again. They hosted strangers to hear from them the recent news and to share with them blessings of the land and their work on it. Such material readiness was the fruit of a biblical, moral instruction about all of life. The conquest of the land in its spacious wilderness gave practice to the skillful hand and generous heart to help the next generation get started, the neighbor to stay above water, and the immigrant to get out of it.

Christians worked according to their insights and convictions in all areas of life. They talked about their Christian view of things and shaped their lives more or less accordingly. The sermon was the central form of instruction and encouragement about all of life. A biblical view of things helped give shape to government, law, and civil society. Christians and Jews understand the Bible to explain the “Whence? What? Whither?” of life. This is a distinct view among religions for two central reasons. First, that view expresses the belief that we are meant to be human beings with minds and hands to be used to nourish body and soul as well as to have dominion over nature and to create the flow of history in a deliberate use of culture over nature. Second, it expresses the belief that the bigger picture of life can only be explained from a revelation in a text and language that addresses the mind and deals with real issues. Questions are not to be squashed, and answers need to be examined for their truthfulness. At the same time this heightens the place of man and calls for careful study in all areas of God’s creation in order to make good use of life and to protect it against error.

Church schools and universities were part of an obligation, and for some a delight, to teach the next generation about all of life—from meaning to morals, from skills to sanctification, from personal to public obligations. Christians worked in the professions, for which the teachings of the Bible had prepared an intellectual and moral landscape. They saw history as real, their own lives as significant, and the tasks before them as effective contributions in a flow that started with creation, suffered the Fall, and hoped in the work of Christ onward to the kingdom of God.

As recently as 150 years ago, however, a gradual shift in thinking was accepted. First, revelation was gradually denied on any but a very personal level. The Bible, it was said, no longer now told us about all of life but contained only moral prescriptions and general indications about human dependencies. Left with only indirect revelation, the God of the Bible could no longer be known as Creator. Instead, on a second wave, creation itself became seen as divine. God was assigned a place in the midst of nature's working. Knowledge of God was not gleaned anymore from careful study of Word (the Bible) and work (nature), but became related more to the degree of goodwill, self-confidence, and personal accomplishment in each person. Many Christians joined the Romantic Movement in the nineteenth century to be closer to God in nature—under the mountains and in rich autumn foliage. They left the knowledge of God's text and rational thinking and instead turned to feeling, spontaneity, and an inner light.

David Wells has shown succinctly and in considerable detail how there was a shift from studied understanding to the power of an inner conviction, a kind of Christian transcendentalism married to the advancing democratization of Christianity (see his books *No Place for Truth* and *God in the Wasteland*). Our own generation has turned the Christian faith into something consisting of incredible lightness. Man's position above and over against nature, sometimes counter to the flow of things and very much focused on being human, was abandoned for seeing God in nature, a trust in human nature, and a tolerant view of everything as part of a natural flow.

Over the years too much water has been mixed with the lemonade. What had been a relief and delight to any thirsty person on a hot summer day has now become a weak imitation. When good intentions replace good thinking and good work, a society may continue for a while, but the reasons for its existence and the realities created by its efforts and convictions will become weak. When people decide on what they believe on the basis of what they like, what they are comfortable with, and where they find support for what they always

wanted, they are no longer concerned very much about what is true, just, and good in the longer perspective.

The body of belief that strongly influenced a whole culture to think and act more biblically about man and nature has been weakened by the gradual neglect of important components. They have atrophied from a diminished conviction of what is true and what matters morally and in general from the widening separation of genuine faith from mere comprehension of life. Feelings are more readily embraced than reasoned and certain content. Convictions are more private, less tested in the real world for their truthfulness to that real world in the circle of all of life. Instead, faith and convictions come across in personal views, denominational particulars, and rules for a separated community.

The Christian profession of belief about God, man, and history came out of a study of reality, revelation, and relevance to the human experience. Today the Christian profession of faith takes on the form of the personal testimony. There is little encouragement in the churches to live thoughtfully as Christians in all aspects of life. Bowing morally and intellectually before the Creator is now a matter of personal preference and personal perspective. Instead of engaging the world of human activity, greater importance is placed on establishing parallel channels to replace secular institutions. Christian schools, sports teams, companies, and publishing houses create their own market for their community. They function almost like a separate country with citizenship in the church. They are like a package of yeast that has no contact with the flour and will never make the whole loaf rise. Questions of truth, quality, and integrity are no longer raised with any thought about a larger world. More weight is given to belonging and speaking to limited contexts. Christians, who work in the midst of a wider world, are left to stand alone, unless they can be there as missionaries.

