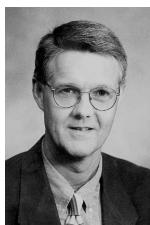


Price H. Gwynn III, Moderator of the 202nd General Assembly (1990) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers, and became a successful businessman as well as an extremely effective elder of the Presbyterian Church. Prior to his election

as moderator, this North Carolina native was vice-president and director of Lance, Inc., having previously served as president of two other major companies. After being elected, Gwynn became the only moderator of our denomination to be featured in *The Saturday Evening Post* for his extensive business experience. Such experience prepared him to serve as chairman of the board of Presbyterian Publishing Corporation during an important time of transition.

His experience and leadership at all levels of the Presbyterian Church are equally impressive. Gwynn has served as deacon, elder, Sunday school teacher, and synod representative and has held extensive presbytery committee assignments, as well as acting as moderator of his presbytery. He was awarded five honorary degrees from Presbyterian colleges, including Davidson, where he also served on the board of trustees. During his distinguished career, he chaired the board of Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte, and he is an active member of the board of trustees of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond.

Further national church leadership roles include former membership on the General Assembly Council, the Committee on the Spiritual Welfare of the Church, and the Special Committee for Review of the General Assembly. Gwynn has combined all of these activities with a distinguished military career, outstanding civic service, and, with his wife, Katherine, strong family ties with their three sons and their grandchildren.



Dear Presbyterian Leader:

It is with great pleasure that I send you the fourth volume in the Price H. Gwynn III Leadership Series from the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. This series is intended to honor an individual who has been instrumental in providing distinguished leadership to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at all levels.

Sadly enough, Price Gwynn will soon be leaving the PPC Board of Directors after eight years of extraordinary service to the PC(USA)'s denominational publisher. The denomination and PPC's general readership owe him a large debt of gratitude for ensuring that PPC has successfully fulfilled the General Assembly–assigned responsibility to publish “for the Christian nurture of the church's members and the education of religious communities and the world they serve.” The robust publishing program of PPC today is unthinkable without Price Gwynn's sustained involvement in the governance of this General Assembly entity.

Given Price Gwynn's association with Union Theological Seminary-PSCE, as well as his high regard for and friendship with John Leith, it is especially appropriate to publish *The Best of Times and the Worst of Times for Religion, Especially Christian Faith* as this year's contribution to the Price H. Gwynn III Leadership Series.

John Leith has long been one of this church's most significant theological voices. He is a learned thinker who has also served as a pastor and who has devoted himself throughout his career to building up the church through the training of clergy and through his penetrating theological reflections. For John Leith, theology is an intellectual discipline whose proper *telos* is the strengthening of the church for service to the world.

This essay in particular is important in that it represents, as Leith put it to me in conversation recently, his “final message to the church.” As Leith nears the end of a teaching and writing ministry that extends almost sixty years, he is still endeavoring to speak a critical and constructive word to the church that he loves so dearly. Often polemical and prophetic, always provocative, John Leith, in the entirety of his published corpus and in this essay, proves the point that “theology matters.”

Sincerely yours,

Davis Perkins
President & Publisher

The Best of Times
and the Worst of Times for Religion,
Especially Christian Faith

John H. Leith







The Best of Times and the Worst of Times for Religion, Especially Christian Faith

I

The best of times for religion is now. The predictions of Marx and Nietzsche have not proved to be true. Mighty changes in society effected by the Industrial Revolution, and the more recent technological and communication revolutions, have not eliminated religious hunger in the souls of human beings. Augustine's ancient analysis of the human situation has proved to be true. "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."¹ Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker, in an interesting sociological study, conclude, "In the wake of modernization, religion and spiritual beliefs have not faded."²

