
Three Innovations in American Christian Witness for the Coming Decade

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Mark Chaves reports in *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* that by every measurable marker, traditional religious belief and practice in the United States has plateaued or is declining.¹ Additionally, religious attendance in adults has declined and the number of children being raised without institutionalized religion has significantly increased in the past several decades.² In short, the climate in North America is shifting away from the favored position of Christianity, and fewer people are identifying as “Christians.” While this is not the first church decline in history, the inability to provide a contextual and innovative witness will leave the North American Church in a compromised position in the near future. As this church decline has occurred, L. Gregory Jones argues that the American Church has stood idly by with an open mouth. He expresses that Christians have, “Turned inward and been shaped more by fear than by hope. We have become preoccupied with managing what already exists, rather than focusing on innovative renewal.”³ The steps forward for the Church are difficult in many ways and will involve confronting commitments to models which are sometimes held more tightly to than Christ himself. While not intended to be exhaustive, this paper approaches three significant innovations in Christian witness that must occur in the next decade for the North American Church to provide a faithful, contextual expression of the Gospel in the years to come.

The death of Christendom power and the birth of suffering witness

As the transition from Christendom and modernism to post-Christendom and post-modernism continues to center in society in North America, witnessing models must shift from those used in previous generations. An overarching theme that will set the trajectory for Christian witness in the coming decade will be the move away from the power allotted the Church by Christendom

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and an embracing of a suffering witness. Throughout the history of the United States, Protestantism has held a place of significant power in public life and society. Essentially, all of the presidents throughout U.S. history have been Protestant Christians with only one (Kennedy) being Catholic and three religiously unaffiliated at the time they held office (Franklin, Lincoln, and Taft). Today, the term “Christian conservatism” is nearly synonymous with “Republican Party,” and American Politico-Christianity has become a religion in and of itself. In his 2017 lecture, “Flag and Cross” J. Wendell Mapson Jr. claimed that too many American evangelicals today, “have dressed God in the red, white and blue and reduced Christianity to a quest for personal salvation, without disturbing or challenging the institutions and systems that promote and sanction racial inequality and social injustice. For them, the cross looks best, and is safest, when draped in the American flag.”⁴ The image of American Christianity being married to political power is a massive harm to its witness and will only continue to be so in the coming years. Realistically, evangelical Christians should be utterly ashamed of having the reputation of their religion being in bed with the political superpowers of the day. Relinquishing Christendom power must become a new spiritual discipline for the Church, and marginalization should be embraced not avoided. The Western Church has many lessons to learn from the Church in the

1. Mark Chaves. *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (United States: Princeton Univ. Press, 2017). 118.

2. *Ibid.*, 45-46.

3. L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 8.

4. J. Wendell Mapson Jr., “Flag and Cross: A Challenge to the Church: The 2017 Urban Theological Institute Lecture.” *Seminary Ridge Review* 20 (1): 57.

majority world in which suffering and marginalization is historically the norm. In reality, the suffering that the Western Church will potentially face in the next few decades might entail things such as losing tax exemption, media ridicule, and being shamed in the public sphere. This is an easy burden to carry in light of the persecution experienced by many Christians around the world.

As the Western Church embraces suffering as its new missiological lens it will be important to “reread reality from a different perspective, not necessarily from the perspective of the powerful or the complacent.”⁵ This reorientation of the biblical model of God’s preference toward those who suffer will guide the Church into a new era of giving witness to the Gospel in the West. Leaning into the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and recognition of a God who suffers alongside the Church is vital to stepping out into a post-Christendom reality. Following the long-held positions of status and authority in the West, Christians in the next era must be willing to be a prophetic voice that speaks against harms the Church has historically committed and seek reconciliation with those that it has harmed. Jayakumar Christian argues that Christians in the next decades need, “A theology that will allow the bones of the local Church to burn and be angry, provoking redemptive and prophetic presence.”⁶ Holding hands with the poor and suffering, not the powerful, is the future of Christian witness in the West. For those Christians who are in possession of varying degrees of power, the most challenging thing their faith may call them to do is to leverage that power on behalf of the voiceless, rather than use it for their own gain. The confession, “Jesus is Lord” will gradually become an even more politicized statement as Christians commit to an alternative way of living in this world, especially when matched with the stand for justice that must accompany this confession. In the coming years, American Politico-Christianity will continue to evolve into a religion of its own. This will be subtle and give off the appearance of Christianity as it has been known. However, the distance between those who follow the way of Jesus, and those who follow the way of Uncle Sam will only continue to grow, and the difference will eventually become very apparent. Hopefully this cycle may be reversed before even more significant damage is done.

The death of sacred vs. secular and the birth of the holy ordinary

The second innovation for the Western Christian witness is a commitment to abandoning both a published and practical holding to the sacred and secular divide which has permeated American Christian culture for generations. There has been a long-winded battle waged by Western Christians against the secularization of society in every avenue from removing prayer in schools, to lack of morals in media, and standing up for “traditional” values.

