

**ADAPTIVE CHURCHES IN A CHANGING WORLD:  
THE CULTURE HAS CHANGED**

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Selected Scripture

I was born in 1953 and my parents bought their first home in 1955. It was a little cape on a *cul de sac* in a brand new post-war Baby Boom neighborhood in Wakefield. Rt. 128 hadn't even been built yet. It was a neighborhood filled with new families and kids were in abundant supply. I walked to the nearby Dolbeare Elementary School and we all went to the Wakefield-Lynnfield United Methodist Church.

It was a shiny brand new facility with a handsome young minister with a wife and 2.5 kids. The place was packed with two Sunday morning services, Sunday school classes for all, and a huge youth group. I spoke to a soloist at Phyllis Morand's funeral who attends there today. She says they are barely hanging on with their fingernails.

What happened? This is the story of many of our old, historic mainline churches. Once mainline Protestant churches were the custodians of the dominant American culture; now we are side-lined. Once theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich graced the covers of Time and Life magazines; now it's Rick Warren, Ted Haggard, and James Dobson leaders of evangelical mega-churches and ministries. Once we were the only show in town, now we have to share the public square with many religions and worldviews.

This is the second in my series on "Adaptive Churches in a Changing World." Last week we looked at hanging on to our unchanging God in the midst of all the transitions going on around us. In fact, the church of Jesus Christ has always had to do this. Augustine wrote his great City of God after the barbarians had sacked Rome and dispersed the Church far and wide. He was trying to make sense of what distinguishes the Kingdom of God from human institutions. Constantine, after all, had made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire and it still came crashing down.

Given the limits of a Sunday morning sermon, I will only be able to run down the road and point at a few markers along the way, and often with a broad, sweeping wave of the hand, but I think that will be enough to get a clearer sense of what's going on. First, we have moved from going to church out of a *sense of obligation to going from an internal motivation*. Attending church, having your children baptized in the church, and sending them to Sunday school was something you were supposed to do. When we moved to Wakefield, finding a new church home was on the list with finding a doctor, a mechanic, a new bank and a dry cleaner. People joined churches like they would a club. It was a contractual obligation. You baptize my child, bury my parents, provide my teenagers with youth activities and I'll give my fair share. If I'm unhappy with the product, I'll take my money and presence elsewhere. The minister was more of a chaplain for the community or neighborhood rather than a leader who helped the congregation define a vision of the Kingdom of God and reach it.

Today we are a "generation of seekers," as sociologists of religion Wade Clark Roof and Bill McKinney put it. When people are hungry for meaning or an experience of the divine, then they are motivated to become part of a religious community, not out of a sense of duty or obligation. The mainline church somehow lost this "meaning making" ability to put people in touch with God.

In part, it was because our *faith became more moralistic than transformational*. There were "good works" to be done. That might mean "giving more to missions" than other churches in the denomination (and missions were usually overseas); serving on many boards and committees; striving to have a "perfect" family; or having "the right values" and supporting the correct causes. Consequently, we didn't look much different than any other red-blooded, middle class American. We endorsed the dominant American values of reliance upon reason and technology, the inevitability of progress, and an emphasis on human and individual self-sufficiency. We didn't offer anything much different than our culture and were basically the

Rotary Club at prayer. It seemed that we had lost the crucial and powerful element of biblical faith—grace, new life, forgiveness, the possibility of transformation—and replaced it with a much more conventional morality.

What I've described is called American civil religion, a term first coined by sociologist Robert Bellah to describe the set of rituals, doctrines and beliefs that develop around nations, which become the sacred myth that binds citizens in common allegiance. Daniel Marsh of Boston University has pointed out (*Unto the Generations: the Roots of True Americanism*) the similarities between biblical history and American history. America's book of Genesis is the Mayflower Compact. Its exodus is the Declaration of Independence. The book of the law is the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Its psalms include the Star Spangled Banner and God Bless America. Lincoln's Second Inaugural address is its prophetic denouncement.

Rituals include saying the pledge of allegiance in our schools, singing the Star Spangled Banner at sporting events, having parades and ceremonies honoring the war dead, and invoking the blessing of some higher power at political events. The virtues of democracy, individual liberty, the right to private property, family, free enterprise, and a commitment to faith are part of its doctrines. Faith in this system of thought is vague and undefined. It is best exemplified in President Eisenhower's statement, "This country was founded on faith and I don't care in what."

Civil religion and Christian religion can look deceptively similar, especially in the era I've described, so much so that it is easy to merge the two into one, like many American churches do on the Sunday near the Fourth of July. Civil religion is not a state religion, but rather a set of practices and beliefs that makes sacred national values, national heroes, national history, and national ideals. However, to equate the kingdom of God with the United States of America is not only a pale comparison, it is bad theology. The commonwealth of God is a global community that transcends all nation states and embraces all peoples. Rather

than endorsing any national agenda, the Gospel calls all such pretensions to power into question. Churches that are adapting and growing today recognize that.

Next there was *an erosion of trust and any sense of a reliable authority*. The 1960s and 70s saw a succession of events that tore huge holes in the sacred canopy of American civil religion. There were the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bobby Kennedy. There was an unpopular war with many defecting to Canada. Partly as a consequence of the war, there was a new drug culture. Watergate brought down a president and scandalized the nation. The divorce rate began rising to fifty-percent and abortion became more prevalent, too often used as retroactive birth control. The civil rights movement and the women's movement challenged social arrangements that had been in place for generations.

American civil religion was not equipped to deal with these traumas. Since social institutions and trust had broken down and the traditional reliable authority of the family, church, and state seemed suddenly unreliable, people were at sea. If they came to church at all, they were seeking something like healing, salvation, and hope for themselves and their families. We used to be able to call upon the best and the brightest in our congregations to service. Now they were often among the afflicted.