Church has become increasingly a private affair and a personal choice and less a place of real community at a time of growing fragmentation. People flee into private spaces and new homes and leave

the city. Long driving distances diminish geographical, emotional, and intellectual proximities. Previously community existed among people who lived in the same place as family and neighbors. Community did not have to be created or even discussed. Now our life and thought have largely broken up that proximity. We form ideological communities based more on membership than on life together. Membership is an exclusive agreement. Part of the aspect of the human family is lost. Rather than starting from a community of people who live out a concern about what is true, good, just, and beautiful, we cut ourselves off from the wider human family. Christianity with its universal truth is not the same as a church with its tribal truth.

Fragmentation characterizes much of our lives. With fewer children and two incomes per family, each person already leads a more independent life in the smallest community—the family. Personal convenience and the need to be in control, understood as personal rights, make it hard to accept others into my personal sphere. They might be an unpredictable burden. Moving the older generation out of homes into convenient retirement settings contributes much to generational fragmentation and isolation. The distances we cover in order to experience our “right to privacy” make real and daily community much harder.

The automobile allows us to move from the neighborhoods around the church into the country. There new churches are always changing congregants. Church is becoming more a matter of the heart and imagination. You can carry that with you wherever you go. It requires no stable commitment to place or people regardless of inconvenience.

A new and more internal church of private choice, convenience, and personal conviction is less exposed to the details, to the various aspects of normal life. That church offers a sanitized view of our lives, for it removes all the inconveniences, struggles, and frustrations that are part of a more stable and local human context. There you had to test what you believed against the outside world and in the midst of realities that were often far from pleasant. We now expect the church

of our choice to support us in our flight from the world around us with a safe environment, a ready acceptance among equals, an entertaining program to hold our attention through joy and tears, laughter and light instruction. Here we are among new brothers and sisters. We hardly notice the artificiality of this church family. We can now *pretend* to be family without the burdens of quibbles, shared bathrooms, and competition for time and attention.

Churches nurture this fragmentation by providing a group and study for each age. This breaks up real families. Where church used to bring us together from different situations under the teaching and blessing of one God, church now meets the perceived needs of fragmented people. While attention to personal variations is an act of respect and kindness, the church's mandate is to bring us all to the Creator and his work for us in redemption. We may be focused on our own painful story; yet the Bible places it in the context of history (*his* story), so that we understand what is the problem of mankind, not just my personal and immediate sensation. Healing comes from God's work for us, not from feeling better about ourselves.

Too many ideas about community are expressed in various programs without a reality check. Actually being together in place and ideas, across the ages and in all aspects of life, serves community much more. Everything else is merely an illusion of community.

Fragmentation inevitably shrinks our field of vision. We alone are important to ourselves. Personal happiness, immediate fulfillment, personal concerns can and do trouble us. In adolescence we require everything to revolve around our needs. But church is not only composed of adolescents. Yet we hardly admit anyone to show us, from a wider angle, that our expectations about church and faith, life and love, may be very unrealistic, idealistic, and selfish. Exposure to the larger picture of life in a fallen world is avoided. From a narrower base of concerns and questions the wider, glorious answers of God's answers and work in history remain undiscovered and unappreciated. There is little awareness of any of the more universal problems and the historic burdens from life in a fallen world.

Consequently Christians show little confidence in the marvelous weight and wholeness of the biblical answers. We end up feeling either selfishly satisfied or constantly frustrated. Both are emotional states. The weight and wonder of God's work in history, of the truth of the Bible applicable to all areas of physical and intellectual life, is overlooked.

Such a change of focus from the real world to one's personal vision expresses itself in both left- and right-wing orientations in politics and society within the church. Both offer quick fixes, simplistic, one- or two-step solutions to all the problems we recognize. Some Christians think that the poor, the marginalized, and the variously inclined are God's favored people. They rarely see that life is more complex than that. Poverty, being on the sidelines of society, or pursuing your own favorite orientation in any area may also be the result of an unfounded opinion, personal vision, or ideological idolatry in the first place.