These are also the worst of times for religion and for Christian faith. For five centuries the Christian church in Western Europe dominated the worldwide Christian community. Today it is in radical decline. The proportion of regular church attenders in Spain declined from 53 percent in 1981 to 38 percent in 1990. In Russia regular church attendance was only 8 percent in 1995. In Norway church attendance dropped to thirteen out of every one hundred people, and in Sweden the attendance was 11 percent.³ In England one report indicated that in 1998 only 7.5 percent of the people attended church on Sundays, and only 4 percent of children under fifteen years of age go to Sunday school.⁴ These figures are only approximate, but they all point to the radical decline of the church in Western Europe.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has shared in this general decline. In 1966 the United Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Presbyterian Church (US) had 4,250,000 members. By December 31, 1999, the total membership had declined to 2,560,201. Attempts have been made to explain away this loss of membership as cleansing the roles of inactive members. No easy explanation is possible in the light of the losses confirmed by other statistics. Adult baptisms declined from 29,002 in 1966 to 11,457 in 1999. Infant baptisms fell from 75,476 to 41,009 in the same period. Church school membership declined from 2,324,507 to 1,084,458. The number of churches declined from 13,004 to 11,216. Four out of every 100 American people give a Presbyterian preference according to



the Gallup Poll (Emerging Trends, March 2000), which means the Presbyterian constituency is much larger than the number of active communicant members.

While not easy to define with precision, some reasons for the decline stand out. Among the more prominent general causes of decline are the following:

1. The Industrial Revolution, followed by the technological and communication revolutions, created many problems for highly organized churches, which depend upon bureaucratic structures. “Economic development has systematic, and to some extent, predictable cultural and political consequences. . . . The probability is high that certain changes will occur once society has embarked on industrialization. Industrialization leads to occupational specialization, rising educational levels, rising income levels, and eventually unforeseen changes—changes in gender roles, attitudes toward authority and sexual norms; declining fertility rates; broader political participation and less easily led publics.”⁵ The early Methodists and the social gospel movement were creative and effective responses to the Industrial Revolution, but it appears that the church in general has been unable to resolve the problems that industrialization creates. For example, in our industrial society, people are very mobile, which imposes an incredible problem for maintaining church membership and participation.

An industrial society finally imposes its own norms on the life of the church. Consider the contemporary emphasis on “professionalism” in calling a pastor, not only in terms of salary but on the basis of days off, study time, living arrangements, and incredibly complex arrangements for salaries, deferred compensation, and other benefits. The minister does not say “yes” to a call; first the minister negotiates. This dynamic changes the whole relationship from pastor and people to employee and employer.⁶ This analysis from John W. Vannorsdall, one-time chaplain at Yale University and a Lutheran pastor, is indicative of a change that has occurred in the church in the past fifty years.

2. The second cause of the crisis is the influence of the Enlightenment emphasis upon human reason, upon methodological doubt as a way of arriving at the truth, and upon thinking for one’s self. The church, until the Enlightenment, had appealed to authorities—the authori-



tative organization, the authoritative religious figure, the authoritative book—but now the appeal was to reason. Reason is a gift from God, and the Enlightenment served a very useful purpose of cleansing the church from fraud and pretense. The Christian religion is the only major faith that has been subjected to radical, rational criticism. In itself, such analysis can be a strength as the church faces the future. Yet, casualties occurred along the way, as the dogmas of the Enlightenment replaced such Christian convictions as revelation as well as reason as a source of truth. When science discovered ways to control the forces of nature, many modern people no longer felt a need for God.

3. The monstrous and irrational evil of the twentieth century is a third factor in the decline of established religious communities. One popular statement is that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the churches. Kenneth Scott Latourette, however, noted that the blood of the martyrs is not the seed of the church, if the people who make the martyrs have absolute power and are willing to use it. Martyr-makers can destroy the church. The impact of Communism in its endeavor to eliminate Christian faith is difficult to assess in Eastern Europe and in Russia. On a deeper level, the irrational and vicious evil that human beings have experienced under Hitler in Germany, Stalin in Russia, Mao in China, and Pol Pot in Cambodia raises questions about the meaning and significance of human life. The incredible horrors of war, the fire bombings of great cities, and the viciousness of combat undermine faith. These horrible events always prompt the questions, “What is God doing? Can God not control such evil?” No one has put this crisis more sharply than Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the death camps, in his memoir *Night*: “Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed. . . . Never shall I forget that smoke, never shall I forget the little faces of the children whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath the silent sky. Never shall I forget those flames, which consumed my faith forever. . . . Never shall I forget those moments, which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.”⁷

These horrors of the twentieth century are certainly not the first in human history, and we have to ask if the church in the twentieth century had the faith to deal with these terrors as the believers in Israel did in the history we read



in the Old Testament, or as the early Christians dealt with such terrors in the first centuries of the church's existence.