5. Jayakumar Christian, “Innovation at the Margins” in *The State of Missiology Today: Global Innovations in Christian Witness*, edited by Charles Van Engen (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press 2016), 173.

6. *Ibid.*, 177.

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There is an underlying assumption that, if Christians were able to influence culture enough for it to return to a particular state, the rapid church decline occurring across the nation would cease. Some think that, along with the apparent decline of religion, there is this great existential, feeling of loss within society. Without religion whole generations must be wandering without any form of spiritual or moral guidance. This is simply not the case. Many people in Western society today live with no felt need for God (or a divine reality) and have created their own systems of morality and identity to guide their lives.⁷

As a result of this, there has developed a felt need for the Christian community to push back against the grips of the secular realm of the “world” from invading the hearts and minds of Christian young people. For many, missional faithfulness has become more about aiding in the battle to hold religious *space*, than it is concerned with living out a faithful expression of the way of Jesus in the world. As such, a genuine Christian faith is ascribed to participation in certain *spiritual activities* on a regular basis. In this understanding, the church is the place where one goes to participate in spiritual activities, and these activities are what legitimize a true Christian faith. These “spiritual” activities (prayer, worship, communion, Scripture reading, and listening to sermons) are set on a separate plane from “secular” activities (eating, working, recreating, and resting) and thus a dualistic, sacred/secular life has become the norm for the majority of Christians in North America. While the Church in many places has been well intentioned, it has crafted several generations of believers whose faith is tied to temporal spaces (religious buildings) rather than instructing them on how to *live* as a resurrected people outside of the church walls.

Frost & Hirsch observe that the sacred and secular divide is among one of the greatest problems for the Western Church seeking to give witness today. Many churches remain stuck in

7. Andrew Root, “Faith Formation in a Secular Age.” *Word & World* 37 (2): 130.

an attractional model that seeks to bring non-Christians into the religious space in order to experience the divine. They write that many Christians live with the functional assumption that, “God cannot really be accessed outside sanctioned Church meetings, or at least, that these meetings are the best place for not-yet Christians to learn about God.”⁸ The belief that God’s working is limited to specific times and places effectively cripples the witness of the Church, and makes evangelism and outreach more like “dragging in.” As an incarnational people, the Church must recover a commitment to believing that God works in the very ordinary places and moments of this world. Through Christ a radical collision of the holy and the ordinary has occurred. Without embracing this, a true and faithful witness of the Gospel will be completely lost. Core to the Hebrew (and thus Jesus’) worldview was the hallowing of every day. In this understanding, there are only two realities which exist in a world consumed with the immanence of God: the holy and the not-yet holy. The work of the people of God is to make the not-yet holy, into the holy. In a reorientation toward the will of God, each action may be deemed as holy as it is performed with the purpose of communing with the divine. As such, the walls of the sacred and secular fall as the people of God live defined by their intention to bring notice to God through their work, learning, eating, resting, recreation, grocery shopping, and every other activity of normal life. Embracing and learning to love the holy ordinary will provide multitudes of opportunity for the North American Church to give witness to the God who cannot be confined to the walls of a building, but who has taken on flesh to walk among us.

The death of certainty and the birth of bold humility

The third innovation for the North American Church in the next decades is the loosening of certainty and the embracing of bold humility. In an article focused on the new direction in Roman Catholic missiology, Mary Motte argues that a new way of seeing the world and faith is necessary to contextualize the Gospel message to the experience of the individual. She writes that this requires, “a starting point of being with the people in openness to discover how God is acting in their lives, then, together with them, discerning the truth and presence of God’s love.”⁹

An effective Christian witness in the future of North America is one which does not grasp for certainty, but with a bold humility legitimizes the spiritual journeys of every single person and walks alongside them toward discerning truth. People who are certain are, by definition, “established beyond doubt.” However, as followers of the way of Jesus the Christian community acknowledges

8. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 61.

9. Mary Motte, “Emergence of New Paths: The Future of Mission in Roman Catholicism” in *The State of Missiology Today: Global Innovations in Christian Witness*, Charles Van Engen, ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press 2016), 227.

Asking questions, surveying, and seeking to understand the theological and spiritual demographic of a community goes much further than assuming why people are not gathered in the church building on Sunday morning. ... The Church should ask, “How do we meet people in our community where they are already gathering and come alongside them in those spaces with the Good News?”

that certainty beyond doubt was inaccessible even to the apostles, those who spent three years walking daily in the flesh with Jesus.¹⁰ Christians who live with bold humility are confident in their union with Christ, while also living with meekness in regard to their presumptions about life and faith. They live in submission to Scripture, but do not weaponize its teachings against a society that does not assume it to be authoritative. Christians committed to a way of bold humility live as listeners and learners alongside their neighbors, not as ontological experts.