Much of the Christian Left pays little attention to the devastating consequences of erroneous worldviews, pagan religions, and political visions of the kingdom of God. They tend to quote Scripture to sanctify their dream of kingdom values without Christ. They call for justice but have in mind only a mathematical, numerical equilibrium. Their vision is a healed society through what turns out to be a paleo-Marxist view of equally distributed goods. Their slogan refers to "preferential treatment by God for the poor" and parallels an affirmative action program without any respect to culpability or merits in outlook. They tend to assume that pain is always the result of injustice from those who do not have the same pain. They forget that ideas and faith have consequences.

Ideas that are true to the real world have different consequences than ideas that exist only in relationship to an imagined world. The Left largely operates from a materialist and mathematical model applied to human beings and their life situation. They recognize victims but never self-inflicted wounds.

The Right within the church also has a simple vision of how to solve all problems. For those holding this view there is little recogni-

tion of genuine problems for life in a fallen world. They are like Job's friends and always see a personal cause for all life's situations. "You suffer; ergo you must be a bad person. Change your ways, and you will have no further problems!" They overlook the tragic side of life. There is no justice under the sun. Parents may have wicked children, and children may have stupid parents. The rain falls on the righteous and the wicked.

The proposals of the Right for a better world do not recognize a world that groans while waiting for the redemption. In the world of their imagination, justice is already here. We all get what we deserve. With Jesus in our heart, or simply left to ourselves without government intervention, all things would work well. They have identified the enemy. The state is as evil as the sinner next door. The elimination of either or both would solve all the remaining problems—poverty and naughty children and cancer. They propose a new and separate community of the righteous, where the wheat is separate from the tares without waiting for the angels' work at a later time.

The solution for both the Right and the Left is, in their view of things, always within reach. There is no real need to wait for the Messiah to come and clean up the mess. We only need the right political decisions. The enemies are those outside our community, foreign or unpatriotic. There is no admission of an internal and lasting problem, the reality of sin in thought and life in each person and its effect on the long road of history.

The personalization of Christianity weakens the emphasis on the need to bow before the reality of God, our sin, and Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Correcting one problem often results in another, much like the man who fell off the horse and tried to get back on with such zest that he fell off the other side. First, the revivals in the nineteenth century rightly taught the necessity of individual conversions. We become Christians individually. This was an urgently needed corrective after the teaching of more general ethics or the marriage of the church to nationalism. Christianity had widely become a matter of habit, custom, and repetition, not of personal choice to believe God. Choices are

personal because only persons make them. Neither nature nor history nor a machine has the consciousness to make them for us.

The emphasis on the personal also had some regrettable results. With it we fell off the horse on the other side. The personal focus in conversion elevated the individual, so that the person could and did become the center of his theology. Revivals coincided with the move from an acknowledged larger world to the world that the individual could oversee. The Bible, the gospel, and life experiences invite us to seek wisdom in our effort to understand the world, creation, and the existence of God. Revivals often had a single focus—the individual's soul.

Personal faith has insidiously become married to the idea of a personal worldview, a private perspective from personal knowledge and personal interests. The nineteenth century talked about the person in contrast to animal instincts, scientific law, and an absolutist monarchy. It was a century of rising personal awareness. Individuals discovered their rights and possibilities. We are persons, not things or pawns or puppets in the nobility's wars.

America as a new continent placed enormous responsibilities on all persons for themselves. The vastness of the land required personal moral choices. Settlers had to have the law on their own hearts before the law of government reached them. Before they were accountable to Washington, they had to be accountable to God individually. They were pioneers, self-made men and women. They crossed a continent in which only the handyman survived. They had to take dominion over all kinds of unexpected situations.

Their religion was also carried with them from the East. Most of them were not pagans to whom missionaries later came with something new. They knew the teaching of God and Christ, but in the absence of established communities they relied more often on their intuition and experiences than on considered biblical teaching. They often saw God's hand and mind in a wild, magnificent, largely unknown and threatening nature around them. The God of heaven no longer revealed himself in history and through language in the Bible.

He was heard more and more as the voice within, the harmony felt with nature and, necessarily, with one's neighbors.

Such a shift is also noticeable in the meaning of the word *personal*. It gradually took on a different meaning. Commonly it marks a distinction in human beings, who make choices and act in history. Persons act, and in that they differ from animals and nature, which react. But without the constant reminder of Scripture the "personal" became the "private." It is no small step from man made in the image of God to each man being divine in his own imagination. The studied sermon for instruction was replaced by the Spirit within. Exposition was replaced by personal impression. The antiauthoritarian mood of the new democratic America removed the authority of God from heaven and made God an inner inspiration. There he could be more easily controlled, defined, and amused.