4. Secularism is the fourth cultural factor leading to the decline of the church. Society began to become more secular in the thirteenth century, but this movement perhaps only reached its climax in the twentieth century. Until the Second World War America could be described as a Christian country, or even as a Protestant country. This description is no longer valid. One by one, areas of the church's life and human life have been taken from the overwhelming dominance of the church.

Up until a half-century ago, public schools in many areas of our nation were Protestant schools. My daughter learned more about the Bible in elementary school when she had a Baptist teacher, who told a Bible story every day, than she probably ever learned in any year in the church. The society in which I grew up would have taught me the basic elements of Christian faith and some portions of scripture, even if my home church had never taught me anything. Moreover, the local community controlled the influences that entered it and that influenced growing children. Today, influences on children are beyond the control of the local community and reside more in the realms of radio, television, and the Internet.

Secularism served many good purposes, as those who welcomed it in the 1950s and 1960s loudly proclaimed.⁸ The control of the organized, bureaucratic church over wide areas of human life was never an unmixed good for church or society. Such control generally becomes tyrannical and corrupt. Paul Tillich wisely said that the church, and especially Protestantism, by principle is safest when it is criticized from the outside. The dominance of secularism in our society, in the elite media, and in the universities, as well as in the culture of even small towns, has subjected the church to criticism that has both purified the institution and undermined it.

Today the church faces such crucial questions as whether or not the Christian community can survive with secular education from kindergarten to the Ph.D. degree, or whether the church will once again have to establish church schools in order to maintain the integrity of its life.

5. A fifth reason for the decline of the church is that it has not been able to provide from scripture the interpretive framework for understanding human existence. The Bible



begins with God's creation of the world and ends with the consummation of all things. In between is the narrative of God's redemptive acts in human history. A hundred, or even fifty, years ago, American culture viewed human existence through a scriptural lens. In the last forty years, this interpretive narrative has lost its credibility, in large measure because of the failure of the church's preachers and theologians to proclaim it with power and persuasion.

The dark sides are clear enough. These are the worst of times for the church. Yet, they are also the best of times. All of the negative events of the twentieth century have failed to extinguish the sense of divinity that John Calvin said was in the human heart. According to the accepted wisdom of the past two centuries, religion should have died already. Karl Marx said that religion was the consequence of how one made one's living. Freud declared that religion was just wish fulfillment. Historians proclaimed that religion was a stage in the history of humankind that landed somewhere above magic but below science. By all these proclamations religion should be dead, but it persists.

Secularism, which at first was proclaimed irreversible, is now found to be reversible. Human beings all over the world have a yearning for religion and for meaning in life, or more specifically, for the good news that Christian faith has to report about human beings and human history. Augustine was right: The human heart reaches out to God and is not satisfied in any other way. Over against the hopelessness that is so evident, particularly in Western Europe, there is a hope that reaches out for meaning, for a God who creates and who redeems and who finally will bring human life and history to a fulfillment beyond our imagining.

Francis Fukuyama describes the period from 1960 to 1990 as The Great Disruption, but he concludes that signs of a return to traditional values are apparent.⁹ Sociologists Inglehart and Baker conclude their study with the affirmation that religious concerns and questions persist. "People have always sought answers to such questions as: Where do we come from? Where are we going? Why are we here? The need for answers may be especially acute in the face of disaster, but it does not die out in our postindustrial society."¹⁰ Indeed, spiritual concerns may increase while organized religion decreases.

In the United States the old-line churches—Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, UCC—have either lost members or



have not grown in the last fifty years. Yet the Baptists, Pentecostals, Churches of God, and independent churches have grown dramatically. Many individual congregations in old-line churches have grown, some in unpromising situations. Churches can and do grow in our culture, even today.

II

How then shall we respond to the crisis of our age? No human being is good enough or wise enough to prescribe a definitive program. Each of us has limited intellectual capacities. We, too, are sinners saved by grace. But let me advance a few proposals for consideration.

The following list of responses to the crisis has no claim to finality. They emerge from my experience as a minister—fourteen years as a pastor and thirty-one years as seminary professor.