In an age in which spiritual certainty is not looked upon very highly, Dwight Zscheile offers four steps that the Western Church might take as it seeks to give a confident, yet humble, witness of the Gospel. First, the Church must commit to a practice of *close listening* to the realities experienced by people within its community. Asking questions, surveying, and seeking to understand the theological and spiritual demographic of a community goes much further than assuming why people are not gathered in the church building on Sunday morning. Second, the Church must be willing to engage in *small experiments* in contextualizing to the specific neighborhood it exists within. The Church should ask, “How do we meet people in our community where they are already gathering and come alongside them in those spaces with the Good News?” Third, the Church steeped in humility has a very *high tolerance for failure*. Learning how to give a contextual witness and exercising experiments in doing so will take time, energy, and effort. The Church (and its leadership) should not grow discouraged if their efforts are not initially deemed “effective” and must have grace and mercy for where they fail. Finally, the Church must embrace a *spirit of improvisation* and run on the ground that it has

10. e.g., Matthew 28:16-17, which many scholars have interpreted, “¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷And when they saw him, they worshiped him, but *still* doubted.”

been given. Creativity and improvisation must be integral values for the missional Church today.¹¹ Christians seeking a contextual witness will find that they discover spaces to give witness where they would not have ever initially imagined. Navigating the grey space between certainty and humility will become an important task for Christian leaders in the future. Zschiele argues, however, that unless these leaders are “able to respond meaningfully to the actual struggles faced by people in negotiating life in the pluralist, uncertain, fluid, insecure world that is the twenty-first century, they will have no future.”¹² A bold, yet humble witness to the way of Jesus will be the most appropriate embrace of Christian witness in North America in the coming years.

The problem is not “survival”

COVID-19 undeniably swept across the world and the United States in force beginning in the first quarter of 2020. The numbers climbed quickly at staggering rates with hundreds of thousands of lives lost both in North America and across the globe.¹³ This invisible, deadly force has understandably shaken normal life to its core both in the United States and around the world. The effects of the Coronavirus on the health and well-being of people across the country are evident, and the financial effects of a necessary yet consequential nationwide shutdown will negatively impact the lives of society’s most vulnerable for months (likely years) to come. The Federal Reserve noted that by May of 2020, 36 million Americans had applied for unemployment in response to the virus and close to half of those who earn \$40k or less annually were financially impacted in a negative way by the crisis. The vulnerable population in the United States is growing exponentially.¹⁴ For many across the country there is a sense of a visceral, societal pressure that appears ready to detonate. It is in times such as this that the Church has an incredibly grave but beautiful opportunity to be a steadfast witness of hope and compassion to the people within its reach. The Church in many places has been forced to innovate and improvise, and the time has come to build toward a new normal in providing a contextual Gospel witness in a post-COVID-19, post-Christian world. Understandably, many have questioned how the Church will survive these days, but survival should not be the concern.

Scott Cormode writes of the need for innovation in the Church and makes the important observation that innovation for the Church is simply not about survival. He explains, “The problem is not the survival of the Church; Jesus will see to that. But the question remains: Will the Church in America make a

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difference in the coming century?”¹⁵ The Church, as the chosen means for God to bring about the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven will not fail. Instead, the Church, in some places (e.g., North America), will become so committed to its models that it will miss out on the moving of the Spirit in new and fresh ways. The Spirit of God continues to move in power throughout places and cultures around the world. This movement is foreign by nature as the same ecclesial models have been sufficient for many Christians in North America for generations. Nonetheless, at times new models and tools become necessary for giving a contextually appropriate witness to the timeless story of the Gospel. The message itself requires no innovation, but the means through which the Gospel is communicated and made real in the lives of those who do not know the way of Jesus requires constant innovation and creativity. In the midst of seasons such as global pandemics (which are likely to become more common), the Church must seek innovative paths forward in both its ecclesiology and missiology. The Church will absolutely fail in its innovative models at times; it comes with the territory. But occasionally, a light will shine through the cracks and the Gospel will be made real for the first time in the life of one who had not yet found their place in the Kingdom. The death of doing Church a certain way can be frightening for those who have found solace in its walls. Yet, Christians worship a God whose story does not end with death. For those who are listening to the innovative work of the Spirit, there is no need to fear the future of the Church in North America. The resurrected Christ is already there waiting. Faith over fear is the way forward for the Church.

11. Dwight J Zschiele, “Disruptive Innovations and the Deinstitutionalization of Religion.” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 14 (2): 23.

12. Ibid., 29.

13. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Provisional Death Counts for Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19).” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 22, 2020). <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid19/index.htm>.

14. “Speech by Chair Powell on Current Economic Issues.” Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. May 13, 2020. <https://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/powell20200513a.htm>.

15. Scott Cormode, “Innovation That Honors Tradition: The Meaning of Christian Innovation.” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 81.