The Lord of heaven now spoke through the light in a man's heart. Yet while *heart* in the Bible is the central core of a human being, the place of all intellect and personality, *heart* for the nineteenth century was an emotional concept in contrast to reason. This has the advantage that a private view of things need not stand in the market of ideas but can be carried as "personal" views, "personal" faith, and "personal" opinions. Theology, the study of words and sentences and the acts of God in history to gain wisdom in complex human situations, could then be replaced by what "works for me in my life" and other "personal" experiences.

This would inevitably lead to a more tolerant but less precise Christianity. The dogmas of theology taught in seminaries became denominational distinctives. Presbyterians believe this, Baptists the other, with a somewhat silent agreement not to merely pursue what is biblical. American pluralism gave rise to a multitude of denominations, often for good historical reasons and personal preferences. But plurality also undermined the very notion that there is a basic body of belief that distinguishes all Christianity from its detractors and opponents. Too much pluralism makes it virtually impossible to still believe there is truth anywhere.

At what point does pluralism still describe real variety, wisdom, and different emphases, and when does it point to agnosticism and an inability to know anything for sure?

When does pluralism contribute to a dynamic challenge to see more clearly, and when does it make excuses for my right to hold my own crazy views? When is lemon without water too sour to drink, and when does too much water mixed in cheat the client out of his money?

Our age has largely replaced real discussions of theological, philosophical, and cultural content with “personal” testimony, anecdotal experience, and private views. Parallels with other expressions of the same fluidity in our culture are striking. Is beauty only in the eyes of the observer? Should marriage be defined differently for each couple according to their sexual or religious preference?

In his prayer for the disciples before his departure, Jesus asked that God would sanctify them through the truth, for God’s word is true (John 17:17). But today the very concept of truth has been diluted. Jesus certainly had something more substantive in mind than what we have adopted in our pursuit of personal knowledge, personal approval, and private opinions.

External factors have also contributed to the decline in the holding of truth. Even agreement that we have the Word of God in the Bible does not prevent modern notions of what is true from doing great harm. One of these is the modern concept of democracy, which has affected our understanding of what is true. Once it was held that submitting all matters to the consent of the governed required an acceptance of a corresponding responsibility by the voters. They must be critical, informed, moral, and accountable. Where this is not the case, democracy will no longer bring an educated and moral consent. Law will follow a mathematical win/lose situation. Numbers can win a count, but not always an argument. Majorities do not by necessity have moral integrity. They only tell us the size, not the character, of the followers.

The majority/minority relation tells us something numerical only.

Without an outside definition of what is good, right, and beautiful, democracy will only indicate what is more or less accepted. In the end, what separates the minority from the acceptable is a matter of numbers, not greater wisdom, moral rectitude, etc.

Pragmatism and utilitarianism also have affected our understanding of what is true. What works in this situation, what I like, what causes least trouble or gives greatest joy to the individual and thereby gives immediate practical benefit decides over good and bad. But these are emotions and sensations without any larger grid to weigh them against. In a fallen world, all kinds of things work in the short run, give temporary pleasure, or satisfy personal greed. Bad consequences follow only after some time. There may be not only unintended but also unanticipated consequences that remain unknown until later. Pragmatism without wisdom is risky and often foolish.

Sin is the pursuit of an illusion. It follows a belief that something is real, possible, and good when in fact it is impossible, imaginary, and harmful. It may seem to bring a benefit or personal pleasure. Eve saw that “the tree was good for food, and . . . it was a delight to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6) when she believed the promise that Adam and she would be like God. In reality that was only an illusion. Adam and Eve could never be like God, since they had been made by the eternal God to begin with. Hitler, from a desire to correct what he and others considered the injustice of the Versailles Treaty, sought to create a less flawed human race. Adultery is often justified with faulty reasoning that attraction and love in multiple relationships are better than one. Don Juan argued it and became a convenient example for many. Yet in reality he destroyed both intimacy and then himself.

Finiteness, confusion in the face of too many options, and cynicism about any final knowledge demolish the notion that there is real truth. Who am I to know? How can I ever be sure? Everybody has his own view on these things and sees things from their perspective. Truth? What an impossible concept! A student asked me recently, “Do we always have to think?” Implied was the desire to be

free to act on impulse, to follow impressions of the moment, and to respond to mere feelings. That desire is made easy by, for example, insurance for no-fault situations. Such a view can cover many acts of sinful stupidity.