1. The first step in the survival of the Christian community in our time is the recovery of the congregation as the worshipping, believing, and giving community of faith, in its fullness as the embodiment of the one holy, catholic, apostolic church.

We cannot accomplish great programs for the transformation of our society, but we can work for the transformation of the local congregation, where committed and competent preaching and teaching and pastoral care by a committed local minister takes place, and where local church people are likewise committed to the restoration of the authentic Christian community, insofar as this is possible. Scott Hendrix, in an excellent essay on the Reformation, has spoken of the Protestant Reformation as the attempt to *replant*, or as the *indiginization* of the church in a community of people.¹¹ Reformation is our task today.

The coming into being of the church as the people of God is no simple human achievement alone. From this perspective, the church differs from every other human organization. We can organize and establish a Rotary Club or a sewing club, but we cannot bring into existence the church as the people of God. The church always comes as a gift from God. In the New Testament, we do not read that the disciples first decided upon a need for a church and then sought to organize one. Instead, the disciples suddenly dis-



covered that they *were* the church, a community of faith. They had experienced the impact of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and these acts of God had *made* them a church, a community for which they always had to improvise procedures because they had not planned for it.

The church comes into being when human beings hear the Word of God and obey it in faith and love. For this reason, a congregation may have to wait to be what it hopes to become: the people of God.

The church as God's gift does not mean that we have nothing to do. We have to assemble for worship, engage in prayer, and hear the Word of God. We must invite our neighbors to come with us and hear this Word and to claim God's promises that where two or three are gathered in his name, there he shall be. The crucial point is that we must be aware by our plans and our activities of the radical difference between the church and every other human organization that comes into being. The church comes into being where God's Word is heard in the reading of scripture and in the preaching of the Word of God, in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Response to this Word of God is given in hymns, prayers of confession, thanksgiving, intercession, petition, and in the giving of our substance.

The church exists as the communion of saints in which those who have heard the Word of God share their spiritual gifts and strengthen one another in fulfilling God's purposes for them. The church is a community that shares a common faith, a common hope, and a common way of life. Moreover, the church is a community where people who have suffered pain are comforted, where people who have suffered loss of loved ones in death are supported by the community's hope of eternal life, and where people who have more of this world's goods share to support people who have very little.

The church, as a community that hears the Word of God in life and in death and that lives together as a communion of saints, has an enormous impact upon the community that surrounds it. Adolf Harnack, in his study of the mission and expansion of Christianity in its first three centuries, noted the impact of the local congregation of Christian believers upon the larger community. People outside the church saw in the Christian community a life in



which they wanted to share.¹² Writing at the end of the second century, Tertullian observed, “It is our care for the helpless, our practice of loving-kindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Only look,’ they say, ‘look, how they love one another! . . . look how they are prepared to die for one another . . .’” (Apology XXXIX). Moreover, this early church had a profound awareness of the one God who created the world, of Jesus the Lord, of the judgment and the resurrection. Tertullian boasted that among us, “tradesmen, slaves, and old women know how to give some account of God and do not believe without evidence.”

2. The church must recover the language of the faith: the narratives and the simple teachings of scripture. In an older American society, you learned much of this language from popular culture, but today the language that you learn from TV and from secular education is very different. The church is challenged to teach the scripture so that we learn not only the basic affirmations of our faith, but also the language by which we can express those affirmations to others.

Increasingly in America today we are becoming biblically illiterate. Furthermore, the church itself seems to be unaware of its obligation to maintain the language and narratives of scripture in a secular society. Too many of the church’s educational programs are directed to instruction on race or sex or environment or peace. We have reversed the proper order. We first must teach our children and our young people the language of faith and the biblical narratives upon which our faith is based.

Edward Hirsch of the University of Virginia, in an influential book *Cultural Literacy*, writes:

The weight of human tradition across many cultures supports the view that basic acculturation should largely be completed by the age thirteen. At that age, Catholics are confirmed, Jews Bar or Bat Mitzvahed and tribal boys and girls undergo the rites of passage into the tribe. According to the anthropological records, all cultures whose educational methods have been reported in the *human relations area files* (the standard source for anthropological data) have used memorization to carry on their tradition.¹³



Hirsch supports this point by noting that our distaste for memorization is “more pious than realistic.” Children have “an almost instinctive urge to learn.” American young people memorize all kinds of statistics, but the data are not of much value in shaping either their membership in the political order or in the church. The church can mightily influence our society by determining that, by age thirteen, its young people will know certain material by memory. This material will include:

1. A number of Bible passages and the Apostles’ Creed.
2. At least two classic hymns.
3. Two or three traditional and classical prayers.