Another sea change in our culture is that *we are a much more ethnically and religiously diverse society*. In 1955 Will Herberg could write a sociology of religion describing America called Protestant, Catholic, Jew. Forty-six years later Diana Eck of Harvard could write a book titled, A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation. This was due largely to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 that followed in the wake of the civil rights movement. This opened up the United States to a wave of new immigrants who were much more diverse than the European immigrants of past movements. In 1978, increasing numbers of families from

Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were arriving. Many of these new immigrants brought Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and animist religions with them. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century begins, we are just starting to grasp the implications of these realities. In Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School, where my daughter graduated, there were 32 different language groups represented. There are now more Muslims in the United States than Presbyterians. More than half the population of California are people of color.

Inevitably, this has raised questions for American Christians? What do we believe? What distinctive about our faith? What are our particular practices and spiritual disciplines? How are we to participate in the public square? American civil religion was ill-equipped to help its people answer these questions and its theology was often so thin that there wasn't much to say when we were involved in interfaith dialogues. Our strength of "openness" to the "Other" was found wanting when it came to being able to articulate the content of *our* faith.

Another cultural phenomenon we have to deal with is *the rise of post-modernity*. The benchmarks of modernity, which we mainliners wholeheartedly embraced, included a trust in reason, progress, technology, individualism, personal autonomy and tolerance. Post-modernity challenges the notion that there is anything such as universal truth or one story (called a "metanarrative") that can speak for all of humanity. While there may be "ultimate" or "universal truth," they are very hard to grasp it. No one has a "God's eye" view of the world. Our environment, social class, gender, sexual orientation, race, nationality and so on radically shapes how we perceive and understand the world. Hence, there are women's studies, African-American studies, and Gay studies. We have feminist Christians, ecumenical Christians, liberationist Christians, evangelical Christians, progressive Christians, Asian Christians and African Christians.

For those born after 1964, so called "Gen Xers," "Gen Yers," and "Millennialists," there is no binding story. They lack confidence in the institutions that sustained previous gener-

ations and are suspicious of trite answers. There is a more fragmented, de-centered world of rapid shifts, disposable identities and changing images—the world of MTV, computers, ipods, Facebook, reality TV and cell phones.

Because our churches and institutions were so identified with dominant cultural values, when those values were challenged we didn't have much of an alternative. There was little capacity to speak of the intrusive and often disturbing grace of God, or of the God for whom all things are possible and who brings life out of death.

Whereas, fundamentalists circled their wagons and separated themselves from culture as a defense against modernity, theologically liberal churches tried so hard to make the Christian faith and Gospel “fit” the modern world, to show that it was really reasonable and that it supported individualism, self-sufficiency, optimism and progress, that the distinctive characteristics of the Christian faith were eroded, diminished, and, in time, forgotten. We lost our ability to critique the dominant culture or offer a better choice.

Lastly, *we suffered the hazards of success; we became complacent, establishment institutions*. Too often mainline congregations and leaders assumed they had a guaranteed place and constituency. And why not? Our churches were on the main streets, the center of downtowns, and on the village greens of America. We did a very good job at nurturing institutions, but we became complacent about needing to prepare and equip the coming generation. We began having trouble recruiting quality young men and women to go to seminary because of our aging congregations; our church-related colleges loosened their ties to the church and lost their Christian distinctives. In that, we lost an important training ground for people in ordained and lay ministry. In addition, we became bureaucratized having large, complex structures and national organizations that were often distant from the grassroots. They were well-suited to carry on an existing, established church; they were not ready or able to lead, or in many cases, to perceive change.

IBM saw the handwriting on the wall sometime ago and began streamlining and reorganizing. It's only been lately that our mainline Protestant denominations have begun to do the same.

So these are some of the factors that mark our reality today. Others have also pointed to other factors such as demographic shifts from the east to the west, declining birthrates among mainliners, and a shifting financial base. But the five I've mentioned seem the most salient to me.

So, what do we do with this information? Throw in the towel? Retreat into a "holy huddle"? Take another anti-depressant? I actually find it an exciting time to be a mainline Protestant. We used to be the "custodians of culture," but that is somewhat passed to evangelicals, but that seems to be fading fast, and it didn't serve us too well. Critics might say we're so yesterday, irrelevant, too liberal, out of touch, and so on. Yes, we are rather marginalized compared with 40 years ago. But you know what happens to people on the margins? They become movements. They become radicalized, in the sense that they go back to the "radix," the core of their beliefs and purposes. And that's what I believe is beginning to happen. We are on an exodus being led from the Egypt of another place and time to the Promised Land yet to be seen.

Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith*, which our book group has read, tells the story of moderate and progressive mainline Protestant congregations—and how they found new vitality through spiritual practices and deeper meaning by pursuing God's hope for transformation in the world. These churches are moving beyond the conventions that have defined them for the past 50 years and are recovering ancient spiritual practices like worship, prayer, study, meditation, healing, service and justice ministries and applying them in ways appropriate for 21<sup>st</sup> century people. They are also focused less on the maintenance of an institution and

more on becoming a movement or ministry that looks beyond the four walls of the church building.

This kind of Christianity stands outside that old “right-left” divide of American religion and resists a tidy definition. They all are trying to create a new theological language, new structures of leadership and community, and a responsible, peace-filled, and just global Christian vision. It doesn’t really have a name yet—although most people seem to be calling it “emerging,” “practicing,” “transformative,” “missional,” or “progressive” Christianity. Bulter Bass simply refers to it as “Christianity for the rest of us,” a way of saying that this generous-sort of faith has its arms wide-open. It is a disposition of faithful people on a different kind of journey, a journey with friends toward some undiscovered country of being God’s new community.