Francis Schaeffer made the helpful distinction between *true* truth and *exhaustive* truth. He suggested that we can't ever know things to the end, or exhaustively. Only God can know what is there in all details—what is and will be; what could be but is not; what should be but won't; also what could never be. Humans are limited. We do not know anything completely. We do not know how, when, or even where the seed fell on the ground for the tree from which the middle rung of my ladder was made by someone anonymous in whatever kind of a mood on whichever day of the week.

However, that does not mean that I do not really know much that is really true about many things. I do not know anything exhaustively, but I do know much in such a way that the opposite could not be true. For it was a real person, moody or not, who worked that day and built a ladder from wood he purchased from a mill instead of resting on a beach and thinking of Roman aqueducts. He did a good job, and I can climb on the ladder to pick my cherries.

The proposition that we can't really know anything every time we cannot know something exhaustively is convenient when we don't want to admit to things that need to be corrected, compared, and established with reasonable certainty. It is far easier to say that I see it such and such a way with deep "personal" conviction and claim God's direction for it. The fact is that God has spoken, explained himself, and now expects us to struggle for wisdom and understanding of what is true in the real world. We can't just claim to know already or not to know at all.

Anything less gives persons only greater intensity of conviction, not a degree of certainty to be pursued further. Personal opinion may be claimed to have divine sanction. But many atrocious views have been held in this way. Hitler saw God, then fate and destiny behind his ideas and accomplishments as well. Many speak about the will of

Allah. In church circles you find as many visionaries as outside the church. They claim to have the Spirit on their side; others claim to hear the voice of history or to feel the pain of the people.

Whichever way you cut it, the discussion almost always deteriorates to a mere personal view of things. We must of course admit to being persons who see, describe, and then state their conclusions in the open so they can be corrected, questioned, and believed. But “personal” has come to mean the private and untouchable. Personal views demand blind trust, not agreement. Such personal knowledge requires a faith up front rather than as the conclusion of finding sufficient evidence. That kind of faith is the opposite of biblical faith. When the Bible offers to quench our thirst, it has not watered down the lemonade to cheat us out of our money.

Personal knowledge *seems* to be more tolerant, less divisive. But in the long run you will always find it to be little more than a statement into the night without an audience to convince, inform, or encourage. Each person has his own belief, viewpoint, and podium to speak from. But the neighbor, the child, or the next generation that wishes to understand the insight and wisdom of the parents is left in the dark, lacking certainty and without any lasting definition.

Left alone with our “personal faith” to hear the voice of God inside us in personal experiences and interesting stories isolates us from others. We become incomprehensible and finally just as easily wise as foolish, just as likely vocal as ignorant, offering advice not based on truth but on a feeling of truth. This is often only an imitation of the real thing.

One further aspect must be pointed out. By reducing Christianity and one’s faith to what a person believes rather than to what he ought to believe in light of the real world, it is easier to turn God into an image-bearer of various people. The personal characteristics, moods, and preferences become decisive. Rather than being brought into relation with God, God is filtered into my life. The “sinner in the hands of an angry God” of Jonathan Edwards is easily turned into what might be called “God responding to an angry public.” Or, stated in

another context, the hymn line “What a friend we have in Jesus” because he intercedes for us before a just and holy God might become “Jesus is my support group leader, my therapist divine.”

The focus has shifted from God to man, from the Creator to the creature, from the eternal to the temporal, from judgment and instruction to approval. Many Christians have turned the God of creation into their personal god, the Lord into their friend, and the truth into their self-validation. The understanding of the church at war has been widely replaced by the notion of the church as fellowship. It joins so many other associations of mostly personal interests at a time of diminished family life and greater distances between family members in the midst of our hurried and harried lives.

Despite the surprising response among professional colleagues when I insisted that Christianity is the truth of the universe, the Bible is not merely a particular set of glasses to see another world reserved for Christians but is rather a corrective that allows us to understand the real world more fittingly. For not only do we need glasses to see—we also need to be sure that we understand which glasses bring the real world into focus. In other words, Christians have a worldview that is true to the real world in which all men and women have to live, whether they like it or not.

All people, independent of their religious or cultural views, live in the same world of cause and effect, of before and after time, of man being different from non-man, of language and rationality in the daily things of life. There are not many creations. There is only one. All people put their pants on one leg at a time all around the world. Poisonous mushrooms make you sick regardless of your ethnicity, color of skin, or religious persuasion. This is the one and same world we all live in. Here lemonade has a definition. Here we are concerned with truth in labeling. Here a yes should always be a yes.