The church must also teach to young people the important narratives of the Old Testament; the lives of Jesus, Peter, and Paul; and at least three of the parables of Jesus.

This orientation and mastery of knowledge that forms the basis of the church’s life is a realizable goal in very congregation. This knowledge, out of which the church lives, therefore takes priority over courses on race, sex, environment, the feminist movement, and economics. After young people are grounded in the faith of the church, they will express this faith very effectively in their responsibilities in those other areas as members of our society.

3. The church, in order to meet the crisis of our time, must concentrate upon basic human issues. The most critical issue in our time is death and the end of history. The problem of guilt, which preoccupies so much of the Old Testament, is not the first question in our society. The Old Testament faced the question of whether the only word in history is “judgment.” These questions, however, arise only if one believes in a personal God.

Death and the end of history are the underlying questions. Does the church have a message of hope in the face of death and in the face of what appears to be the end of human history and the demise of our planet, of our solar system?

George Kennan has spoken of the hopelessness of a Communist funeral in which the meaninglessness of life is compounded by the meaninglessness of death. This problem in our society is partly covered up by the traditional rhetoric that is always used on the occasion of funerals. The question that arises is as follows: Do members of



the church, and in particular ministers and leaders of the church, really believe the rhetoric that they repeat, or are they deceiving the people with language that means one thing to the listeners but something else to them?

4. An Augustinian understanding of human nature and human society is necessary for the church to respond effectively to the extreme Pelagian emphasis on the human capacity for good that is endemic, not only in our society, but in the churches, including the Presbyterian Church.

Roman society at the turn of the fifth century, like ours at the outset of the twenty-first century, was chaotic and confused. Into this situation, there came from Britain a great hulk of a man with a powerful personality by the name of Pelagius. Pelagius believed that the church was an elite community that had a clear understanding of its own existence in contrast to the mediocrity of society in general.

Pelagius wanted to reform society. Under his influence, rich young nobility gave up their wealth and renounced self-seeking. The Pelagians were committed to the redistribution of wealth. They believed that accumulated wealth was just another bad habit that Christians could shrug off upon their baptism. We should not underestimate Pelagius's achievements. Yet, when Augustine, the great theologian and Bishop of Hippo, heard about Pelagius, he responded that Pelagius had a zeal for righteousness, but without knowledge. Augustine based his judgment on the complexity of the human situation, which he believed Pelagius had greatly oversimplified. Original sin was an important factor in Augustine's case. He knew that no baby is born into a situation of innocence. After Adam sinned, human life was changed. Once human beings had sinned, sin became part of the human heritage and part of the structure of society that penetrates the life of every newborn person, in those mysterious ways in which persons penetrate and influence other persons before a child's first conscious behavior. Sin also becomes embodied in the structures of society so that we have no possibility except to sin.

Augustine knew that sin is not a superficial corruption easily corrected. It reaches into the depths of a person, and even beyond conscious awareness. Sin is something more than a perversity. In a very remarkable sentence Augustine wrote, "Many sins are committed through pride, but not all



happen proudly. . . . [T]hey happen so often by ignorance, by human weakness; many are committed by men weeping and groaning in their distress.¹⁴ Augustine knew that sin is deeply entrenched in the individual and society.

Reinhold Niebuhr shocked the liberal movement in the church with his 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. In this book he stated with great emphasis that a society in which people love each other is not a human possibility, and that the best we can hope for is a society in which power and interests are sufficiently balanced off against each other that a tolerable measure of justice is possible. Evil people do not give up unjust advantages by prayer or education or love. The highest human possibility is to use power in a moderate and creative way, balancing self-interest against self-interest to reach a tolerable measure of justice. As long as God deals with human beings as he does, respecting their freedom, as long as human beings are creatures of instinct and impulse, and as long as instinct and impulse are further corrupted by the self-interests of the human person, a just society is not a simple possibility.