When Christians teach facts about the real world, they do not present a Christian view of things as different from another working model. There are no “Christian” facts and other facts about the same

phenomenon. The acceptance and interpretation is often different, but not the facts under study.

We do not have one specific view of basic things in the world, with other views also possible. Postmodernism is not modern, but a justification for an assumed freedom for our minds to see things only because and when we see them. As an idea it justifies our confusion, when we have failed to see reality as “there” and coherent. Any incoherence is of our making. We choose to see it that way from the position of our own fragmentation. Reality is then a construction of our minds, of our perspectives. We can never be sure of the thing as it really is in and of itself. Until, of course, reality crushes us and the poison begins to work.

The conviction that we are in touch with a real world out there has been lost when the thrust of the discussion, the center of one’s concern, has become what we believe rather than what we are forced to acknowledge as people living in an objective world. When we reduce our convictions to personal views, we suggest that we do not *know* anything. For then we only know in the sense that we have a mental model in our mind in the same way we wear a mask over our eyes. With that the Christian has moved into the chair of the post-Kantian nihilist and dances to the melodies of a postmodern dirge.

There is no merely Christian angle to the world of reality. Everything that accurately relates to the real created world with its deliberate definitions and with a real purpose in the decisions of the Creator is Christian. That is the world of reality, good but now fallen, affecting relationships and even microscopic details. For there is no Christian molecule and then some others! What we look for, what we value and prize, what we choose to do or not to do depends on our worldview. But the world itself, out there and created, does not depend on such a religious view of the world. Our interpretations may and should vary, but that does not change the shape of things. There is no Christian biology. There is only biology done by different kinds of people with their own degrees of integrity, curiosity, honesty, etc., as

Christians or not. The truth of biology does not depend on the faith of the practitioner.

There is an incredible lightness to the church's teaching about the Christian faith today. There is too much water and too little lemon. Our arguments no longer carry any weight. There is an increasing alienation of Christians from the certainty of a real world. Privately, they still hold to the certainties of their convictions. They know what they believe. They state it, live it more or less, share it with others, and confess it alone and in community. But from that alone one does not know whether what they believe is true to the real world. They live and speak what they see, but that has little weight in modern pluralist societies, where each person has the right to his own vision of things and obligations to none.

To use another picture, we have not thought through enough on the teaching and church level how little we actually say. Whatever we say is not plausible to an audience that has embraced the notion that "this is a free country," all of life is like a shopping mall, and freedom has been practically reduced to questions of consumption. Every day new suckers are born, we are told, and you should try to sell them something any way you can.

# NOTES

1. *Religious Congregations and Membership in the U.S.*, The Glenmary Research Center, 2000, gives one church, synagogue, or temple for every 1,049 Americans. Our figure is a rough estimate, since many ethnic and evangelical churches have been left out of the Center's calculations.
2. Marquis de Custine, *The Empire of the Czar, a Journey Through Eternal Russia*, foreword Daniel J. Boorstin, introduction George F. Kennan (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1989).
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1 (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 522.
4. Adam Gopnik, *Paris to the Moon* (New York: Random House, 2000), pp. 124-125.
5. See, among other places, the long discussion of how the "great obstacle [to discovery is] not ignorance, but the illusion of knowledge," in Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 86ff. Further on he points out how the lack of knowledge (in geography, for instance, an orphan in the world of learning for a thousand years) was made up by a rich resource of ancient fantasies (p. 109). Often Christians would embroider a sacred world through doctrines and ignore the real one. This is no recent phenomenon, for in past generations Christians would often relish theological speculations and practice scientific and scholarly amnesia. They would approve pagan myths and Greek speculations but be contemptuous of pagan science (pp. 109-110).
6. David Gress, *From Plato to NATO* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).
7. Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar (contributor), David K. Cohen (contributor), *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).
8. Kaye Ashe, *The Feminization of the Church* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 1998). See also Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 1999).
9. "The Emasculation of Sports," *New York Times Magazine*, April 2, 1995.
10. Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern, 1815-1830* (New York: Harper, 1999), p. 704ff.
11. David Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 52.
12. "Faith in the Flesh: An Essay on Secular Society's Preoccupation with Life [Somewhat] Eternal," *Lynn Magazine*, October 1985, p. 18.