George Kennan, a devout Christian and an observer of international politics in the 1930s, gave this judgment in *The New Yorker* about modern human beings: “He has a great deal of animal in him. His sexual appetites. His love of power. These are qualities of immense power and less than admirable. I think God should recognize He is not going to make perfection of many human beings. They are caught between innate good qualities and wholly uncontrollable—animalistic if you will—instinctive compulsions that come to bear. That is part of the human condition as I see it.”¹⁵

Reinhold Niebuhr, as well as Augustine, knew that there are indeterminate possibilities of good and that we ought to strive for goodness in our own lives, in our communities, and in our world. Yet, we have to also remember the indeterminate possibilities of evil and that new forms of evil appear on every new level of goodness. Christian hope should be a realism that neither despairs nor expects a utopia. As Augustine put it, the church is an inn of convalescence.

5. In appointing committees and in electing elders and commissioners to the General Assembly, priority must be given to Christian commitment and to competence. Committees and courts can destroy the church unless the



elected and appointed people are qualified to do the work assigned to them. Fifty years ago in the Presbyterian Church, committees were generally made up of people who could vote to do something, then leave the committee meeting and do it. The same was true of the commissioners to the General Assembly. This no longer the situation.

Representation simply for the sake of representation subverts the life of the church. The first and primary qualification for leadership in the Christian church is knowledge of and commitment to the Christian faith. The second qualification is the capacity to give real leadership in the work to which one is appointed or elected. After these requirements have been met, then representation can play its role.

6. The health of the church depends upon recovering its capacity for critical judgment. Evangelical liberalism lost this capacity and declared everything liberal to be good. In the meantime, radical changes were happening in the church and society, namely: (1) the unprecedented feminization of the church and its ministry; (2) the radical increase in divorce with disastrous consequences for the church and society, but which was protected by the dogmas of political correctness; (3) the tremendous increase in the size and power of bureaucratic structures in the last fifty years; and (4) the steadily increasing bias against traditional Christianity in the media and secular universities. The church has subjected none of these changes to critical review.

7. We need to commit ourselves to recovering simplicity and authenticity in the life of the church. John Calvin abhorred the pretentious, the ostentatious, the contrived, and the artificial. For Calvin, simplicity was very close to sincerity. The simple uncovers reality. The pompous and the ostentatious cover up reality. Simplicity and authenticity applied not simply to individual life, but also to church life.

In his personal life Calvin was not an ascetic. He advocated moderation in the use of this world's goods with thankfulness to God. He could rejoice that God, who could have sustained human life with plain food, gave us food that was pleasant to eat. In place of plain clothing adequate for protection from the weather and for purposes of modesty, God gave us clothing that enhances human appearance. And then Calvin added, in the days long before



distillation and stronger alcoholic beverages, that God, who could have sustained life simply with water, gave us wine.

We must recover simplicity in our incredibly affluent economy and in our consumer-oriented culture. We must also recover simplicity in our lives as ministers. We have to limit adding summer homes to winter homes. We have to cultivate a simple style of life that only fifty years ago was forced upon us by church and society.

We can well begin with our work as ministers. Jesus spoke against those who “make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, [who] love to have the place of honor . . . and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi” (Matt. 23:5–7). In the 1950s Aubrey Brown wrote editorials in the *Outlook* calling for an end to the use of “reverend.” He did not succeed. With the universality of the Doctor of Ministry program, “reverend” has been expanded to “Reverend Doctor.” Degrees may be used when they officially certify competence. But the authority of a person is found within the person, not in title or dress, which may mean very little.

The question may also be raised concerning the dress of ministers. The Reformation began in Zurich in 1519 when Zwingli cast aside clerical garb and preached in the ordinary dress of Zurichers. Ordinary dress was still our practice until fifty to sixty years ago. Now robes must be adorned with stoles, etc. Is it not appropriate now to call for a return to simplicity in clerical attire? No one style or pattern can be prescribed for everyone, or all ministers, but everyone must take seriously the traditional Presbyterian emphasis on simplicity.

8. The Presbyterian Church can meet the crisis of our time by being a *Presbyterian* Church. We do not have to be Presbyterian in order to be Christian. There are other communities and ways of life that are part of the holy catholic church. The Presbyterian Church is only one way of being Christian. It has its own uniqueness and in that uniqueness it nurtures human beings who find that it answers their needs and enriches the one holy catholic church.

Presbyterians cannot do best what the Baptists do best, what Billy Graham does best. Persons who are edified by typical Baptist sermons and by the hymns sung in Baptist churches are not always edified by typical Presbyterian sermons and the hymns and psalms that are sung in Presbyterian churches. Presbyterianism is a unique way of



being Christian, and we ought to bring to the holy catholic church the very best that we can from this tradition.

The distinction between the church and all other human organizations, such as civic clubs or various social clubs, has been emphasized throughout this essay. In the Presbyterian Church we are not free to preach and to worship in any way we wish. By committing ourselves to the Presbyterian Church, we also commit ourselves to embodying the best of this particular way of being the Christian church in our lives and in our community.

For the Presbyterian Church to be truly Presbyterian is a matter of integrity and also a matter of political wisdom. Some people in our society can be nurtured in Christian faith better in the Presbyterian way than they can in any other. Our task as Presbyterians is to represent our tradition in the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church with integrity and with enthusiasm.

9. The health and strength of the Christian church and particularly the Presbyterian Church in our time depend upon recovering gratitude for and integrity in our stewardship of what has been bequeathed to us from the past. The church lives today in large measure upon the money of dead people. The fact places a heavy responsibility upon the people who use this money not only for their salaries but also for the programs they advocate.

Ministers and professors in seminaries and in colleges and church staffs should continually be aware of their responsibility to the people who have made possible the existence of these jobs and institutions. When the people who use the financial resources of the church no longer share the purposes of its donors, the result is disastrous both personally and for the health of the church. Almost all ministers and congregations today live by virtue of the labors of men and women who built the church over the past two or three centuries.

The quality of our society, and in particular the ethos of the church, has been bequeathed to us by people who have gone before. Church members today who live in a very pagan and secular culture can easily use up the good resources of the church's life and in doing so leave very little for generations who come after us.

Integrity and gratitude in the life of the church also depend upon the churches, especially church officers, taking seriously the confessions of faith. In our society we

have to ask with great conscientiousness, do we really believe what we profess when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and when we take our vows as officers?

The health of the church of today depends in considerable measure upon our gratitude for that which has been bequeathed to us and our integrity in using this inheritance in our time.



The crucial importance of maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the Christian faith in a secular culture has been the theme of this essay. Opponents of Christianity do not need to refute Christian faith to destroy the church—only to turn confessing Christians into nominal or culture Christians.¹⁶ In retrospect it is easy to condemn the *German* Christians over against the Christians of Barmen and the Confessing Church. Is the plight of the church among us today similarly one in which *culture* Christians may undermine the Confessing Church?





Notes

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. I, ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House Publishers, 1948), 3.
2. Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker, "Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values," *American Sociological Review* 65 (February 2000): 19–51.
3. *Ibid.*, 48.
4. "The Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland" (June/July 2000).
5. Inglehart and Baker, 21.
6. John W. Vannorsdall, "By Day and by Night: Life in Christ before God and the World," *Weavings*, vol. 11, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 1996), 29.
7. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Avon Books, 1969), 44.
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9. Francis Fukuyama, "The Great Disruption, Human Nature and the Reconstruction of Social Order," *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1999): 55.
10. Inglehart and Baker, 47.
11. Scott Hendrix, "Rerooting the Faith: The Reformation as Re-Christianization," *Church History* 69, 3(Sept. 3, 2000): 558–77.
12. Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, vol. I (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1908), 94ff.
13. Edward Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), 30.
14. Augustine, *Nature and Grace*, in *The Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. I, ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House Publishers, 1948), 542.
15. Nicholas Lemann, "The Provocateur," *The New Yorker* (Nov. 13, 2000), 94.



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16. I witnessed this in my own civic club as Presbyterian elders lost the courage to speak of Christmas and Easter, much less to pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Irving Kristol has written a perspective editorial that the strategy of certain Jews, in turning confessing Christians into nominal Christians or culture Christians, will sooner or later backfire. (Irving Kristol, "Are Jews Politically Foolish?" [*Wilson Quarterly*, Winter 2000]).

